ENTRUSTED

A JOURNEY OF GRIEF, DISCERNMENT AND SPIRITUAL RECOVERY

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Dedication

To those who loved deeply, served faithfully and gave generously of their time, gifts and hearts. To those who asked honest questions, hoped for repair, prayed for reconciliation and chose grace even when it was not returned.

To those who stayed longer than they felt able to, carried confusion, wrestled with loyalty and truth, and discovered that leaving could be as painful as staying. To those who quietly wondered whether anyone else could see what they could see.

Whether your story has led you to staying, leaving, grieving, healing or beginning again, may these pages remind you that honest questions need not be a sign of weak faith, and a desire for truth need not be rebellion. Your dignity was never yours to earn, nor anyone else’s to take away.

May you find the wisdom to discern, the courage to respond and the freedom to entrust your heart wisely. Wise discernment is not the opposite of faith. Sometimes it is one of faith’s greatest expressions.

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Before We Begin

If you are holding this book, something may have stirred questions within you. Perhaps you are considering joining a church, wondering whether to stay, or making sense of having left. Perhaps you are carrying a quiet sadness that is difficult to explain to someone who has never experienced it.

Whatever brought you here, I want you to know this before we begin: you are more important than any framework contained in these pages. This book is not here to prove that churches fail or to make you suspicious of every spiritual community. It is for people who long to belong, want to trust and hope that love, truth and humility can exist together.

If that is you, welcome. I hope these pages offer practical wisdom, but also kindness.

Theme Scriptures

Guard Your Heart

> "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."
>
> - Proverbs 4:23

This book is not about closing your heart. It is about learning to steward it wisely.

Discern by the Fruit

> "By their fruit you will recognize them."
>
> - Matthew 7:16

Jesus invited His followers to practise discernment by observing the fruit of a person's life and community, rather than relying on assumptions or appearances.

Honour One Another

> "Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves."
>
> - Romans 12:10

Healthy spiritual communities are marked by mutual honour, humility and genuine care for one another.

Shepherd Those Entrusted to You

> "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."
>
> - 1 Peter 5:2-3

Leadership is a sacred stewardship. Those who lead are entrusted with people, and are called to shepherd with humility, integrity and love.

Hope

One of the most comforting truths in Scripture is that when human shepherds fail, God does not. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks to leaders who had failed to care for His people. Rather than abandoning His flock, He makes a beautiful promise:

> "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them."
>
> - Ezekiel 34:11

A few verses later, He continues:

> "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak..."
>
> - Ezekiel 34:16

These verses remind me that our ultimate hope has never rested in human leadership alone. When people fail us, the Good Shepherd still searches for us. When relationships break down, He still calls us by name. When trust has been broken, He binds up our wounds; when we are weary, He strengthens us.

Recognising an unhealthy community is only part of this book. The other part is remembering that God remains faithful. May these pages help you discern wisely, heal gently and keep sight of the Shepherd who has never stopped searching for you.

Chapter One - Everything Is Fine… Until It Isn’t

There is something beautifully ordinary about becoming part of a church. It rarely begins dramatically. Someone smiles at the door, remembers your name or shares a cup of coffee after the service. Your children make friends. Gradually, you begin to feel that you have found somewhere to belong.

Almost without noticing, your life becomes woven into the community. You volunteer, join a small group, serve on a roster and give financially. You celebrate baptisms, weddings and new babies, grieve together at funerals and pray for one another. Shared meals, laughter and ordinary moments become part of your story.

For many people, church becomes home. That is a beautiful thing. Spiritual communities can offer extraordinary friendship, generosity, healing and growth, reminding us that we were never meant to journey through life alone. It is because churches can do so much good that the trust placed in them deserves thoughtful stewardship.

The Investment We Rarely Notice

When we think about what we invest in church, we often think first of money, time or gifts. Over the years, however, we invest something more personal: trust. It grows through conversations, acts of service and the quiet repetition of ordinary Sundays.

One day we realise that this community knows our children, history, hopes, fears, faith, dreams and disappointments. Without making one grand decision, we have entrusted part of ourselves to the people around us. That is neither foolish nor naïve. It is what can happen when human beings belong.

The Questions We Never Thought to Ask

Most of us ask questions before making important commitments. We think carefully about marriage, seek trustworthy doctors, choose schools for our children and consider an employer’s values. We observe character before entering close friendships. Yet many of us commit years, even decades, to a spiritual community without asking what would happen if the relationship became difficult.

Would I be heard if something went wrong? Would I be protected if I became vulnerable? Would truth matter more than reputation, and would my dignity be safeguarded? Would my children be safe? Would my daughters be encouraged to flourish, including when their gifts or perspectives differed from the existing culture? Would I still be valued if I could no longer serve?

We may never think to ask because we assume church will be different. We hope that a community following Christ will respond with humility, fairness and courage. Sometimes that trust is well founded. Sometimes we discover questions we had not realised we needed to ask.

Everything Is Fine… Until It Isn't

These questions often surface when something changes: a misunderstanding, conflict, safeguarding concern, leadership decision, complaint or accusation. A relationship becomes strained, and the experience of church changes with it. The question moves from “Do I enjoy being here?” to “How does this community respond when relationships become difficult?”

Pressure can reveal things that are less visible when everyone is getting along. Healthy communities are not those that never experience conflict. They are communities willing to respond with humility, truth, accountability and relational courage.

Stewardship Flows Both Ways

As Christians, we are encouraged to steward our finances wisely, use our gifts faithfully and give our time generously. Those are important principles. But stewardship also asks something of the community inviting us to belong.

