

ENTRUSTED



A JOURNEY OF GRIEF, DISCERNMENT
AND SPIRITUAL RECOVERY



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SPIRIT LED COUNSELLING

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A Journey of Grief, Discernment and Spiritual Recovery

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Entrusted: A Journey of Grief, Discernment and Spiritual Recovery

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Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise indicated.

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Dedication

To those who loved deeply, served faithfully and stayed longer than they should have because they believed relationship, grace and repair were worth pursuing. To those who gave generously of their time, their gifts and their hearts; who asked honest questions; who hoped for reconciliation; and who carried confusion instead of certainty when the answers did not come.

This is also for those who quietly wondered whether anyone else could see what they could see, and who wrestled with the painful tension between loyalty and truth. Whether your story led you to stay, leave, grieve, heal or begin again, may these pages remind you that your questions were not a sign of weak faith and your desire for truth was not 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.

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 only on appearances, promises or assumptions.

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 that trust calls for humility, integrity and love.

Hope

One of the most comforting truths in Scripture is that when human shepherds fail, God does not. Ezekiel records God’s promise: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them” and, a few verses later, “I

will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.” — Ezekiel 34:11, 16

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 still binds up wounds and strengthens the weary. This book is not simply about recognising unhealthy communities. It is also about remembering that God remains faithful.

Before We Begin

If you are holding this book, there is a good chance that something has stirred questions within you. Perhaps you are considering joining a church. Perhaps you are wondering whether to stay. Perhaps you have already left. Or perhaps you are carrying a quiet sadness that is difficult to explain to people who have never experienced it.

Whatever has brought you here, I want you to know one thing before we begin: you are more important than any framework contained in these pages. This book is not about proving that churches fail, and it is not about teaching you to become suspicious of every spiritual community. It is about people who long to belong, want to trust, hope to serve faithfully and still believe that love, truth and humility can exist together.

If that is you, welcome. I hope these pages offer practical wisdom without losing kindness. I hope they help you notice what is healthy without teaching you to live afraid of what is not. Most of all, I hope they remind you that discernment and tenderness can live in the same heart.

PART ONE

ENTRUSTING

Belonging is beautiful. Trust is sacred. This first part asks what happens when people place their lives, families, gifts and spiritual formation within a community, and what responsible stewardship of that trust can look like.

CHAPTER ONE

Everything Is Fine... Until It Isn't

The Investment We Rarely Notice

There is something beautifully ordinary about becoming part of a church. It rarely begins with a dramatic moment. It begins with a welcome at the door, a cup of coffee after the service, children making friends and someone remembering your name. Slowly, almost without noticing, your life becomes woven into the life of the community.

You volunteer, join a small group, serve on a roster and give financially. You celebrate baptisms, weddings and new babies. You grieve together at funerals, whisper prayers beside hospital beds and share meals and ordinary moments that gradually become part of your story. For many people, church becomes much more than somewhere they attend. It becomes home, and that can be a beautiful thing.

Communities like these can become places of extraordinary healing, friendship, generosity and spiritual growth. They remind us that we were never created to journey through life alone. It is precisely because churches have the capacity to do so much good that they are worthy of thoughtful stewardship.

When we think about what we invest in church, we often think about money, time or gifts. Yet over the years we invest something even more significant: trust. Trust is given quietly, one conversation, one act of service and one Sunday at a time. Eventually the community knows our children, our history, our hopes, our fears, our faith, our dreams and our disappointments. Without ever announcing the decision, we have entrusted part of ourselves to the people around us. That is neither foolish nor naïve. It is what human beings do when they belong.

The Questions We Never Thought to Ask

Most of us ask questions before making important commitments. We think carefully before we marry, seek trustworthy doctors, choose schools for our children and consider whether an employer shares our

values. We observe character before entering close friendships. Yet many of us commit years, sometimes decades, to a spiritual community without ever asking what will happen if the relationship becomes difficult.

Would I be heard if something went wrong? Would I be protected if I became vulnerable? Would truth matter more than reputation? Would my dignity be safeguarded? Would my children be safe here? Would my daughters be encouraged to flourish, or only those who fit comfortably within the existing culture? Would I still be valued if I could no longer serve?

We do not fail to ask these questions because we lack wisdom. Often we simply assume church is different. We assume that because a community follows Christ, it will naturally respond with humility, fairness and courage. Sometimes that assumption is well founded. Sometimes it is not.

Everything Is Fine... Until It Isn't

Most people do not begin asking these questions while everything is going well. They begin asking them when something changes: a misunderstanding, a conflict, a safeguarding concern, a leadership decision, a complaint, an accusation or a breakdown in relationship. Suddenly the question is no longer, “Do I enjoy being here?” It becomes, “How does this community respond when relationships become difficult?”

This is often the moment when the true health of a community becomes visible. Healthy communities are not communities that never experience conflict. They are communities that respond to conflict with humility, truth, accountability and relational courage. Pressure has a way of revealing what ordinary seasons can hide.

Stewardship Flows Both Ways

Christians speak often about stewardship. We are encouraged to steward our finances wisely, our gifts faithfully and our time generously. These are important biblical principles, but stewardship is never only one-directional. When a church invites people to belong, it also accepts responsibility for the way it treats those who choose to trust it.

A church is not merely entrusted with volunteers, members, donors or ministry workers. It is entrusted with people: people created in the image of God, carrying stories, hopes, grief, gifts and vulnerabilities. Their trust should never be treated lightly. This book therefore asks a simple question that I wish I had learned to ask much earlier: how well does a spiritual community steward the trust placed in its care?

Why This Book Exists

This is not a book about finding the perfect church. There are none. Nor is it an invitation to become suspicious of every leader or community. It is an invitation to practise wise discernment before making significant investments of the heart.

Safeguarding is not simply about policies, training or incident reports. Those things matter, but safeguarding also lives in the ordinary relational culture of a community: in how dignity is protected, how authority is exercised, how truth is pursued, how disagreement is handled and how repair is approached when something has gone wrong.

Every person who walks through the doors of a church brings something sacred with them: their trust. Trust is one of the greatest gifts we can receive from another human being. It deserves to be stewarded with wisdom, compassion and great care. The day I realised I had never asked whether the community I was serving was capable of stewarding the trust I had placed in it was the day this book began.

