

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Leaving, Returning, and Rebuilding Faith

How ministry teams can recognize the movement beneath the distance, accompany people without controlling the outcome, and receive return with grace and wisdom

A free, research-grounded resource for ministry teams. Designed for a focused fifteen-minute staff, vestry, elder, board, pastoral-care, chaplaincy, youth-ministry, or volunteer conversation.

07

What this names

The same empty seat can hold different stories. Someone may still believe and pray while living outside congregational rhythms. Someone may no longer claim Christian faith. Someone may be questioning a church because Scripture has made the church's failure impossible to ignore. Someone may be returning to God before they are ready to return to a room.

What to listen for

Not only where the person is, but what is moving. What do they still love? What have they stopped trusting? What authority are they moving toward or away from? What would welcome, truth, repair, and faithful accompaniment require now?

What this helps a team do

Ask before classifying, match the first response to the journey being described, keep relationship from becoming leverage, and distinguish immediate Christian welcome from the slower rebuilding of trust and responsibility.

01 • THE FORMATION CHALLENGE

The empty seat does not tell you the journey

"I still believe in God. I just do not think I need church."

"I am not sure I believe any of it anymore."

"I love Jesus. I do not trust the institution that speaks for him."

"I want to come back. I just do not know whether I belong there now."

Those sentences can arrive in the same family, the same congregation, or the same ministry year. From a distance, each may look like departure. Up close, they ask for different forms of care.

The first person may still pray, read Scripture, and identify as Christian while living outside regular congregational life. The second may be reconsidering Christian belief itself. The third may be measuring church practice against a gospel they still confess. The fourth may have turned toward Christian community while carrying shame, fear, damaged trust, or uncertainty about what welcome will cost.

A ministry team can misread all four by treating physical absence as a spiritual diagnosis.

The natural response is often an invitation: come back to church, join the group, return to the room, try again. The invitation may be sincere. It may even be right. Yet it can still answer a different question from the one the person is asking.

01 CONTINUED • THE FORMATION CHALLENGE

They may not be asking where the building is. They may be asking whether their questions can survive inside it.

They may not need an argument for God. They may need help distinguishing God from a community that used God's name badly.

02 • HEAR MOVEMENT, NOT ONLY LOCATION

The invitation must answer the journey being described

They may not be waiting for a better invitation. They may be rebuilding the capacity to trust any invitation at all. They may already be moving toward Christian faith, but in language that does not yet sound familiar to the team.

That is why this work begins with movement rather than location.

Where is the person turning for truth, meaning, correction, and belonging? What are they carrying from Christian formation? What are they resisting, protecting, recovering, or grieving? What kind of presence would help them take the next faithful step without pretending that the team can control the ending?

Begin with movement rather than location

TRUTH Where is the person turning for meaning and correction?	MEMORY What Christian formation remains alive?
TRUST What are they resisting, protecting, recovering, or grieving?	PRESENCE What would help without controlling the ending?

The ministry task is not perfect classification. It is attentive accompaniment.

03 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Return is not one road

81

continuous faith deepening

78

void, seeking, and finding

45

dark night and transformation

30

divine initiative

21

relational rupture and faith

281

conversations across the full map

Authority Ministries® analyzed 281 public online conversations across 53 distinct communities in the *Multi-Pathway Meaning-Making Model™*. The study found no single narrative that could stand in for every story of coming to faith, deepening faith, leaving, returning, or making sense of spiritual change.

Continuous faith deepening was the primary narrative in 81 conversations. Void, seeking, and finding appeared in 78. Dark night and transformation appeared in 45. Divine initiative appeared in 30. Relational rupture and faith appeared in 21. Smaller groups included advice-only conversations, non-faith resolutions, institutional exit with private faith, and gradual drift and return.

These are classifications within one digital corpus, not percentages of the public and not a sequence that every person travels. They widen the map. They do not turn the map into a diagnosis.

That wider map matters because ministry storytelling often gives the dramatic turnaround more attention than the quieter work of formation. A visible crisis becomes the hinge. A person reaches the end of themselves, returns to church, and gives a testimony with a clean before and after.

That can be a true story. It is not the only true story.