A church accepts responsibility for how it treats the people who trust it. They are more than members or volunteers. They are people created in the image of God, carrying stories, hopes, grief, gifts and vulnerabilities. Their trust is not a small thing.

The question running through this book is simple: how well does a spiritual community steward the trust placed in its care?

Why This Book Exists

This is an invitation to discern wisely before making significant investments of your heart. No church is perfect, and no leader gets everything right. The aim is to understand how a community protects dignity, exercises authority, handles difficulty and makes room for truth and love together.

Safeguarding involves policies, but it is also lived through relationships. Every person walking through the doors brings a story and the possibility of trust. Receiving that trust is a privilege that deserves wisdom, compassion and care.

The day I realised I had never asked whether the community I was serving could steward the trust I had placed in it was the day this book began.

Chapter Two - My Story

Some stories begin with a wound. Mine began with a home.

I grew up within a church family. Faith was woven through our lives, not simply something we attended to on Sundays. My grandparents served faithfully, including as missionaries, and my parents served in leadership. I watched people quietly give their time, gifts and hearts to others, learning that following Christ was something to live as well as believe.

Church was where we worshipped, learned, celebrated, grieved and belonged. It helped form my understanding of God, community and service. For much of my life, I did not think to question whether it would be a place of care when I needed it. It had always been home.

A Life of Serving

As I grew older, serving became a natural expression of my faith. A small number of church communities shaped my journey, each in different ways. Serving was a privilege and one of the ways I expressed love for God and people.

Over the years, there is not much I have not done. I served on worship teams, led in children's ministry, worked in administration, supported governance, cared for people pastorally, coordinated communication and contributed to safeguarding. Some seasons placed me at the front; many more involved work quietly done in the background. I loved both.

I did not separate preparing an agenda or writing a policy from ministry. Whether I was leading worship, teaching children or helping a committee work well, the purpose was to help create a community where people could flourish.

Governance was never only about constitutions and meetings. Every agenda, policy, conversation and decision eventually

touched a real person: someone carrying hope, grief, questions, gifts and trust. That mattered deeply to me then. It still does.

When Everything Changed

There came a season when my experience of church changed in ways I had not anticipated. What had felt steady became uncertain. Relationships became difficult, and I found myself needing care, communication and understanding in a way I had not needed before.

The experience affected me deeply. I struggled with how I was understood and with the distance that developed in relationships I valued. It was painful to discover that the sense of belonging I had carried for so long could become fragile.

I had believed that, if difficulties arose, careful listening and fairness would help us work through them. When I found myself vulnerable, the process did not feel as I had imagined it would. That led me to reflect more closely on how communities make room for different accounts, especially when people already know and trust one another.

For years I had been happy to serve without needing to be part of anyone’s closest social circle. I assumed that the same dignity and fairness would be available to every person, whatever their relationships or role. My experience left me with questions about how those principles become real when a situation is complicated.

I did not want special treatment. I wanted the opportunity to be heard and understood, and I hoped that the people involved could find a way forward with care for one another. I began asking questions I had never expected to ask: how does a spiritual community respond when someone feels hurt? Who makes room for each voice? How is dignity protected while people seek understanding? What happens when those responsible for a process are also close to the situation?

Some of the sadness lay in conversations that did not happen and opportunities for understanding that seemed to pass. What had once felt familiar no longer felt quite secure. I was trying to find my footing in a place that had helped shape so much of my life.

Reaching for Repair

What I wanted most was relationship. I hoped we could sit together, listen carefully, acknowledge hurt and understand one another more fully. I believed then, and still believe, that honest conversations can strengthen relationships.

In time, I received written apologies. I remain grateful for that acknowledgement and do not want the parts of the experience that involved care or courage to disappear from the story.

I also hoped for personal conversations that might help rebuild trust. Those conversations did not unfold as I had hoped. I found it difficult to know how to move forward while still longing for a sense of connection and understanding.

That experience helped me recognise a distinction between acknowledging that something went wrong and repairing the relationship affected by it. An apology can matter greatly, while the person receiving it may still need time, conversation and changed experience before trust begins to settle again.

I do not tell this story to decide anyone else’s motives. I can speak about what the experience meant to me, what I hoped for and what I found difficult. The absence of the conversations I had imagined became part of what I needed to grieve.

The Long Goodbye

Leaving a church is not always one decision. It can be a gradual process of hoping a little longer, offering grace again and wondering whether the next conversation might bring

understanding. For me, it took time to recognise what had changed.

After that difficult season, I stepped into a regional ministry role whose vision I genuinely believed in. I loved serving churches across the region and felt I still had something meaningful to contribute. Yet although I was serving, I no longer felt the same sense of being at home.

For eighteen months I hoped for mediation, conflict resolution and conversations that might help restore trust. As time passed, I began to understand that I was waiting for more than a meeting. I was hoping that my spiritual home would feel familiar and secure again.

The grief was about more than the events themselves. I was grieving a community that had shaped my faith, relationships I had expected to continue and a future I had imagined. Recognising that helped me understand why the experience stayed with me.

Leaving did not erase my affection for people or my gratitude for years of service and belonging. Those years mattered. They helped shape me, and I continue to value much of what I received through them.

The experience also changed the questions I now ask about trust, leadership, accountability and care. I began to wonder how a person finds their way forward when the relational repair they hoped for remains out of reach.

What I Learned

One question kept returning: how do we know whether a spiritual community is healthy enough to entrust with our hearts? I had been taught how to serve, give, steward my gifts, support leadership and commit to community. Those teachings had shaped my faith in many good ways.