CHAPTER TWO

My Story

Some Stories Begin With a Home

I grew up in church. Not simply attending on Sundays, but growing up within a church family where faith was woven into who we were. My grandparents served faithfully, including as missionaries, and their lives taught me that following Christ was something to be lived rather than merely believed. My parents also served in leadership, and from an early age I watched people quietly give their time, gifts and hearts in service to others.

Church was woven into the fabric of our family. It was where we worshipped, learned, celebrated, grieved and belonged. It became one of the foundations upon which my understanding of God, community and service was built. Like many people, I never thought to ask whether church was a safe place. Why would I? It had always been home.

A Life of Serving

As I grew older, serving became a natural expression of my faith. Over the years I became part of a small number of church communities, each shaping my journey in different ways. Serving never felt like an obligation. It was a privilege and one of the ways I expressed love for God and for people.

There is not much I have not done at some point. I have served on worship teams, led in children's ministry, worked in administration, supported governance, cared for people pastorally, coordinated communication, contributed to safeguarding initiatives and quietly served in behind-the-scenes roles that often go unnoticed. Some seasons placed me at the front. Many more found me working in the background. I loved both.

I never considered governance to be separate from ministry. Whether I was leading worship, teaching children, preparing agendas, writing policies or supporting good process, the purpose was the same: to help

create communities where people could flourish. Every policy, every meeting and every decision eventually touches the life of a real person. That mattered deeply to me then. It still does.

When Everything Changed

For much of my life, church had been a place of belonging, purpose and trust. I never imagined that could change so quickly. Then, in what felt like a single season, everything I believed to be secure was shaken. The experience was sudden, unexpected and deeply distressing.

It was not simply that I found myself in conflict. My reputation was damaged, I experienced profound relational betrayal, and the care, communication and protection I had always believed a church would offer seemed painfully absent. What followed was not merely the loss of a role or a disagreement with people I respected. It was the loss of trust.

Perhaps one of the most painful realisations was discovering how much procedural fairness depends upon the people entrusted to uphold it. For many years I had been content to serve without needing to belong to leadership's closest friendships or social circles. I believed that if I ever became vulnerable, the principles of careful listening, fairness and integrity would apply equally to everyone. When I suddenly needed those principles to protect me, my experience was very different.

I began to question whether procedural fairness was experienced equally by everyone, or whether established relationships and existing trust within leadership circles could influence who was heard, believed or protected. I did not want special treatment. I wanted the same careful listening and dignity that I believed every person deserved.

For the first time in my life, I found myself asking questions I had never imagined I would need to ask. How does a spiritual community respond when someone believes they have been wronged? Who ensures every voice is heard? Who protects a person's dignity while truth is sought? What happens when leadership itself becomes part of the conflict? Those questions did not arise from theory. They arose from lived experience.

The pain was found not only in what happened but also in what did not happen: conversations that never took place, opportunities for understanding that were missed, relationships that were never repaired and the fairness I had always assumed would be there. The ground I had trusted to support me began to feel like quicksand. The harder I tried to regain my footing, seek understanding and pursue reconciliation, the deeper I seemed to sink.

Reaching for Repair

Looking back, I can honestly say that what I wanted most was not to win, expose people or seek revenge. I wanted relationship. I wanted people to sit together, listen carefully, acknowledge hurt where it existed and seek understanding with humility. I believed then, and I still believe now, that healthy relationships are strengthened rather than threatened by honest conversations.

In time, I received written apologies from the elders and from the pastor. I remain grateful for those apologies. Acknowledging that something had gone wrong required courage, and I do not want to overlook it. Yet something was still missing for me. The repair I longed for was relational.

The person I most needed to sit down with was the church chairperson. I felt deeply betrayed and hoped that through honest conversation we might begin to understand one another and rebuild what had been broken. I reached out for that conversation. I reached for reconciliation and repair. Instead, I encountered closed doors and silence.

That distinction became profoundly important to me. Organisational acknowledgement and relational repair are not always the same thing. An organisation can recognise that something went wrong; relational repair asks the people involved to sit together. One can restore confidence in process; the other begins to restore trust between human beings. I longed for the second.

The Long Goodbye

Leaving a church is rarely one decision. It is often hundreds of small decisions made quietly over months or years: choosing to hope one more time, choosing to wait a little longer, choosing grace again and believing that perhaps the next conversation will be different.

For me, leaving was not immediate. After everything that had happened, I stepped into a regional ministry role that I genuinely believed in. I loved the vision, loved serving churches across the region and believed I still had something meaningful to contribute. Yet something within me had changed. Although I was still serving, I no longer felt at home.

For eighteen months I waited for mediation, conflict resolution and the conversations I believed would surely come. I waited for opportunities to sit together, listen, understand and rebuild trust. Eventually I realised I was not simply waiting for a meeting. I was waiting for my spiritual home to feel like home again.

That was the grief I had not recognised. I was grieving what had been lost: the place that shaped my faith, the community that once felt safe, the relationships I believed would endure and the future I had imagined. Leaving did not erase the love I had for people or the years of faithful service that came before. Those years mattered, and much of what I received through them remains precious to me. But the experience changed how I understand trust, leadership, accountability and the stewardship of people.

What I Learned

One question continued to return to me: how do we know whether a spiritual community is healthy enough to entrust with our hearts? Throughout my life I had been taught many wonderful things about belonging to the Church. I had learned to serve faithfully, give generously, steward my gifts, support leadership and commit myself to community. These were good things that shaped my faith in beautiful ways.

Yet there was one conversation I had never heard. No one had taught me how to discern the relational health of a spiritual community. No one

had encouraged me to ask whether the community itself was stewarding the people God had entrusted to its care. Healthy churches are not recognised only by their vision, programs or even their theology. They are also recognised by how they respond when relationships become difficult: how they steward trust, pursue truth, protect dignity and seek repair.

A second question followed: where do you belong when the place that has always felt like home no longer feels safe? What do you do when trust has shattered, the conversations you longed for never happen and reconciliation remains out of reach? For a long time I believed the answer was to wait, hope, pray and keep reaching out. Sometimes those things lead to healing. Sometimes they do not.