Some people deepen in faith through ordinary worship, Scripture, friendship, service, repentance, and time. Some move through grief or rupture without arriving at a visible resolution. Some understand themselves as searching. Some describe themselves as found. Some leave an institution while Christian prayer and belief remain present. Some return to faith before they return to a congregation. Some return to a congregation while still rebuilding the language to describe what happened.

When a ministry team expects one pathway, it can miss the person whose movement is quieter than the template.

The practical question is not, *Which standard testimony does this resemble?*

It is, *What movement is this person actually describing?*

The useful question is not which standard testimony this resembles, but what movement the person is actually describing.

04 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

The same absence can conceal different relationships to faith

NOMAD

Outside regular participation while Christian identity or practice may remain.

PRODIGAL

No longer claiming Christian faith, yet still worthy of relationship without affection becoming leverage.

EXILE

Remaining Christian while navigating tension between church culture and faithful vocation.

Barna Group's earlier Nomad, Prodigal, and Exile framework was developed in research with young adults who had been active in Christian churches during their teen years. It distinguished among people who stepped away from regular church participation while still identifying as Christian, people who no longer claimed Christian faith, and people who remained Christian while navigating tension between church culture and the world they felt called to serve.

The categories are limited. They do not describe every age group, every departure, or every return. People change, overlap, and resist categories. The terms should never become fixed identities or predictions.

They remain useful for one reason: they stop the team from assuming that one outward behavior carries one inward meaning.

A person outside regular church attendance may still love Jesus and practice Christian faith. A person present every Sunday may be reconsidering belief, authority, or belonging. A person offering a sharp critique of church culture may be trying to follow Christ more faithfully, not leave him behind.

That distinction changes the first response.

Someone who still believes but lives outside congregational rhythms may need a conversation about community, correction, encouragement, worship, and what faith is carrying alone. Someone who no longer claims Christian belief may need a relationship large enough to hold real disagreement without making affection a reward for agreement. Someone struggling to connect Christian faith with vocation, culture, justice, or public life may need deeper discipleship, not suspicion.

The framework does not tell the team who the person is. It teaches the team to ask.

05 • WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

The volume of the question does not reveal its direction

Questions can sound like departure when they are actually exposing drift inside the church.

Second Kings 22 tells of the Book of the Law being found during repairs to the temple. When Josiah hears it, he does not defend the institution. He allows the recovered standard to expose what the people and their leaders have inherited and practiced.

That gives ministry a useful discernment lens. Some questioning measures the church, its traditions, and the questioner by a truth beyond them. Other questioning gradually makes personal judgment the final court of appeal. Many real conversations contain mixed movement.

The distinction cannot be made by emotional volume.

Anger does not prove departure. Lament does not prove unbelief. Doubt does not settle the direction. Scripture contains faithful people who questioned, protested, grieved, and asked God how long.

Listen instead for what is allowed to correct the self.

Is the person asking whether church practice matches Scripture? Are they separating the gospel from a cultural habit that was presented as doctrine? Are they trying to recover a Christian authority that was obscured by a leader's misuse of it?

Or is Scripture becoming one source among several, accepted or rejected according to resonance, comfort, or personal judgment?

The most useful question may be gentle and direct:

When the sources you trust disagree, how do you decide what is true?

The answer is not a verdict. It is the beginning of a better conversation about authority, harm, repentance, safety, and the possibility of a standard outside both the isolated self and the institution.

The answer is not a verdict. It begins a better conversation about authority, harm, repentance, safety, and a standard beyond both the isolated self and the institution.

06 • WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Distance can still hold Christian memory, concern, and contradiction

226

threads where Christianity appeared as helpful or stabilizing

176

threads where Christianity appeared as controlling or oppressive

119

thread-level fields where both frames appeared

In *The Authority Loop™*, Athority Ministries® examined 281 stored Reddit threads across 53 online communities. Christianity appeared as helpful or stabilizing in 226 threads and controlling or oppressive in 176. Both frames appeared in the same thread-level conversation field 119 times, or 42.3 percent of the corpus.

The co-occurrence does not prove that one person expressed both views. It does show why ministry should not force gratitude and concern into separate stories.

A person can carry Scripture that formed them and anger about the way Scripture was used. They can remember care and still name control. They can love Jesus and mistrust a Christian institution. They can miss Christian community and remain afraid of being known by one again.

One truth does not automatically cancel the other.