What I had not learned was how to consider the relational health of the community itself. I knew how to ask what I could contribute. I had thought less about what would happen if I needed fairness, protection or care.

A church's vision, programmes and theology matter. So does the way it responds when relationships become difficult: how it listens, handles trust, seeks truth, protects dignity and approaches repair. I began to notice that the ordinary ways people relate can tell us something important about the community they are building.

Another question followed. Where do you belong when a place that has always felt like home no longer feels safe to you? What do you do when conversations remain unfinished and reconciliation is not available in the form you hoped for?

For a long time, I waited, hoped, prayed and kept reaching out. Sometimes those movements open a way toward healing together. Sometimes a person has to begin making sense of what happened without the resolution they wanted.

I came to understand that belonging involves more than remaining in a place. It grows through trust, welcome, dignity and the willingness to work honestly with difficulty. When those things become uncertain, our sense of home can become uncertain too.

I cannot offer every answer. I can offer the questions I wish I had known to ask, and the understanding that helped me begin to find my feet again.

Why I Wrote This Book

This book grew from loving the Church and caring about what spiritual community can mean in a person's life. Church shaped my faith, friendships, purpose and understanding of belonging. That is why the change in my experience mattered so much.

There was a time when I assumed I would always belong to a church family. At the time of writing, I no longer do. That was not a quick decision. It followed a long season of hoping for repair and learning to recognise the grief I was carrying.

That is my story. It does not have to become yours. This book is not asking you to leave the Church or to draw conclusions from my experience. It invites you to consider the relationships around you and the care with which a community receives people’s trust.

If your church shows humility, accountability and relational integrity, treasure it. Support it, pray for it and help it flourish. If questions arise, I hope these pages give you language to reflect and seek understanding sooner than I did.

I cannot rewrite my own experience. I can share what I learned in the hope that it helps someone ask a useful question, helps a leader think carefully about another person’s trust, or helps a community become kinder and more courageous in the way it cares. That is the purpose I want these pages to serve.

Chapter Three - The Stewardship of Trust

What Is Spiritual Safeguarding?

For much of my life, I thought safeguarding meant policies, procedures, Working With Children Checks, risk management and complaints processes. These things matter. They create structures intended to help protect people. Over time, I began to see how much also depends on the way people experience those structures.

At its heart, safeguarding recognises the inherent dignity of the person walking through the door. When someone joins a spiritual community, they bring more than attendance: their hopes, questions, children, gifts, vulnerabilities, grief, dreams, calling and history. They are offering trust.

For me, that trust carries something sacred. It deserves to be received carefully, in the everyday relationships of the community as well as in its formal processes.

Stewardship Flows Both Ways

I remain grateful for the teaching I received about stewarding time, gifts, finances, opportunities and calling. It helped me understand that what we have can be used generously. The question I ask alongside it now is: who is stewarding the people?

When a church invites someone to belong, serve, give and raise children within its community, it accepts responsibility for the way that person is treated. People deserve dignity, fairness, honesty and the opportunity to be heard. They deserve ethical treatment and recognition of the gifts and ministry they bring.

That responsibility becomes especially important when conflict arises or a person becomes vulnerable. Careful

listening and procedural fairness must be available beyond the people who are already well connected or easy to understand. The community is entrusted with people, not simply with filling its volunteer roles.

What Does Healthy Stewardship Look Like?

Healthy stewardship becomes visible in ordinary decisions. Leaders tell the truth, including when it is uncomfortable, and listen before reaching conclusions. Governance applies fairness consistently. People's gifts are respected even when their perspectives differ.

It means protecting dignity while seeking truth, using power with humility and making accountability meaningful regardless of position, friendship or influence. It means speaking directly rather than relying on rumours and assumptions, and pursuing repair where possible.

Preaching and ministry can be important expressions of a community's life. So can the way a difficult meeting is conducted or an unanswered question is handled. Every decision made in a meeting room will eventually touch a real person.

Safeguarding Is Relational

Safeguarding seeks to prevent harm and to cultivate places where people can flourish. I hope for communities where truth is spoken with grace, power is exercised with humility and governance protects people rather than simply controlling them.

In such a community, people are valued beyond what they contribute. Questions can be asked, leadership remains accountable and relationships matter enough to work toward repair. A person who becomes vulnerable should not have to wonder whether their dignity still counts. That is the kind of spiritual safeguarding this book explores.

Chapter Four - When Trust Is Entrusted

The Shared Responsibility of Spiritual Community

> "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." - 1 Peter 5:2-3

Entrusting Our Hearts

Trust cannot be demanded or manufactured. It is given, and receiving it carries responsibility. Joining a church is rarely only a decision about attending a Sunday service. Over time, people entrust more of their lives to the community.

At first, it may be a conversation after church, a prayer request, a willingness to volunteer, a donation or a child joining the children’s programme. Later, a family invites people into their home. Stories, hopes, disappointments and questions about God become known.

A spiritual community can become the place where babies are dedicated, weddings celebrated, loved ones buried and prayers whispered beside hospital beds. Friendships become family. Identity, belonging and faith grow intertwined. Being welcomed into that part of someone’s life is an extraordinary privilege and a responsibility to carry carefully.

Stewardship Is More Than Ministry

Churches rightly consider how to steward finances, buildings, resources, vision and volunteers. Yet people are the most precious part of what has been entrusted to the community.

A policy, meeting, conversation, conflict, silence, apology or avoided conversation does not remain administrative for long. It becomes part of someone’s experience. Behind every decision is a person created in the image of God. That is why

the way a community conducts its business belongs within its ministry of care.