I eventually learned that belonging is more than remaining in a place. True belonging grows where truth is welcomed, dignity is protected and difficult conversations are not avoided. When those things are absent, something precious begins to unravel, not only our connection to a community but sometimes our understanding of what home feels like.

Why I Wrote This Book

This book was not born from a desire to criticise the Church. It was born from loving it. Church had been woven into my life from childhood. It shaped my faith, friendships, sense of purpose and understanding of community. Because of that, what happened changed me in ways I never imagined.

There was a time when I believed I would always belong to a church family. Today, I no longer do. That decision was not made quickly or in anger. It came after years of hoping for repair, waiting for conversations that never came and grieving the loss of a place that had once felt like home. That is my story. It may not become yours. I hope it never does.

This book is not an invitation to leave the Church. It is an invitation to pause before entrusting a spiritual community with your heart, to ask thoughtful questions and to notice the health of the relationships around you. If your church is a place of humility, accountability and relational integrity, treasure it, support it and help it flourish. If it is not, I hope these pages help you recognise what is happening sooner than I did and

encourage you to seek places where truth, dignity and grace are lived as well as preached.

I cannot rewrite my own story. Perhaps, however, sharing it can help someone else's story unfold differently. If this book helps one person ask wiser questions, one leader recognise the responsibility of stewarding another person's trust, or one community become safer, kinder and more courageous, then the pain that gave birth to these pages will not have been without purpose.

CHAPTER THREE

The Stewardship of Trust

What Is Spiritual Safeguarding?

For much of my life, I thought safeguarding was primarily about policies, procedures, Working With Children Checks, complaints processes and risk management. All of those things matter. They create structures that can prevent harm and make responsibilities visible. Yet over time I came to realise that safeguarding is larger than compliance.

At its heart, spiritual safeguarding is the practice of protecting human dignity, agency, truth and appropriate boundaries within spiritual relationships and communities. It asks not only whether a policy exists, but how people are actually treated when they become vulnerable, disagree, ask questions, make a complaint or can no longer contribute in the ways they once did.

A community may have excellent paperwork and still have an unhealthy relational culture. Conversely, a warm and friendly community can still be unsafe if accountability disappears when relationships become difficult. Good safeguarding therefore needs both structure and culture. Policies matter, and so do the ordinary habits that determine whether those policies are applied consistently, humbly and fairly.

The Person Behind the Process

When someone becomes part of a church, they bring far more than attendance. They bring hopes, questions, children, gifts, vulnerabilities, grief, dreams, calling, story and trust. Safeguarding begins when we remember that there is a person behind every process. A complaint is carried by a person. A governance decision affects a person. A leadership disagreement can alter the safety and belonging of a person and their family.

This is why procedural fairness is more than an administrative concept. Listening before reaching conclusions, allowing someone to respond to concerns, managing conflicts of interest, respecting privacy

and communicating directly are all ways of protecting human dignity while truth is being sought.

Stewardship Requires More Than Good Intentions

Most spiritual communities are filled with people who mean well. Good intentions are important, but they are not a safeguarding system. Healthy stewardship also requires accountability, clear processes, role boundaries, transparency and the willingness to examine how power is operating.

A community becomes safer when responsibility does not disappear into friendship networks; when leaders can challenge one another without the relationship being threatened; when policies apply to everyone; and when a person does not need social influence to receive a fair hearing. Good intentions become trustworthy when they are supported by structures that remain dependable under pressure.

Safeguarding Is Relational

Spiritual safeguarding is therefore not simply about preventing catastrophic harm. It is also about cultivating conditions in which people can flourish. It looks like truth spoken with grace, power exercised with humility, governance used to protect rather than control, and people valued beyond what they contribute.

It creates room for questions. It expects leadership to remain accountable. It resists triangulation and unnecessary secrecy. It cares about repair because unresolved relational harm does not become harmless simply because everyone stops talking about it. Above all, safeguarding asks a deceptively simple question: when someone becomes vulnerable here, what happens next?

The following chapters take that question from definition into practice. If Chapter Three names spiritual safeguarding, Chapter Four asks what it looks like when a community actually stewards trust well.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Trust Is Entrusted

*“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 is one of the most extraordinary gifts one human being can offer another. It cannot be demanded or manufactured. It can only be given, and when it is given it carries responsibility. When someone joins a church, they are rarely joining only a Sunday service. They are entrusting something far more precious: their heart.

At first, trust is given in small ways: a conversation after church, a prayer request, a willingness to volunteer, a child attending the children’s programme, a donation or an invitation into a home. Over time the community learns the person’s story, hopes, disappointments, marriage, children, gifts, vulnerabilities and questions about God. A spiritual community can become woven into the fabric of a person’s life. Babies are dedicated there, weddings celebrated there, loved ones buried there and friendships formed that feel like family. This is an extraordinary privilege, and it carries extraordinary responsibility.

The Stewardship of Leadership

Leadership is not primarily status; it is stewardship. We often speak about the authority entrusted to leaders and less often about the people entrusted to that authority. Healthy leaders understand that influence is borrowed. People choose to trust leaders because they believe those leaders will protect what is precious, not simply a church’s vision but its people.

Leadership is therefore measured not only by what is achieved but also by how people are treated along the way. Growth, strong preaching and successful programmes cannot compensate for a culture that

routinely diminishes people, ignores conflict or protects position at the expense of truth.

The Stewardship of Truth

Truth is one of the greatest expressions of love because trust cannot survive indefinitely without it. Healthy communities resist assumptions, seek understanding before drawing conclusions and allow each person to be heard. They recognise that truth is rarely strengthened by silence or protected by avoiding difficult conversations.

Truth requires courage, humility and curiosity. It may ask leaders to discover that their first understanding was incomplete. It may require a friend to challenge a friend, or a governing body to acknowledge a conflict of interest. A community that genuinely values truth must be willing to let truth cost something.

The Stewardship of Dignity

Every interaction communicates something about a person's worth. Sometimes that communication arrives through words, sometimes through actions and sometimes through silence. When people become vulnerable, the way they are treated can shape far more than the outcome of a particular situation. It can affect their confidence, sense of safety and even their understanding of God.

Healthy communities protect dignity regardless of outcome. Disagreement never removes a person's humanity. Procedural fairness, careful listening, respectful communication, privacy and honesty are not merely governance principles. In relational life, they are acts of love.