52 of 57

said a spiritual path is something a person must find on their own

58%

preferred discovering answers rather than being told answers

55% + 54%

did not feel fully themselves or felt communities tried to fix them

That is also why repeated invitations can misfire. In one own-audience poll from *The Felt Commons™*, 52 of 57 respondents said a spiritual path is something a person must find on their own. This is not a population estimate. It is a limited signal of how strongly personal ownership mattered within that audience.

[Springtide Research Institute's 2021 research](#) gives another view of the relational environment. Fifty-eight percent of the young people it studied preferred discovering answers about faith and religion rather than being told answers. Fifty-five percent said they did not feel able to be their full selves in a religious organization, and 54 percent felt religious communities tried to fix their problems instead of simply being present.

Those findings do not explain every departure. They help a team hear why "come back" may sound like pressure, erasure, or a return to a room that has not yet learned how to receive the story.

A person is unlikely to trust a room again simply because the room repeats its address.

07 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Some people describe being found before they have Christian language for it

65 of 281

divine initiative
as the dominant
interpretive model

30

complete divine-initiative
narratives

97

divine-timing language in a
separate overlapping layer

The *Multi-Pathway Meaning-Making Model™* also examined how people interpreted spiritual movement. Divine initiative was the dominant interpretive model in 65 of 281 conversations, or 23.1 percent of the corpus. A narrower complete divine-initiative narrative appeared in 30 conversations. Divine-timing language appeared in 97 conversations in a separate coding layer.

These groups overlap and must not be added together. The study cannot verify divine action or tell a ministry leader what God is doing in one particular life.

It can help the team recognize a narrative shape.

Some people describe themselves as interrupted, addressed, drawn, met, or found before they have settled theological vocabulary. They may speak about timing, the universe, a presence, a voice, an answer, or a sequence that felt given rather than produced.

Christian theology has rich language for the God who moves first. The ministry leader does not need to place that language over the person's story before hearing it. Nor should the leader treat every unusual account as self-authenticating.

The next move is companionship and discernment:

What happened? What did the person understand it to mean?

What fruit followed? How does the account stand in relation to Scripture, the character of Christ, prayer, and Christian community?

What language might help the person name and test what they believe they received?

The team's role is not to tell someone what they already lived. It is to help them locate the experience within the larger Christian story without rushing past the person in front of them.

08 • WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Rebuilding faith can bring merit arithmetic into the room

60 of 167

selected "still working on it" when asked how they healed soul and spirit

Welcome

is not a wage earned by completing enough self-repair

Wisdom

takes safety, repair, formation, and accountability seriously

Return does not end every formation pressure. Sometimes it exposes one.

In another own-audience poll from *The Felt Commons™*, 167 respondents were asked how they healed their soul and spirit. The largest response was "still working on it," selected by 60 people, or 35.9 percent. Other respondents selected self-care and self-love, prayer or spiritual practice, and forgiveness and letting go.

This one poll does not define every returner or reveal why each person chose an answer. It helps a team recognize a sentence that may appear at the threshold: *I am still working on myself. I am not ready. I need to prove that I have changed.*

The language may express appropriate remorse, a real need for repair, or a mature recognition that trust takes time. It can also carry an old merit framework into the gospel.

That is why a team must distinguish welcome from responsibility.

Christian welcome is not a wage. A person does not earn the right to approach Christ by completing enough self-repair. At the same time, welcome does not automatically restore trust, access, responsibility, leadership, or every relationship affected by harm.

Grace tells the truth and refuses spiritual debtor's prison. Wisdom takes consequences, safety, repair, formation, and accountability seriously.

The team needs both.

Grace tells the truth

It refuses spiritual debtor's prison and basic belonging as a wage.

Wisdom distinguishes responsibility

Welcome does not automatically restore trust, access, leadership, or every relationship.

09 • THE THEOLOGICAL LENS

Move from the gate to the road and the table

THE CENTER

Luke 24 gives the Church a pastoral sequence spacious enough for this work.

LUKE 24:13-35

01 • DRAW NEAR

Jesus comes close before he is recognized.

02 • ASK

He receives "we had hoped" before opening Scripture.

03 • TELL TRUTH

He corrects without withholding company.

04 • LEAVE ROOM

He allows the disciples to invite him to remain.

