

You may not know this, but if you're in a Christian church - whether it's a traditional Roman Catholic church, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist, Independent-Bible-Thumping-Fire-and-Brimstone-Fundamentalist - your priest/pastor may be losing his/her faith, or already lost it. And yet still be in the pulpit. There are some times when you might suspect something was up. Other times, you'd have no clue.

I've been there, on both sides of that equation. I won't talk about the loss of faith on the part of pastors who were preaching in front of me every week. But I can say something about myself, in the pulpit, desperately trying to hold on to my faith, and seeing it ooze away from me, while preaching every week on the radio. It's not a pleasant feeling, and can lead to massive confusion, self-doubt, self-condemnation, and uncertainty about what to do and where to turn.

I was never a permanent ordained minister in any denomination. I was *trained* to be a minister. Many of my classmates at Moody Bible Institute went off, directly from there, to be missionaries and pastors, and are still serving the church now over 40 years later. Our education there involved not only Bible and theology classes, but also courses on preaching, Christian education, evangelism, and so on.

I myself was not sure what I would do when I graduated. Missionary? (I considered it.) Pastor? (Maybe?). More education? (Yup, went that route)? My final year at Moody I became a youth pastor in a church in Oak Lawn IL, led Bible studies, prayer meetings, and trillions of social activities with high school and college kids and young adults. I did it for three years (while finishing my degree at Wheaton.) Loved it. But didn't think I wanted that to be my life.

Then I went to seminary. I had decided at that point not to go into ministry, but to get credentialed to teach at the university level. My idea was to have a different kind of ministry, in a secular setting, as an evangelical spokesperson with academic credentials. I had known a lot of professors teaching among the evangelicals; I wanted to be an evangelical among the (secular) professors. A Christian mission to the secular academic world.

In the course of my seminary training I was not allowed to take only the topics I was really interested in - history of early Christianity, Old Testament, New Testament. I had to take courses in preaching; pastoral counseling; church administration; Christian education, etc. I received the same training as everyone else, most of whom were training for lifelong ministry. It was a Presbyterian seminary, so most of my friends from those days were heading to the Presbyterian ministry and are still there. I myself was active in an evangelical church in those days, running the adult education programs.

When I got into my PhD program I continued on in the church. By that time we had moved to an American Baptist Church. It's an interesting denomination - not as consistently conservative theologically or politically as the Southern Baptist church has now become. My church was certainly conservative in many ways, but it was in Princeton and there was a broad range of theological and political views there. I was at the time heading toward a more liberal view of things in every way, as I advanced in my education.

During the second year of my PhD program the pastor of the church left, and the governing board asked if I would serve as an interim pastor for a year. So I did. Preached most weeks. On the radio. Performed church duties and services (funerals were not high on my list of pleasurable pastimes....). Visited the sick and grieving. Organized and ran the whole

thing.

And was losing my faith. I don't need to explain why here. Just one very quick anecdote. One Sunday I gave a sermon dealing with how a certain passage of the Bible tried to explain why there can be such intense suffering in a world created by a good God. Afterward, a parishioner came up to me, a lovely man with a gentle disposition, with tears in his eyes, and gave me a hug. He and his wife were stalwart members of the church. Their seventeen-year old son had committed suicide the year before, and they didn't know how to handle it, how to make sense of it, how to have faith in the light of it. This kind soul simply appreciated someone actually talking about the hard problems in church, even if there were no obvious answers.

Pastors confront this kind of thing all the time. It really beggars belief what some pastors deal with, getting into the horrible lives that so many people have to deal with. And some of these pastors lose their faith. For a variety of reasons. It happens. All the time. These are humans.

But what do pastors do when they are losing their faith? How do they keep ministering to those in need? Keep preaching every week? Assuring mourners at funerals? Keep following the church rituals: baptism, communion, and so on?

In my case it wasn't so bad. After a year, the church found a pastor, I left to go to another church, my slide continued, but I didn't have to feel like a hypocrite standing in the pulpit preaching something I wasn't as sure about any more, let alone preaching something I didn't believe and counseling people in a faith I wasn't sure I held.

Others are not so lucky. It is very, very difficult to lose your faith emotionally and socially - what you have always believed is getting sucked away from you, and you have based your entire life on it. You may have a deeply religious spouse, and kids, and parents, and friends; everyone looks up to you for spiritual guidance and support; you are to be a model and the model is crumbling.

And one thing outsiders may not think about as much. You are trained to do nothing else. If you leave the pulpit, you can't just find another comparable job. And you've never done or thought about another job. You aren't trained for another job. You haven't developed your skills for another job. And you have a family. And you are the sole or a main supporter. And your kids need a place to live, and clothes, and food, and And how are you, literally, going to survive if you lose your faith?

It is a horrible situation to be in. Some simply gut it out and hold on to what little faith they have as best they can. Others feel forced to be a hypocrite for the good of everyone else, to continue to comfort and help those in need and doubt, to avoid destroying the emotions and lives of family and loved ones, and so on. Yet others realize they simply can't live with themselves, and so they admit the problem, leave the church, and try to figure out a way to mend all their relationships and move on, somehow, but not always successfully. Some heart-breaking stories out there.

Most of you will not know, but there is an organization that came into existence eight years ago to deal with precisely this problem. It is called The Clergy Project. You can find its public page here: <http://clergyproject.org/>. There is also a nice Wikipedia page devoted to it and a Facebook page. It's worth checking out. It is designed to help clergy and other religious professionals who are either still active or who have left the ministry, who have

lost their faith.

It's an amazing project. To join, one does have to have been a religious professional (not just Christian, but in any religion) who now does not hold supernatural beliefs. Applicants are carefully vetted. (No trolls!!) People in this situation can join *completely* anonymously. The group is massively protective of identities: no one needs know who you actually are, unless you are ready to come out. The group provides lots of vital services. There is an online support group with others in the same boat. There are counseling services. There are career development opportunities for retooling (pastors actually have a lot of skills, well-honed, that are useful in other careers, if they can figure out how to redirect them). There are monetary grants for career transition. And so forth.

The group is justifiably pleased just now that they have now reached a milestone of 1000 members. It's a great accomplishment, as the numbers continue to grow. Members come from a large range of Christian denominations and groups, but not only there: it also has Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Scientologists, and others!

I know a lot of people on the blog have also lost their faith. Others have started to have some doubts. Yet others are completely committed to their faith, as much as other. We represent a broad swath of the religious and non-religious community. And hopefully being together in this format is helpful to people, no matter what their commitments and views. Whatever our views, it is important to be supportive of one another, and to realize there are others in our boat with us. The Clergy Project does this in a very focused way. We do it in a different way. The goal for both is to help people think through matters of importance to their personal, religious, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual lives, both to help them come to what they really think is the truth and to support them as they move forward in life thinking and believing as they do.

I post five times a week on this blog, almost always on the New Testament, the historical Jesus, the literature and history of Christianity in the very early centuries of its existence. You get tons of information here, going back over seven years. Joining costs very little, and every penny goes to charities helping those in need. So think about joining!



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