The Stewardship of Power

Power is not dangerous simply because it exists. Every community needs people who can make decisions, hold responsibility and lead. Power becomes dangerous when it forgets why it was given. Jesus consistently used influence to lift, protect, restore and serve. Healthy leadership reflects that posture.

Authority should create safety rather than fear, space for questions rather than enforced silence, and accountability rather than insulation. The safest leaders are rarely those with the strongest control. They are often those who remain teachable when challenged and who do not confuse disagreement with disloyalty.

The Stewardship of Repair

Every community experiences conflict. Healthy communities are not recognised because conflict never occurs; they are recognised because relationships matter enough to attempt repair. Repair asks us to listen before defending ourselves, to seek understanding before protecting reputation and to sit with another person's pain without immediately explaining it away.

Sometimes repair is possible and sometimes it is not. Reconciliation may be limited by safety, willingness, distance or the reality that trust has changed. Yet healthy communities do not casually allow broken relationships to drift into silence simply because difficult conversations are uncomfortable. They understand that silence communicates, too, and that an unresolved rupture can continue shaping a community long after the formal issue has been considered "finished."

The Stewardship of Belonging

Belonging is one of humanity's deepest needs, but healthy belonging is never built upon conformity. It allows people to remain themselves. It celebrates different personalities, gifts, perspectives and forms of creativity. It makes room for thoughtful questions and welcomes the person who sits quietly at the edge of the room as warmly as the person who naturally gathers at the centre.

One of the questions I have learned to ask is, "Would my daughters flourish here?" Would they be encouraged to discover the gifts God has placed within them? Would they be listened to? Would their voices matter? Would they be protected if they became vulnerable? Every parent hopes the answer is yes.

The Stewardship of Our Children

When families bring children into a church, they entrust more than physical safety. They also entrust formation. Children quietly learn what leadership looks like, how conflict is handled, whether apologies matter, whether power is exercised with humility, whether questions are welcomed and whether people are treated with dignity.

The culture children grow up within can shape the adults they become. That is an extraordinary responsibility. A safeguarding culture therefore considers not only whether children are protected from obvious harm, but also what they are learning about truth, power, belonging and the value of their own voice.

A Shared Responsibility

For generations, Christians have been encouraged to steward what God has entrusted to them: gifts, finances, time and calling. These are beautiful expressions of faith. Yet stewardship was never intended to flow in only one direction. When individuals entrust themselves to a spiritual community, the community also becomes a steward: of trust, dignity, belonging, truth, children's hearts, grief and hope.

Perhaps every church, elder, pastor, ministry leader and governing board might quietly 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. Perhaps that is what spiritual safeguarding has always been about.

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

If you have read this far, you may already be carrying questions. Some may have been with you for years and others may only have surfaced while reading these pages. Approach this chapter slowly. There is no score to achieve, no perfect church to locate and no single answer that can tell you whether you should stay or leave.

This is a reflective tool, not a verdict. Its purpose is to help you prayerfully notice whether a community demonstrates the relational health, humility, accountability and stewardship needed to care well for people. Healthy communities are not those that never make mistakes. They are those that remain teachable and are willing to pursue truth and repair when relationships become strained.

How to Use This Reflection

Move through each section slowly and remain curious. Notice patterns rather than isolated events. Ask what evidence supports your response and whether what you are noticing is occasional or recurring. Consider whether you would feel confident inviting someone you love into the same culture, and whether you would trust the community to protect your dignity if you became vulnerable.

You may discover areas of great strength and areas that deserve further prayer, conversation or observation. Both are valuable. The aim is not suspicion. The aim is wisdom.

Leadership & Accountability

- If I raised a serious concern about a leader, would I expect to be heard and taken seriously?
- Would I expect a fair process, and are leaders accountable beyond their immediate friendship or ministry circle?
- Can leaders be respectfully challenged without the challenger being labelled disloyal or difficult?
- Are difficult conversations addressed directly rather than avoided, spiritualised or passed around informally?

Governance

- Is there meaningful diversity of gender, perspective and experience in governance?
- Where women are represented, are their contributions genuinely heard and able to shape decisions?
- Are policies followed consistently, and can members understand how important decisions are made?
- Are conflicts of interest identified and managed rather than simply trusted to goodwill?

Leadership Relationships & Independence

- Are most key leaders close personal friends or members of the same social network?
- If so, are there structures strong enough to protect independent judgement when conflict arises?
- Would leaders realistically challenge one another if necessary?
- Does friendship ever appear to carry more weight than accountability?

Procedural Fairness

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

- Would I be spoken to before people made decisions about me or spoke widely about me?
- Would leaders seek truth even when the truth complicated existing relationships or reputation?
- Would the same process be applied to a well-connected person and to someone with little influence?

Relational Integrity & Repair

- Have I seen leaders take personal responsibility when they have caused harm?
- Where appropriate, do people apologise directly and specifically to those involved?
- Does organisational acknowledgement replace personal conversation, or is relational repair genuinely attempted?
- When relationships break down, does the community make appropriate room for mediation, listening and repair?

Power & Culture

- Can people respectfully disagree and say no without negative relational or ministry consequences?
- Is loyalty valued more highly than honesty?
- Is unity understood as healthy relationship rather than simple agreement?
- Do leaders use spiritual language to invite discernment, or to close discussion?

Belonging Without Performance

- If I became unwell, tired or unable to volunteer, would I still be valued?
- If my role changed, would my relationships remain?
- Am I valued for who I am, or primarily for what I contribute?

Belonging, Culture & Social Networks

- Do people appear free to express individuality in personality, appearance, creativity and thought?
- Are there obvious cliques or an inner circle whose relationships significantly shape access and influence?
- Are key leadership positions repeatedly held within the same friendship or family networks?
- If something serious happened, could those social networks influence who was believed or protected?

Care & Safety

- Are vulnerable people protected and complaints handled with appropriate confidentiality?
- Are people who leave treated with dignity rather than becoming the subject of negative narratives?
- Do people feel emotionally safe raising difficult issues?
- When someone is distressed, does care continue even if the person is challenging the organisation?