05 • SHARE TABLE

Recognition comes in the breaking of bread.

06 • LET THEM RESPOND

Their burning hearts are understood after the road.

Two disciples are walking from Jerusalem toward Emmaus after the crucifixion. They are disappointed, grieving, and trying to understand what has happened. The text does not say that they are abandoning faith or leaving a church. Their road should not be turned into a claim about every person who departs a congregation.

It does give ministry a faithful picture of accompaniment.

Jesus draws near before he is recognized. He asks what they are discussing, although he understands the events better than they do. He receives the sentence, "we had hoped," before he opens the Scriptures. He tells the truth without withholding correction. As they reach the village, he leaves room for their invitation.

He sits at the table. Recognition comes in the breaking of the bread. Only then do they understand that their hearts had been burning on the road.

Presence did not replace truth. Listening was the road the truth traveled in on.

09 CONTINUED • THE THEOLOGICAL LENS

Learn the actual "we had hoped"

That order matters when the person in front of you carries disappointment, institutional distrust, or a story that leaders have answered before they fully heard it.

The team may know the doctrine it wants to affirm. It may know the invitation it hopes the person will accept. Faithful accompaniment asks the team to learn the actual "we had hoped" first.

**Truth and company
belong together.**

Accompaniment is not agreement. Jesus does not make Emmaus the final destination of the story. He opens Scripture, remains for the meal, and allows the disciples to recognize and respond.

What did the person believe Christian community would be?

What happened instead?

What remains alive in their faith? What has become difficult to trust?

What would it mean to open Scripture in a way that does not repeat the harm they experienced?

What table can remain set without turning the relationship into a technique for producing return?

The parable of the laborers in Matthew 20 adds a second lens for the threshold of return. The workers who arrive late receive the same denarius as those who worked from dawn. The owner's generosity breaks the arithmetic by which people measure what another person deserves.

10 • THE PASTORAL ORDER

Grace breaks merit arithmetic without abandoning wisdom

A returning person may carry that arithmetic inward: *I left. I failed. I cannot belong until I pay enough.*

The people who stayed may carry it outward: *We remained. We served. Why should the returner receive the same welcome?*

The parable reads the whole room.

It does not erase wisdom about trust, safety, repair, or leadership. It refuses tiers of spiritual worth based on hours worked. Everyone in the vineyard depends upon the character and generosity of the owner.

The parable of the laborers reads both the returning person and the people who stayed.

This is the pastoral order the team must protect

- 01 Welcome is not earned.
- 02 Repentance tells the truth.
- 03 Formation continues within belonging.
- 04 Repair is pursued where it is possible and appropriate.
- 05 Trust and responsibility are discerned wisely.
- 06 No one is kept in spiritual debt to make grace look serious.

No tiers of spiritual worth.

11 • WHAT MINISTRY TEAMS CAN MISREAD

Replace assumption with attention

MISREAD 01

"If someone is absent, they have left Christian faith"

Absence can hold changed belief, private Christian practice, institutional distrust, vocational tension, grief, spiritual searching, or a gradual loss of congregational rhythm. It can also hold several of these at once.

Ask what the person believes, practices, trusts, misses, and resists before deciding which conversation you are in.

MISREAD 02

"Strong questions mean the person is running from God"

Questions can expose a church's distance from Scripture. Anger can coexist with allegiance. Lament can be faithful speech.

Listen for where authority is moving. Do not use emotional intensity as a substitute for discernment.

MISREAD 03

"A crisis is our chance to press for return"

Crisis can open a question. It does not determine the answer. Treating vulnerability as leverage can make Christian presence feel like another form of control.

Offer prayer, Scripture, practical care, honest invitation, and relationship without demanding that the person produce a testimony on the team's timetable.

MISREAD 04

"If we stop repeating the invitation, we have abandoned hope"

Retiring one sentence is not retiring Christian hope. "Come back to church" may be too small for the history the person carries.

A better invitation may be: *I am still here. I want to understand. My door and my table remain open.*

The relationship should remain recognizable even when the answer is no.

11 CONTINUED · WHAT MINISTRY TEAMS CAN MISREAD

Keep hope, truth, and welcome properly distinguished

MISREAD 05

"Accompaniment means endorsing the direction"

Company is not agreement. Listening does not require the team to call every belief true, every practice compatible with Christian discipleship, or every account of God reliable.