The Stewardship of Leadership

I understand leadership as stewardship rather than status. We often speak about the authority entrusted to a leader; we also need to consider the people affected by that authority.

Influence is borrowed, not owned. People offer trust in the hope that leaders will care for what is precious. A vision matters, but so do the people living within it. Leadership needs to be considered through how people are treated along the way, as well as through what is achieved.

The Stewardship of Truth

Truth is part of love and essential to trust. Seeking it asks us to resist assumptions, listen carefully and allow people an opportunity to be heard before conclusions settle around them.

Silence and avoided conversations do not necessarily protect a relationship. Sometimes they leave people trying to make sense of one another without enough understanding. Pursuing truth asks for courage, humility, curiosity and a willingness to listen when the answer may be uncomfortable.

The Stewardship of Dignity

Words, actions and silence communicate something about how a person is regarded. When someone becomes vulnerable, a leader’s response can shape their sense of safety, confidence and even their understanding of God.

Protecting dignity does not depend on agreeing with someone or reaching a particular outcome. Disagreement does not remove their humanity. Procedural fairness, careful listening, respectful communication, privacy and honesty are practical

expressions of care. They are more than items in a governance document; they are ways of loving people.

The Stewardship of Power

Power needs a purpose and limits. In Jesus' example, I see influence used to protect, restore, lift and serve. Healthy spiritual leadership seeks that same posture.

Authority should help create safety rather than fear, make room for questions and remain open to accountability. The amount of authority someone carries does not, by itself, tell us how safely they carry it. Teachability matters. So does the willingness to hear that an action has affected someone differently from what was intended.

The Stewardship of Repair

Every community experiences conflict. The question is whether relationships matter enough for people to approach difficulty with honesty and care.

Repair asks us to listen before defending ourselves, seek understanding rather than simply protect reputation, and make room for pain without explaining it away. Sometimes repair is possible; sometimes it is not. A willingness to consider it still matters.

Healthy communities do not use discomfort as a reason to let every difficult relationship drift into silence. They recognise that the absence of conversation can have its own effect.

The Stewardship of Belonging

Healthy belonging makes room for people to remain themselves. It welcomes different personalities, gifts, perspectives and ways of expressing creativity. The person quietly sitting at the edge of the room deserves as much welcome as those who naturally gather at the centre.

Unity need not require everyone to be alike. A community can hold shared faith while making space for thoughtful questions and difference. One of the questions I have learned to ask is whether my daughters would flourish there. Would they be encouraged to discover their gifts, listened to and protected if they became vulnerable? Would their voices matter? Every parent hopes the answer is yes.

The Stewardship of Our Children

When families bring children into church, they entrust their formation as well as their safety. Children learn from the way adults lead, handle conflict, offer apologies, exercise power and respond to questions.

They notice how people are treated. The culture around them becomes part of what they learn about community, faith and relationships. That makes the ordinary conduct of a spiritual community an important part of its responsibility toward children.

A Shared Responsibility

For generations, Christians have been encouraged to steward gifts, finances, time and calling. Those can be beautiful expressions of faith. The community receiving that generosity also needs to consider its own stewardship of trust, dignity, truth, belonging, grief, hope and children’s hearts.

Perhaps every church, elder, pastor, ministry leader and governing board could ask: if someone entrusted us with their heart today, how well would we care for it?

People are not interruptions to ministry. They are the ministry. That is what I am asking spiritual safeguarding to keep in view.

Chapter Five - The Spiritual Community Safeguarding Check™

> "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." - Proverbs 4:23

Before You Begin

By now you may be carrying questions, whether they have been with you for years or surfaced as you read. Approach this reflection slowly. There is no score to achieve and no expectation that a community or leader will get everything right.

The purpose is to help you consider relational health, humility, accountability and stewardship. It cannot decide whether a church is good or bad, or make the decision about where you belong.

Healthy communities experience conflict and make mistakes. Their willingness to listen, remain accountable and seek truth and repair is part of what matters. These questions invite you to consider where you are entrusting your heart.

How to Use This Reflection

Move through each section at your own pace. If a question brings comfort, take time to be grateful. If it raises concern, remain curious about what you know and what is still uncertain. Notice recurring patterns as well as the meaning of particular experiences.

As you reflect, ask what evidence supports your response. Is this an isolated experience or something repeated? If someone you loved joined tomorrow, what would give you confidence about their care? If you became vulnerable, would you expect your dignity to be protected?

You may find strengths and questions together. Both are worth noticing.

A Gentle Reminder

This reflection is an invitation to recognise how trust is stewarded. If you have experienced church hurt, some questions may stir difficult memories. Pause, pray or talk with someone you trust when that would help. You do not have to complete it in one sitting.

Wisdom does not require suspicion of every church, and noticing a concern does not decide what you must do next. Give yourself room to reflect without rushing toward a verdict.

An Invitation

Every person entering a community brings faith, gifts, a story, family, hope and the possibility of trust. The question beneath this reflection is whether the community understands the privilege and responsibility of caring for those things.

Use the questions to discern how people are treated, rather than to produce a score or a label for the church.

Leadership & Accountability

- If I raised a serious concern about a leader, would I expect to be heard?
- Would my concerns be taken seriously?
- Would I expect a fair process?
- Are leaders accountable beyond their immediate circle?
- Can leaders be respectfully challenged?
- Are difficult conversations encouraged?

Governance

Are women represented in governance?

If so, are they genuinely listened to?

Is there diversity of perspective and experience?

Are policies followed consistently?