Transparency

- Are important policies available to members?
- Is there appropriate financial transparency?
- Are conflicts of interest acknowledged?
- Do members know who holds responsibility and where concerns can be taken if usual pathways fail?

Personal Reflection

- Who would I approach if something serious happened?
- Who could advocate for me if the people involved were also in leadership?
- Would I expect procedural fairness?

- Would truth be pursued even if it was inconvenient?
- Would I feel emotionally safe remaining in the community while the matter was addressed?

Possible Relational Red Flags

No single feature automatically proves that a community is unsafe. Red flags become more meaningful when several appear together, when they recur over time, or when they become most visible under pressure. Pay particular attention when leadership is socially closed, questions are interpreted as disloyalty, people who leave are routinely spoken about negatively, policies are applied inconsistently, women or minority perspectives have little meaningful influence, or the organisation's reputation appears to receive greater protection than vulnerable people.

What Healthy Spiritual Communities Look Like

Healthy communities are not perfect. They make mistakes, disappoint people 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 and seek repair where possible. Most importantly, they make it possible for a person to remain fully human even in disagreement.

CHAPTER SIX

Recognising Healthy Spiritual Communities

From Checklist to Pattern

A checklist can help us notice things, but discernment begins when we step back and ask what those things mean together. One difficult conversation does not necessarily reveal an unhealthy culture, just as one beautiful Sunday does not prove a healthy one. Culture is discovered in patterns: what happens repeatedly, what happens under pressure and what happens when the people involved have unequal power.

It can help to think in clusters rather than isolated answers. A church may have a weak policy and still respond humbly when that weakness is identified. Another may have polished policies yet repeatedly avoid direct conversation, protect insiders and resist accountability. The second situation may carry greater relational risk even though it looks more organised on paper.

Imperfection Is Not the Same as Unhealthiness

Healthy communities make mistakes. A leader may communicate poorly, a process may need updating or a conflict may be mishandled. What matters is what happens next. Does the community become curious? Does it listen? Does it correct the process? Can someone acknowledge impact without immediately defending intention? Can the system learn?

An imperfect but healthy culture usually has movement in it. There is room to say, “We got this wrong.” There is an observable willingness to change, repair and strengthen safeguards. An unhealthy culture tends to become rigid when questioned. It may minimise concerns, close ranks, redirect responsibility toward the person raising the issue, or describe accountability as divisive.

What to Notice Under Pressure

Pressure often exposes the operating values of a community more clearly than ordinary seasons. Watch what happens when a complaint involves a respected leader, when two leaders disagree, when a long-serving member steps back, when a person with little influence challenges a decision, or when the easiest path would be to protect reputation rather than pursue truth.

Healthy communities do not need everyone to agree. They need trustworthy ways to remain in relationship while disagreement is explored. They protect confidentiality without turning secrecy into control. They distinguish between unity and uniformity. They understand that accountability is not hostility and that questions are not automatically rebellion.

When Several Concerns Cluster Together

If your reflections raised several concerns, resist the urge either to panic or to explain everything away. Instead, gather information slowly. Ask whether the same pattern appears across different situations. Notice whether concerns can be discussed safely and whether the response to a respectful question increases or decreases your confidence.

A concern often becomes more significant when the attempt to address it produces a second concern. For example, a poor decision may be repairable; a poor decision followed by defensiveness, exclusion, narrative control or refusal to listen suggests a broader cultural issue. In safeguarding work, the response to the concern can sometimes tell us as much as the original event.

When Your Responses Bring Gratitude

You may also discover that your community demonstrates humility, kindness, integrity and accountability. If so, be grateful. Healthy spiritual communities are a remarkable gift. Support them, pray for them and encourage leaders who are willing to remain teachable. Good culture does not happen by accident. It is cultivated through hundreds of

ordinary choices to tell the truth, listen carefully, share power appropriately and treat people with dignity.

A Wise Next Question

The Spiritual Community Safeguarding Check™ is not asking, “Is this church perfect?” It is asking, “Is this a community that knows how to steward people well?” A further question may be even more revealing: “When this community discovers that it has not stewarded someone well, what does it do next?”

That question moves us beyond image and intention into capacity for repair. It allows grace without abandoning discernment. A healthy community does not have to be flawless. It does need to be able to tell the truth about itself.

PART TWO

WHEN TRUST BREAKS

Discernment can help us choose wisely, but sometimes we discover the questions only after trust has already been broken. This part is for the grief that follows, the self that must be reclaimed and the life that still waits beyond the wound.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Spiritual Recovery Framework™

*“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” —
Psalm 147:3*

Before We Talk About Healing

Before we talk about recovery, I want to honour something that is often overlooked: grief. If the questions in this book have stirred something within you, what you are carrying may be more than disappointment or hurt. You may be grieving not only what happened but everything that was lost because it happened.

Harm within a spiritual community rarely takes only one thing. It can affect friendships, belonging, ministry, confidence in leadership, a sense of safety and the future we imagined. Sometimes we even grieve the version of ourselves that existed before trust was broken. Profound losses deserve to be named before anyone asks us to move on.

Forgiveness, acceptance and new beginnings may eventually have a place, but healing cannot be hurried into existence. Grief has its own rhythm. It asks us to acknowledge what mattered, honour what has been lost and tell the truth about where our hearts were broken. Restoration built on denial is not restoration. It is simply pain pushed underground.

Foundational Grief

One of the greatest discoveries on my own journey was realising that I was not only grieving people. I was grieving a foundation. Church had been woven into every stage of my life. It was where I belonged, served, worshipped, celebrated milestones and imagined growing old. When that foundation fractured, the impact reached far beyond one relationship.

I call this Foundational Grief™: the grief that comes when something that once gave stability, meaning, identity or orientation is suddenly altered or lost. A foundational loss can make us feel disoriented because the thing that helped us understand where we stood has moved. We may still believe in God and yet no longer know what church means. We may

still have gifts and no longer know where they belong. We may still love people and feel unable to enter another community.

Foundational grief can touch several layers at once. We may grieve the people we lost, the role we held, the future we imagined, the spiritual certainty we once carried and the version of ourselves who trusted without hesitation. This is why the grief can seem disproportionate to outsiders. They may see a church change. We may feel as though an entire internal map has been redrawn.

