

# Disillusionment with Ministry

*A resource from*





## Disillusionment with Ministry:

### 4 ways to renew your purpose in the midst of disappointment

Ministry promises so much purpose in life. Whether lay or ordained, ministry leaders draw inspiration from the divine, care for people through their most vulnerable moments, and lead others in the service to God and neighbor.

But that promise of purposeful vocation doesn't always deliver. Congregants can become critical of pastors who don't meet all their needs or don't agree with all of their opinions. Finding volunteers to contribute to a vibrant community life is challenging. Building issues pile up, while budget issues prevent even basic maintenance. It becomes hard to remember motivation, to encounter inspiration, or to cultivate connection with God.

That gap between expected purpose and lived reality: let's call that disillusionment. If you are disillusioned with ministry, know that you are not alone — especially as the impacts of pandemic life and political polarization continue to shape churches. In 2021-22, 42% of pastors had “given serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry.”

Before you start thinking about drafting a resignation, spend some time working with disillusionment. Here are four ways to approach disillusionment that can bolster your purpose in ministry.

#### 01 Embrace your disillusionment

*“Early on mentors instilled in us that it is really great when you are disillusioned, because that means we were living in an illusion--and with disillusionment you get to move towards reality.”*

We interviewed pastors who had been identified by their peers as exemplars of resilience. Krista Dawn Kimsey, co-executive director of Servant Partners Canada, shared the above in response to questions about her decades of resilient leadership. It was a revelation, and an invitation to move from a place of cynicism to a posture of openness. Disillusionment doesn't have to be the death of dreams. It can be, instead, the gift of sight — a newer, truer way of encountering God, self, and the other.

Krista Dawn said she's needed that resilience “whenever I have received the message that I wasn't good enough or what others wanted me to be. There have been major points of disillusionment, where this is who I thought I was, and I'd try out a ministry and some aspect of that didn't go the way I thought it would go. I have to get up off the floor and decide what to do with that information. I realize I can do what I want to do, I just need more help. So it's taking the initiative to get the help that I need to do something well. The pitfall is being a victim and to get out of the pitfall is initiative.”

**Reflect:** *If you embrace disillusionment as an invitation to encounter reality, what might you be able to see more clearly? What might God be inviting you to?*

<sup>1</sup><https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry>

We'd love to hear your experience of this resource. Email [transforming@theseattleschool.edu](mailto:transforming@theseattleschool.edu), subject: Resources.



This work is licensed under the creative commons attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



## 02 Find your story in the story of scripture

Disillusionment in ministry is a well-established theme in Christian scripture. Consider the prophet Jeremiah, who complains to God that he has done everything God asked and yet still finds himself miserable; the apostle Paul pleading with congregants to get along; Moses coming down from his mountaintop experience with God to find the people worshiping idols; and the judge Deborah's frustration with her subordinates being unwilling to carry out what she has discerned is best.

Your congregation's story likely also has scriptural parallels. The history of God's people follows a cyclical pattern of commitment and faithlessness. Perhaps it's not surprising that leaders today struggle with the apathy of congregants or a failure of people to return to church after pandemic pauses. We know that when God's people are stone hearted or stiff necked, they are still loved by God; perhaps these cycles are part of the predictability of ministry.

Given that predictability, perhaps it's more fruitful to find where your story resonates with the stories of our spiritual ancestors than it is to accuse God of deceit (though there's certainly space to lament alongside Jeremiah).

Pastor Jeff Lee, one of our resilience exemplar interviewees, said this practice is key to his ability to have resilient purpose: "I think it is always the narrative of scripture, putting yourself in that narrative." Pastor Lee noted that the stories of Elijah's and Moses's leadership struggles particularly resonated with him. "Somehow, some way, I am in the stream of all of those called leaders."

**Reflect:** *Where in scripture or church history might you find a similar story to what you are now experiencing? What insights does that narrative offer for your situation? What hope can be found in that story that you might adopt?*

## 03 Explore your story of disillusionment with others

One goal of growing through disillusionment is to move toward a grounded hope, or a sense of purpose that is less dependent on outcomes. But it can be hard to imagine something you have not yet experienced. That's why it can be so helpful to explore your stories of disillusionment with others.