Are decisions transparent?

Leadership Relationships & Independence

Are most leaders close personal friends?

Do leaders primarily socialise with one another?

Would leaders realistically challenge one another if necessary?

Does friendship ever appear stronger than accountability?

Procedural Fairness

If something difficult happened to me, would I have an opportunity to tell my side of the story?

Would I be spoken to before people spoke about me?

Would leaders seek truth rather than simply protecting relationships or reputation?

Relational Integrity & Repair

Have I seen leaders take personal responsibility when they have caused harm?

Do leaders apologise directly to the people involved where appropriate?

Are apologies specific rather than general?

Does public acknowledgement replace personal conversations?

When relationships break down, is genuine repair pursued?

Power & Culture

Can people respectfully disagree?

Can members say 'no' without negative consequences?

Is loyalty valued more highly than honesty?

Is unity understood as healthy relationship rather than simple agreement?

Belonging Without Performance

If I became unwell, would I still be valued?

If I could no longer volunteer, would I still belong?

Am I valued for who I am or primarily for what I contribute?

Belonging, Culture & Social Networks

Do people appear free to express their individuality?

Is there diversity in personalities, appearance and creativity?

Are there obvious cliques or an inner circle?

Are key leadership positions held by members of the same social group?

If something serious happened, would those social networks influence who was believed or protected?

Care & Safety

Are vulnerable people protected?

Are complaints treated confidentially?

Are people who leave treated with dignity?

Do people feel emotionally safe raising difficult issues?

Transparency

Are policies available to members?

Is there financial transparency?

Are conflicts of interest acknowledged?

Do members understand how important decisions are made?

Personal Reflection

Who would I approach if something serious happened?

Who would advocate for me?

Would I receive procedural fairness?

Would the church seek truth or protect its reputation?

Would I feel emotionally safe remaining while the matter was addressed?

Possible Relational Red Flags

Leadership consists almost entirely of one demographic.

Leaders are all close personal friends.

Women have little meaningful influence in governance.

Questions are viewed as disloyalty.

People who leave are spoken about negatively.

Policies exist but are inconsistently applied.

The church's reputation appears more important than protecting people.

What Healthy Spiritual Communities Look Like

Healthy communities are not perfect communities. They make mistakes and experience conflict. The difference is found in how they respond. They pursue truth over reputation, value people over image, exercise authority with humility, welcome accountability, repair relationships where possible, and steward the trust placed in them with great care.

Chapter Six - Recognising Healthy Spiritual Communities

Before You Draw Conclusions

Pause before drawing conclusions from your responses. This reflection cannot decide whether you should stay or leave. Its purpose is to help you notice what consistently gives confidence and what deserves closer attention.

A wonderful experience and a difficult conversation can both matter, but neither necessarily tells the whole story of a community. You may see remarkable strengths alongside questions that remain unanswered. The goal is awareness, not perfection.

What Healthy Communities Do Differently

Healthy communities make space for difficult conversations and seek truth even when it is uncomfortable. They listen before reaching conclusions, protect dignity while seeking understanding and apply fairness beyond friendship, influence or position.

They understand leadership as stewardship and governance as a way of protecting people. They pursue repair where possible, recognising that an apology may begin healing without completing it. People remain valuable whether they are leading, serving or simply belonging.

Thoughtful questions are welcomed rather than treated automatically as rebellion. Different personalities, gifts, opinions, cultures and ways of worshipping can enrich the community. People should not have to disappear into sameness in order to remain connected.

For a Christian community, the belief that each person carries the image of God belongs in its conversations, decisions,

policies and relationships. That belief becomes visible through how people are treated.

If Your Responses Raised Concerns

If your responses raised concerns, do not ignore what you noticed or assume the reflection has reached a verdict. Some questions may call for more observation; others may invite conversation or reveal a concern that needs attention.

Consider the questions themselves rather than counting “No” answers. They ask different things: a “Yes” about fair process is different from a “Yes” about loyalty being valued above honesty. Discernment depends on what a response means and the evidence behind it, not on a total.

If Your Responses Brought Gratitude

Perhaps you recognised humility, kindness, integrity, accountability and repair, and found yourself feeling grateful. Healthy spiritual communities are a gift. Pray for them, support them and encourage the people helping them grow.

Their health is expressed and cultivated through relationships. Your own contribution can be part of that care.

One Final Reminder

The question is not “Is this church perfect?” It is “Is this a community that knows how to steward people well?” Let that question guide reflection rather than demand an immediate answer.

Chapter Seven - The Spiritual Recovery Framework™

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." - Psalm 147:3

Before We Begin

Before we talk about healing, I want to honour grief. What you carry after difficulty in a spiritual community may include more than disappointment about an event. There can be grief for everything that changed because of it.

Friendships, belonging, ministry, confidence in leadership, safety and an imagined future may all be affected. Sometimes we grieve the version of ourselves who trusted more easily. Those losses deserve recognition.

People are often encouraged toward forgiveness, acceptance or moving on before they have found words for what mattered. Grief has its own rhythm. Naming the loss with honesty and compassion can make room for healing without requiring us to hurry.

Foundational Grief

One of the most helpful realisations on my own journey was that I was grieving a foundation. Church had been woven through belonging, service, worship, celebration and my hopes for growing older. When that sense of home changed, more than one relationship was affected.

I began to understand the grief that reaches into what has given a person stability, meaning or identity. I call this Foundational Grief. The phrase helped me recognise why the sadness could feel so far-reaching and why simply telling myself to let go did not answer it.

Understanding the depth of the loss helped me approach myself more gently. Perhaps it will give you language for part of your experience too.