Losing a Community Is Not Losing God

One of the most important distinctions in recovery is learning to separate what became tangled together. A community may have failed you without God failing you. A leader may have misrepresented authority without God requiring you to submit to harm. A role may end without your calling disappearing. A particular expression of faith may become impossible without faith itself being dead.

These distinctions often take time. Spiritual hurt can make every prayer, Scripture or church building feel connected to the injury for a while. There is no need to force spiritual practices that currently feel unsafe or hollow. Sometimes faith survives first as the smallest thread: a whispered prayer, a walk outside, a song you can still bear to hear, a simple awareness that God is present even when you cannot make sense of people.

You are allowed to let God become larger than the community that once represented Him to you. You are allowed to discover that losing a spiritual home is not the same as losing your place with God.

There Is No Right Way to Grieve

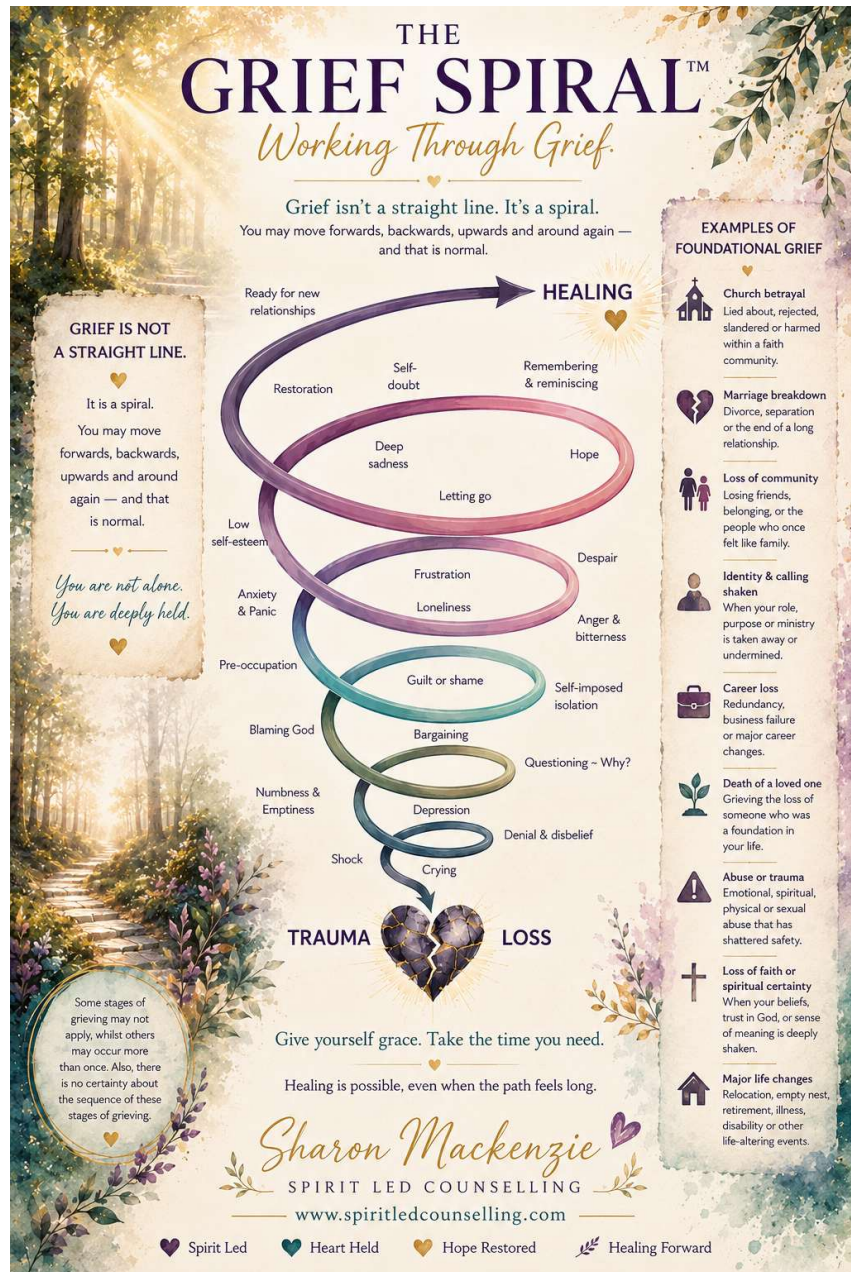
Grief does not behave politely. One person becomes angry, another numb. Some become exhausted, others busy. Some feel immense relief after leaving and then feel guilty for the relief. Many move backwards and forwards between hope and despair. None of these responses makes a person spiritually weak. They make us human.

Healing is rarely a straight line because understanding is rarely delivered all at once. We revisit memories with new information, recognise losses we could not name at the beginning and discover that something we thought we had finished grieving still has another layer. This does not mean we have gone backwards. Sometimes we are simply returning with more capacity than we had before.

The Foundational Grief Spiral™

I use the image of a spiral because grief often circles familiar territory without returning us to exactly the same place. We may revisit anger, sadness, questions or longing, but each turn can bring a little more perspective. The past has not changed, yet our relationship with it can change.

On one turn of the spiral we may be grieving people. On another, identity. Later, we may discover that what hurts most is the future we imagined and will never live. Still later, we may recognise gifts that survived the loss. The spiral does not demand progress. It simply gives us permission to understand healing as layered, patient and alive.



My Journey Through Grief

For a long time I did not understand why the grief felt so overwhelming. I knew I had been deeply hurt and that my trust had been shattered, but I could not understand why the experience seemed to reach into every part of my life. Eventually I realised that I was grieving everything that had been lost because of what happened.

For more than fifty years, church had been woven into my identity. It was where I belonged, worshipped, served, discovered my gifts, built friendships and imagined growing old. When that foundation gave way, the experience was not simply relational. The ground beneath much of my life seemed to dissolve. What had felt solid became uncertain.

There were mornings when I looked in the mirror and barely recognised the woman looking back at me. Who am I if I no longer belong to the community that shaped my faith? Who am I if I am no longer serving in the place where I believed God had called me? Who am I when the place that once felt like home no longer feels safe?

There were also questions with nowhere to go. Why did this happen? Why was there not greater care? Why was there not meaningful repair? Why did the silence continue? I waited for conversations because I believed relationships mattered. Months passed, and the silence itself became part of the grief.