In her dissertation "Hope as Reclaiming Narrative Agency", Laura Burton studied how church-based groups lead to change.<sup>2</sup> She found that sharing stories of struggle in a group of peers helps both the sharer and the listener. Hearing stories with which you identify leads to reflexive moments, or the possibility of seeing situations and solutions in new ways. Reflexive moments cultivate hope. At the same time, the story-sharer benefits by receiving feedback from the group as they feel empathy, experience encouragement, and gather ideas about how to move forward.

Dr. Joel Cocklin echoes these themes. He writes that deep mutual sharing can change ministry leaders' perceptions of their challenges, which is key to resilience: "It is not the absence or the degree of intensity of difficulties in ministry, but it is the perception and interpretation of the emotional and physical reactions to those events that is important."<sup>3</sup> For ministry leaders, connecting with a peer group of deep mutual sharing is worth the effort — though you may have to look outside of your denomination or local ministers association to find an optimal, non-competitive environment.<sup>4</sup>

**Reflect:** *Who in your life, outside of family, can walk beside you through your disillusionment? What organizations near you — seminaries, clergy care or renewal programs, or parachurch organizations — might offer clergy peer groups?*

<sup>2</sup>Burton, Laura L. "Hope as Reclaiming Narrative Agency: The Communication Processes Facilitating Hope at a Community-Based Support Program." (2016). [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cj\\_etds/2](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cj_etds/2)

<sup>3</sup>Cocklin, J.W. (2013). Pastoral Resilience, Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from [https://winebrenner.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Cocklin\\_DM-880.8-FI-NAL-2-Consolidated-Joel-Cocklin-7-26-13-2.pdf](https://winebrenner.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Cocklin_DM-880.8-FI-NAL-2-Consolidated-Joel-Cocklin-7-26-13-2.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Harwood, B.K. et al. (2013) So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive. Chalice Press



## 04 Listen for the redemptive narratives

A redemptive narrative is a story in which pain is transformed into growth or greater generativity. Please don't read that in a shallowly optimistic, everything-happens-for-a-reason way. Redemptive narratives are reflections of the narrative arc of scripture: it includes experiences and tellings of suffering that are ultimately redeemed — not as an encouragement to suffer, but as a way to make meaning of the suffering that naturally, inevitably occurs in the world. Our lives are images of that larger story; small redemptive stories on the way to the eschatological one.

Dealing with disillusionment requires taking the time to fully acknowledge and feel the disappointment, but also imagining the positive endings of the story — who might you become? How is this pain shaping you? How might this pain be redeemed so that the very thing that hurts becomes a part of the blessing you offer to the world?

If that is too hard with the present experience, look to your past. Think of seasons in life in which you learned a lot, grew in a new way, or changed your mind. Did any of those growing experiences involve any struggle or disillusionment? Often pain and learning go hand-in-hand. What story do you want to be able to tell about your current disillusionment, years or decades in the future? Another route is to look at fictional stories. Many “hero's journey” narratives follow a character's growth that is born of struggle.

Dr. J. Derek McNeil, President of The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, suggests these frames as a way to listen for the redemptive narratives in your life:

- See life as a series of meaningful moments that have a larger purpose beyond the now.
- Imagine your story as embedded in a larger connected whole of groups and God. It's your story, but it's also our story and God's story.
- Use your sense of call to imagine possible selves into a long-term future.

Most stories have a turning point: a moment of choice where character is forged. Stories that end with disillusionment end with characters who are cynics. That's not the end that you want, and not the character who you want to become. Stories where characters turn towards hope — that's where redemption becomes possible.

So we might add to Dr McNeil's process one final suggestion: search for the turning points. Search for the turning points in your past where you chose growth. Search for the turning points in scriptural accounts and in peers' narratives. Search for turning points in the present that could move you toward a redemptive ending.

“So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” -Jesus, Gospels of Luke and Matthew

**Reflect:** *If your current disillusionment was a chapter in the book about your life, how does that chapter begin? How might it end? What is a turning point that you could use to move toward your desired ending? How do you want to talk about this season of life when you're retired?*

We'd love to hear your experience of this resource. Email [transforming@theseattleschool.edu](mailto:transforming@theseattleschool.edu), subject: Resources.



This work is licensed under the creative commons attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