There Is No Right Way to Grieve

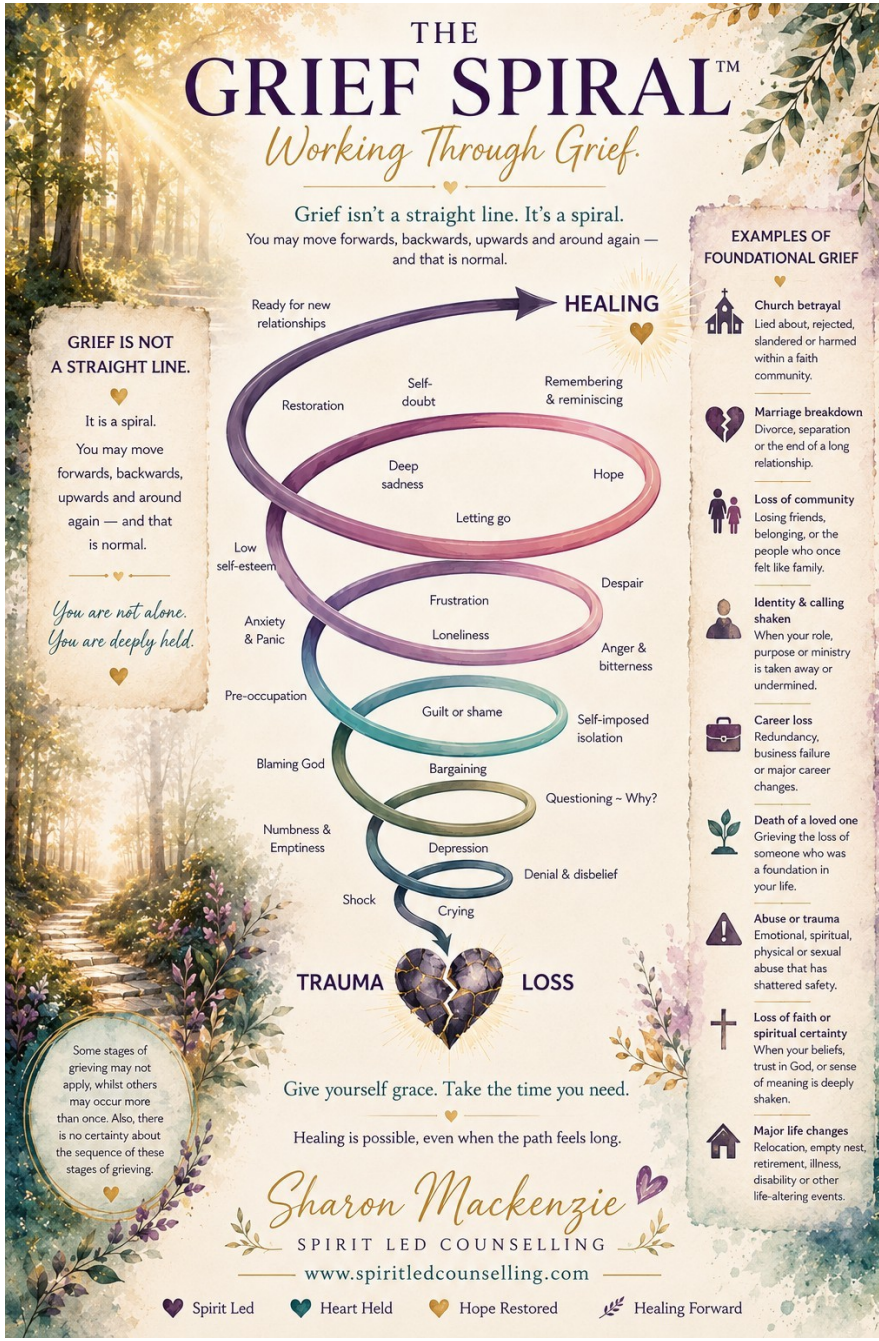
People grieve differently. You may feel anger, numbness, exhaustion or the desire to withdraw. You may move between hope and sadness, or find that feelings change from one day to the next.

Your grief does not have to look like anyone else's. It deserves honesty and compassion rather than a test of whether you are doing it correctly.

The Grief Spiral

The Grief Spiral™ is not intended to prescribe how your grief should unfold. It is a way I have used to picture returning to feelings as memories surface and understanding changes. A return to sadness does not necessarily mean you have made no progress.

The loss of a spiritual home can reach into identity, belonging and faith. Approach the illustration gently, taking from it what helps you recognise your experience. There is no expectation that you should already be over it, or that your journey must follow a particular sequence.