I slowly learned that silence has a weight of its own. It can leave us wondering whether our story mattered, whether the relationship mattered and, at our most vulnerable, whether we mattered. Eventually I understood that I was grieving a spiritual home, a future I had imagined and the woman I had been before my trust was shattered. This kind of grief does not simply ask us to let go. It asks us to rebuild.

Introducing the Spiritual Recovery Framework™

The Spiritual Recovery Framework™ grew from that rebuilding. It is not a formula, a checklist or a pathway that must be followed in perfect order. It is a companion for people who need somewhere to place what has happened while they slowly find solid ground again.

The movement is simple: See → Name → Grieve → Reclaim → Create → Restore. You may linger in one place for months and move through another quickly. You may circle back. That is normal. The framework is not trying to make you recover efficiently. It is helping you recover honestly.

SEE — See What Happened

Recovery begins with honest observation. Seeing is not the same as condemning, exaggerating or deciding that every memory has only one possible interpretation. It is simply allowing yourself to look at what happened without immediately minimising it, spiritualising it away or rewriting the story to make other people more comfortable.

Ask yourself what happened, what changed and what you now understand that you did not understand then. Notice both actions and absences. Sometimes what wounded us was an event; sometimes it was the response to the event, the conversation that never occurred, the lack of protection, or the way a concern was reframed.

Seeing clearly may include recognising your own choices as well as the choices of others. The goal is not to assign every ounce of blame. The goal is to stop carrying a foggy story. Clarity creates somewhere solid to stand.

A gentle practice

Write the story in plain language, as though you were making notes for someone who knew nothing about it. Separate what you know, what you were told, what you felt and what remains uncertain. You do not need to solve the story. You are simply allowing it to become visible.

NAME — Name What Was Lost

People often say, “I just left my church,” but the loss may include community, belonging, identity, ministry, friendships, safety, purpose, certainty, routines, family connections and a picture of God that once made sense. Unnamed loss can remain strangely powerful because the heart is grieving something the mind has not yet recognised.

Naming does not make the loss larger. It makes it more accurate. It also helps us distinguish what is gone from what remains. You may have lost a role without losing your gifts. You may have lost a community without losing your capacity for relationship. You may have lost certainty without losing the ability to live faithfully.

A gentle practice

Finish the sentence, “Because this happened, I lost...” as many times as you need. Then begin a second list: “What remains with me is...” Do not rush toward gratitude. The purpose is simply to see the whole landscape rather than only the wound.

GRIEVE — Honour What Mattered

Grief is not weakness. It is often evidence that something mattered deeply. You may feel sadness, anger, relief, confusion, loneliness, guilt, numbness and hope, sometimes all in the same day. There is no timetable and no correct emotional sequence.

Spiritual communities sometimes move too quickly toward forgiveness because unresolved grief makes people uncomfortable. Yet forgiveness cannot be used as a broom to sweep grief out of the room. Grief needs witness. It needs language, tears, silence, prayer, movement, art, sleep and sometimes professional support. The form matters less than the permission to acknowledge what mattered.

A gentle practice

Choose one loss and give it ten undistracted minutes. Sit with it, pray, write, draw or simply notice what happens in your body. You are not trying to fix the feeling. You are communicating to yourself: this mattered enough to be noticed.

RECLAIM — Return to Yourself

Many people discover that over time they adapted themselves to fit expectations. They became quieter, more useful, more agreeable or more responsible than was healthy because belonging seemed to require it.

Recovery eventually invites a different question: not “How do I fit back in?” but “Who am I when I no longer need to perform for belonging?”

Reclaiming is the restoration of internal authority. It means learning again that you are allowed to notice what you notice, ask questions, form judgements, set boundaries and make decisions about your own participation. This is not a rejection of wise counsel or community. It is the recovery of your responsibility before God for your own life.

Ask what brings you peace now, what you believe now, which values survived, which gifts are still alive and what feels authentic. Some answers may surprise you. Recovery is not becoming someone else. It is becoming more fully able to inhabit your own life.

A gentle practice

Choose one small decision this week that belongs to you and make it without over-explaining. It may be how you spend an afternoon, whether you attend an event, what creative work you begin or what boundary you keep. Reclaiming often returns through ordinary acts of agency.

CREATE — Make Room for Life

Healing is not only about processing pain. At some point it also becomes about making room for life. Creativity matters here because creating is an act of agency. It says that the story is still moving and that you are not limited to what has already happened.

Create does not have to mean becoming an artist. It can mean painting, writing, dancing, gardening, learning, building a business, rearranging a room, cooking something beautiful, making music, travelling somewhere new or returning to an old interest. The specific activity is less important than the movement from reaction toward authorship.

Pain can make our world very small. Creation gently widens it. Every act of making whispers, “There is still more.”

A gentle practice

Make something that has no usefulness at all. Let it exist simply because you enjoyed making it. If your life has been organised around

service and responsibility, purposeless creativity can be a surprisingly powerful way to remember that you are allowed to exist beyond usefulness.

RESTORE — Build What Comes Next

Restoration is not the recovery of your old life. Some things cannot and should not be returned to exactly as they were. Restoration is the gradual building of a life that reflects who you are now, with healthier boundaries, meaningful relationships, authentic spirituality, creativity, joy and peace.

You may never become the person you were before. You may become someone wiser, freer and more fully yourself. Restoration can include new community, but it does not have to begin there. It may begin with a safer relationship, a renewed spiritual practice, a stronger boundary or a home that finally feels peaceful.

The aim is not to prove that you have healed by trusting quickly again. The aim is to build a life in which trust is given wisely and your dignity no longer depends upon another person's willingness to recognise it.

A gentle practice

Imagine your life one year from now, not in terms of achievements but qualities. How do you want your ordinary days to feel? What kinds of relationships surround you? What are you no longer carrying? What is growing? Let restoration become concrete enough to move toward gently.

The Journey

See your story with honesty. Name what was lost. Grieve with compassion. Reclaim who you are. Create what comes next. Restore hope. Then, when another layer appears, begin wherever you need to begin again.

Recovery is not forgetting what happened or pretending the hurt did not matter. It is allowing your story to become larger than the wound, not because the pain was small, but because your life was always meant to be larger than what tried to define it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Beginning Again

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” — Psalm 34:18

Will I Ever Trust Again?