THE
GRIEF SPIRAL™
Working Through Grief.
Grief isn't a straight line. It's a spiral.
You may move forwards, backwards, upwards and around again — and that is normal.
GRIEF IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE.
It is a spiral.
You may move forwards, backwards, upwards and around again — and that is normal.
You are not alone. You are deeply held.
HEALING
Ready for new relationships
Remembering & reminiscing
Self-doubt
Restoration
Hope
Deep sadness
Letting go
Low self-esteem
Despair
Frustration
Anxiety & Panic
Loneliness
Anger & bitterness
Pre-occupation
Guilt or shame
Self-imposed isolation
Blaming God
Bargaining
Questioning ~ Why?
Numbness & Emptiness
Depression
Denial & disbelief
Shock
Crying
TRAUMA
LOSS
Some stages of grieving may not apply, whilst others may occur more than once. Also, there is no certainty about the sequence of these stages of grieving.
Give yourself grace. Take the time you need.
Healing is possible, even when the path feels long.
Sharon Mackenzie
SPIRIT LED COUNSELLING
www.spiritledcounselling.com
Spirit Led
Heart Held
Hope Restored
Healing Forward
EXAMPLES OF FOUNDATIONAL GRIEF
Church betrayal
Lied about, rejected, slandered or harmed within a faith community.
Marriage breakdown
Divorce, separation or the end of a long relationship.
Loss of community
Losing friends, belonging, or the people who once felt like family.
Identity & calling shaken
When your role, purpose or ministry is taken away or undermined.
Career loss
Redundancy, business failure or major career changes.
Death of a loved one
Grieving the loss of someone who was a foundation in your life.
Abuse or trauma
Emotional, spiritual, physical or sexual abuse that has shattered safety.
Loss of faith or spiritual certainty
When your beliefs, trust in God, or sense of meaning is deeply shaken.
Major life changes
Relocation, empty nest, retirement, illness, disability or other life-altering events.

A Gentle Reminder

Grief is not the opposite of faith. Sometimes it is love with nowhere to go, reminding us that something precious mattered. Acknowledging a loss does not require us to remain in the past. It gives us an honest place from which to begin making sense of it.

My Journey Through Grief

For a long time, I did not understand why the sadness felt so deep. I knew that I was hurt, but gradually recognised that I was grieving the place church had held in my life, as well as the difficult experiences themselves.

For more than fifty years, church had been woven through worship, service, friendship and belonging. It was where I discovered gifts and imagined continuing to grow older. When my relationship with that world changed, I found myself asking questions about who I was beyond the roles and community that had helped shape me.

There were ordinary moments when the change became particularly clear. I would look at myself and wonder who I was now. If I was no longer serving where I expected to serve, or belonging where I had expected to belong, what remained? Those were tender questions, and I could not answer them quickly.

I also carried unfinished hopes for understanding. I had imagined conversations that might help relationships settle and restore a sense of connection. As time passed, I began to realise that the outcome I hoped for might not become available in the way I had pictured it.

That was difficult to accept. I valued those relationships, and I believed there was something worth caring for within them. Letting go of a hoped-for conversation was not the same as deciding that the people or the years we had shared no longer mattered.

Eventually I understood that I was grieving a spiritual home, an imagined future and parts of the life I thought would continue. I needed time to acknowledge that before I could begin making room for what came next.

That experience helped shape the Foundational Grief Spiral™. I found myself revisiting feelings, sometimes with a little more understanding than before. Healing did not mean that the past changed or every question received an answer. It meant that, by God's grace, I could begin to find steadier ground within my own life.

I share that gently because you may recognise something of your own experience. You do not need to make your story the same as mine. You may simply need permission to acknowledge that a place mattered, that losing it has been painful and that rebuilding can take time.

Introducing the Spiritual Recovery Framework™

Healing does not require all the answers before it can begin. Sometimes it starts with acknowledging where you are: grieving trust or belonging, missing a community, or feeling tired of questions that remain unresolved.

The Spiritual Recovery Framework™ grew from my own experience of loss and the slow rebuilding of trust in myself, my discernment and God's presence. I offer it as a companion for reflection, not as a formula, checklist or sequence you must complete in order.

You may linger with one movement or return to another. Pause when you need to. Journal, pray, create or rest in ways that help you attend to what you are carrying. There is no prize for finishing quickly.

My hope is that these reflections help you understand what happened, honour what was lost and become more deeply rooted in yourself. Your dignity, voice and gifts do not depend on another person's ability to recognise them.

The journey is not only about recovering from spiritual hurt. It is also about making room for the person God created you to be, including the questions, creativity and life that remain beyond the experience.

Understanding the Depth of the Loss

A spiritual community may be woven through the places where we have served, celebrated, grieved, raised children and understood our calling. When that foundation is shaken, the effects can reach into our experience of God, people, trust, safety, community, leadership, identity and hope.

Recovery does not ask us to pretend those changes did not happen. It makes room to understand their depth and to consider how life might be built again.

See

Begin with what happened and what changed. Try to see your experience with clarity and compassion rather than minimising it or rewriting it. Honest observation gives reflection somewhere to begin.

What happened?

What changed?

What do I now understand?

What feels true for me?

"Truth is the beginning of healing."

Name

“I left my church” can describe a decision without naming everything it changed. You may be grieving community, belonging, identity, leadership, ministry, friendships, safety, purpose, certainty or a picture of God you once held.

Give those losses words where you can. Naming them can help you recognise what you need to grieve. You have not necessarily lost all those things, and you do not have to make the list fit your story.

Grieve

Honour what mattered. Grief may contain sadness, relief, anger, confusion, loneliness, guilt, numbness and hope, sometimes within the same day. None needs to be hurried into a neat account of recovery.

There is no timetable in this framework. Give yourself room to mourn without using someone else’s progress as the measure of your own.

Reclaim

You may recognise ways you gradually adapted to expectations. Reclaiming yourself invites a different question from “How do I fit back in?” It asks, “Who am I when I no longer need to perform?”

Begin exploring what remains yours and what feels alive now.

What brings me peace?

What do I believe now?

What values remain?

What gifts are still alive in me?

What feels authentic?

Recovery isn't becoming someone else. It's returning to yourself.

Create

Healing includes making room for life as well as making sense of pain. Paint, write, dance, laugh, plant a garden, learn

something new or begin a business. Make beautiful things because there is still room for beauty.

Creativity can be a way of saying, quietly or joyfully, “Life continues.” It need not become another measure of how well you are recovering.