If you have made it this far, there is a good chance you have recognised something of your own story. Perhaps these pages gave words to questions you have carried for years. Perhaps they confirmed that what you are feeling is grief. Wherever you find yourself, I want to begin with the question many people eventually ask: will I ever trust again?

Perhaps. But trust does not need to return today simply because someone thinks it should. Trust cannot be forced into existence by guilt, pressure or spiritual instruction. It grows where integrity is repeatedly experienced: one safe relationship, one honest conversation and one small act of reliability at a time.

A broken experience of trust can make caution feel like failure. It is not. Discernment after injury is often slower because the heart is learning what safety feels like again. There is no virtue in rushing that process.

You May Not Need to Trust Everyone Again

One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself is permission to let go of the pressure to become exactly who you were before. Perhaps your journey is not about trusting everyone again, and perhaps it is not about finding another church immediately. For a season, it may simply be about learning to trust yourself again.

Trust the quiet voice that recognised something was not right. Trust your ability to ask thoughtful questions. Trust your discernment and your boundaries. Trust that your dignity is worth protecting and that your worth

has never depended upon someone else recognising it. This is not cynicism. It is mature stewardship of your own heart.

Becoming Who You Truly Are

Profound loss eventually asks a question we may never have asked before: who am I now? Not who was I in that church, ministry or role, but who am I beneath all of those things? Long before we served, belonged to a particular community or received another person's affirmation, there was a person God lovingly created.

Your dignity has never depended on a title, ministry, position or another person's approval. Healing is not becoming someone new. It is gradually uncovering the person who has always been there beneath grief, disappointment and silence. Perhaps this season is not asking you to find another place to belong as quickly as possible. Perhaps it is inviting you to come home to yourself.

Rediscover your creativity, joy, voice, peace and calling. Let them take forms that are true now, not forms dictated by the expectations of a previous season. A calling can survive a context. A gift can outlive a role. God is not restricted to the structure through which you first learned to serve Him.

Will I Ever Belong Again?

For a long time, I believed belonging meant finding another church. Today I think belonging is deeper. Belonging begins when we no longer have to hide parts of ourselves to remain accepted. It grows where truth is welcomed, dignity is protected and people are free to ask honest questions.

That belonging may eventually be found in another church. It may also begin in a small gathering of trusted friends, a mentoring relationship, a creative community or somewhere you have not yet discovered. The point is not to replace one institution as quickly as possible. It is to experience relationships where your humanity is valued as much as your service.

There Is No Rush

If you are wondering whether you will ever trust again, belong again or know who you are now, be gentle with yourself. There is no timetable for healing and no requirement to have every answer today. One thoughtful step is enough.

Healing is rarely found only in dramatic moments. More often it appears in quiet acts of courage: caring for yourself, honouring your grief, believing your life still holds purpose, allowing joy without guilt, keeping a boundary and trusting yourself a little more than you did yesterday. These things may look small. They are not.

If You Need Someone to Walk Beside You

If reading this book has stirred something within you, helped you recognise your own story or revealed grief you have never known how to name, please know that you do not have to make sense of it all alone. Sometimes healing begins with one safe conversation and one person willing to listen without rushing to fix you.

If you would like reflective or counselling support, you can learn more about my work at www.spiritledcounselling.com. You can also explore my writing and other published work at www.sharonmackenzie.org. Whether your next step is counselling, prayer, reflection, creativity, community or simply rest, you are allowed to take it at your own pace.

A Final Blessing

As I close these pages, there is one thing I hope you carry with you above everything else: you are not what happened to you. You are not the silence, misunderstanding, rejection, role you lost or community you had to leave. You are God's beloved, and nothing that has happened can diminish that truth.

My prayer is not that you become the person you were before. Life changes us. Love changes us. Grief changes us. My prayer is that you become more fully who you have always been: rooted in truth, able to recognise your own dignity and free to love without abandoning yourself.

May you find peace where there has been turmoil, truth where there has been confusion, courage where there has been fear and joy that no one can take from you. May you discover relationships where honesty is welcomed, accountability is not feared, repair is pursued where possible and love is shown not only in words but in actions.

May you never again lose yourself trying to belong somewhere that cannot honour who you are. May you learn to trust your discernment, protect your heart with wisdom and remain open to the goodness that still exists. And wherever your journey leads, may you remember that the One who created you has never stopped delighting in you, calling you by name and walking beside you.

Grace and peace,

Sharon Mackenzie

Counsellor & Reflective Safeguarding Practitioner

Spirit Led Counselling

About the Author

Sharon Mackenzie is a counsellor, reflective safeguarding practitioner and writer whose work sits at the intersection of human relationships, spiritual life, community culture and systems. Her background includes counselling, chaplaincy, governance, safeguarding, education, administration and ministry, and much of her writing has grown from a desire to help people make sense of complex relational experiences without losing sight of dignity, agency and hope.

Through Spirit Led Counselling, Sharon brings together therapeutic conversation, reflective safeguarding, spiritual reflection and creative practice. Her frameworks are designed to help people recognise patterns, clarify responsibility, strengthen internal authority and move from confusion toward discernment and freedom.

Her writing also explores belonging, community, grief, creativity and the strange, beautiful business of being human. You can find her counselling and safeguarding work at www.spiritedcounselling.com and her books and broader writing at www.sharonmackenzie.org.

Additional Resources

Reflective Safeguarding Framework™

The Reflective Safeguarding Framework™ is a growing body of reflective tools designed to help people recognise harmful or confusing relational patterns, clarify responsibility, strengthen boundaries and discern wise next steps. Current resources and publications are available through Spirit Led Counselling and Sharon's author website.

Spirit Led Counselling

Counselling, reflective safeguarding support and spiritual reflection:
www.spiritedcounselling.com

Books and Writing

For books, essays, teaching and emerging bodies of work:
www.sharonmackenzie.org

A Note About Support

If this book has opened material that feels difficult to carry alone, consider reaching out to a trusted counsellor, chaplain, pastoral care provider or appropriately qualified safeguarding professional. The right support should make room for your dignity, questions and pace rather than pressuring you toward a predetermined conclusion.