Restore

Restoring hope does not mean reproducing your old life exactly. It can mean building a life that reflects who you are today, with healthy boundaries, meaningful relationships, authentic spirituality, creativity, joy and peace.

You may have changed through the experience. There can still be room to become wiser, freer and more fully yourself.

The Journey

See → Name → Grieve → Reclaim → Create → Restore

See your story honestly, name what was lost and grieve with compassion. Reclaim what remains yours, create room for what comes next and allow hope to return in its own time.

A Closing Reflection

Recovery is not forgetting what happened or pretending the hurt did not matter. It is allowing your story to become bigger than the wound. Your experience deserves care, and your life still holds more than that experience.

Chapter Eight - Beginning Again

> "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." - Psalm 34:18

If you have made it this far, thank you for spending time with these pages. You may have recognised your story, your grief or questions that have been difficult to put into words.

You are not weak because you loved deeply or foolish because you trusted. Trust is a beautiful part of relationship. When it is honoured, community can flourish; when it is damaged, the effects can reach further than we expected.

If that is part of your experience, I am sorry for what you have carried. I do not have every answer, but I understand something of the journey.

Will I Ever Trust Again?

“Will I ever trust again?” is a question people ask me. You do not have to answer it today, or force trust because someone else is becoming impatient with your healing.

Trust can grow through a safe relationship, an honest conversation or a small act of integrity repeated over time. It is something to notice developing, not something to demand of yourself. Be patient with the part of you that needs experience before it can feel confident again.

You May Not Need to Trust Everyone Again

There is no requirement to become exactly the person you were before. You may not need to trust everyone again or find another church immediately. For a season, the work may be learning to trust your own capacity to reflect, ask questions and make choices.

Your discernment, boundaries and dignity are worth attending to. Your worth does not depend on someone else’s

recognition. Learning to protect what matters can be part of healing without requiring you to become cynical about every relationship.

Becoming Who You Truly Are

Loss can bring an unfamiliar question: who am I now? Beneath the church, ministry or role, who is the person whose life continues? It can take time to recognise yourself outside the places where you have been known.

Long before a title, position, affirmation or misunderstanding, there was a person God lovingly created. Your dignity does not begin with a role or disappear when that role ends.

Healing may include uncovering parts of yourself that became quiet through grief and disappointment. Perhaps this season makes room for creativity, joy, voice, peace or calling to return differently. You can begin to recognise what is yours without immediately deciding where you must belong next.

My hope is that you become more fully yourself, rather than simply meeting another set of expectations about who you should be.

Will I Ever Belong Again?

For a long time, I thought belonging would mean finding another church. I now understand it more broadly. Belonging grows where people can be themselves, truth is welcomed, dignity is protected and honest questions have room.

That may be within a church, a small gathering of trusted friends, a mentoring relationship, a creative community or somewhere you have not discovered yet. I hope you find people who value your humanity as much as your service and enjoy who you are, not simply what you do.

There Is No Rush

Be gentle with yourself as you wonder about trust, belonging and identity. You do not need every answer today. A small step can be enough: caring for yourself, honouring grief, remembering that your life has purpose or trusting a considered choice a little more than before.

Healing can be quiet. It may become visible through ordinary acts of courage long before you have a complete story about what comes next.

If You Need Someone to Walk Beside You

If reading has stirred memories, helped you name grief or left you wanting company as you make sense of your experience, you do not have to carry it alone. Sometimes one conversation with someone willing to listen can help.

If my work feels right for you, I would be honoured to walk alongside you for a season. You can learn more or book a session at www.spiritledcounselling.com, or contact Sharon.mackenzie@spiritledcounselling.com.

Whether your next step involves counselling, reflection, creativity or finding your footing again, you are welcome.

A Final Blessing

As I close these pages, my prayer is that you remember you are more than what happened, more than the misunderstanding, rejection, role or community you may have lost. You are God’s beloved. Nothing that happened diminishes that truth.

Life, love and grief change us. I do not pray that you become exactly who you were before, but that you become more fully yourself. May you find peace where there has been turmoil, truth where there has been confusion, courage where there has been fear and dignity where it has been questioned.

May you discover joy and relationships where honesty is welcomed, repair is pursued and love is shown through actions as well as words. May you never again feel required to lose yourself in order to belong.

May you trust your discernment, protect your heart wisely and continue to love without believing that love requires self-abandonment. Wherever your journey leads, may you remember that the One who created you has never stopped delighting in you, calling you by name or walking beside you.

Grace and peace,

Sharon Mackenzie

Counsellor & Reflective Safeguarding Practitioner

Spirit Led Counselling

About the Author

For most of my life, I understood my calling as service. My work in counselling, chaplaincy, governance, safeguarding, education and ministry has drawn me toward the places where people, relationships and systems meet.

I care about seeing people flourish: dignity restored, relationships repaired where possible and confusion given language. My own experiences of joy and loss have shaped the questions I ask about leadership, grief, belonging and healing.

Through counselling, reflective practice, creative restoration and practical frameworks, I help people consider complex relational and spiritual experiences with greater clarity. It is a privilege to accompany people as they rebuild trust in themselves and rediscover hope.

Spirit Led Counselling

Spirit Led Counselling brings together therapeutic conversation, safeguarding principles, creativity, spiritual reflection and compassionate listening, grounded in a concern for dignity.

People come after church hurt or spiritual abuse, through workplace and family difficulties, grief, identity questions and major transitions. Some simply need a safe place to think aloud. My hope is to help them move toward clarity, discernment, peace and freedom without carrying everything alone.