It requires truth to be carried in a relationship that has not stopped seeing the person.

MISREAD 06

"Grace requires immediate restoration of everything"

Welcome, trust, access, responsibility, and leadership are related but distinct. A person can be received as a fellow worshipper while repair and formation continue.

Safeguarding and accountability do not weaken grace.

The team should refuse both errors: making basic belonging a wage and treating immediate welcome as automatic restoration to every role.

QUESTIONS FOR THE ROOM

QUESTION 01

When someone steps away, what does our team tend to assume before we have heard the story, and which question would help us replace that assumption with attention?

QUESTION 02

Can a person name disappointment, harm, doubt, or disagreement in our community without becoming a project, a threat, or a testimony we are trying to complete?

QUESTION 03

If someone returned this month, could we explain clearly how welcome, repair, trust, responsibility, and leadership relate without confusing any of them?

12 • USE THIS IN FIFTEEN MINUTES

Move from recognition to one faithful response

READ • 2 MIN

Read **The formation challenge** aloud through the sentence, "The ministry task is not perfect classification. It is attentive accompaniment."

NOTICE • 3 MIN

Read the six research observations silently. Ask each person to mark one sentence that changes how they understand departure or return.

EXAMINE • 4 MIN

Use **Map the movement, then match the first response** below with a composite or hypothetical situation. Do not classify or discuss an identifiable person.

DISCUSS • 3 MIN

Choose one question for the room. Name one current strength and one place where the ministry's posture, language, or process needs attention.

NAME • 2 MIN

Choose one invitation, listening practice, return pathway, trust-rebuilding process, or team distinction to strengthen. Assign an owner and review date.

PRAY • 1 MIN

Ask the Father to make the team patient in love, truthful in Christ, and attentive through the Holy Spirit to the movement beneath every visible distance.

LEAVE WITH THIS

One response the team will strengthen

Choose something small enough to assign and review.

- An invitation
- A listening practice
- A return pathway
- A trust-rebuilding process
- A team distinction

Ask the Father to make the team patient in love, truthful in Christ, and attentive through the Holy Spirit.

13 · A PRACTICE TO CARRY FORWARD

Map the movement, then match the first response

Use a composite or hypothetical situation that reflects a recurring ministry concern. The aim is not to name a person's category. It is to slow the team's assumptions and identify a faithful first response.

01

Hear the location

What can the team actually observe? Is the person outside regular church participation, present but distant, openly reconsidering belief, seeking a new community, or beginning to return?

Separate visible location from assumptions about faith.

02

Hear the movement

What does the person still affirm, love, practice, or hope for? What have they stopped trusting? What authority are they moving toward or away from? Are they questioning Scripture, an interpretation, a church practice, a cultural habit, or several at once?

Name what is known and what remains unclear.

03

Hear the history

What disappointment, formation, harm, relationship, vocation, or unanswered question is inside the movement? Does the team need to listen, apologize, clarify, protect, teach, repair, or connect the person with another form of care?

Do not turn one wound into the whole explanation.

04

Match the first response

Choose the smallest faithful next move. It may be a question, a meal, a clear theological conversation, an apology, a patient invitation, a safer point of connection, a referral, a boundary, or a promise to remain present.

Do not choose an outcome the team cannot control.

14 · PREPARE THE ROOM

Record what the team can strengthen before the next conversation

05 Prepare the room. If return became possible, what would the person find?

Could their story be heard without spectacle?

Could welcome be immediate while trust and responsibility are handled wisely?

Are questions permitted? Are safeguarding and accountability clear?

Is there a real pathway into worship, relationship, formation, and service?

The team cannot manufacture another person's return. It can become more faithful in the way it listens, invites, receives, and rebuilds.

Now name one response the team will strengthen before the next conversation. Assign an owner and review date.

One response we will strengthen before the next conversation

Owner and review date:

15 · CONTINUE EXPLORING

Stay with the formation challenge

READ 01

01

How Do People Actually Come Back to Faith?

READ 02

02

Nomads, Prodigals, and Exiles

READ 03

03

When "Come Back to Church" Isn't the Answer

READ 04

04

When God Doesn't Give Up

READ 05

05

When Grace Makes No Sense

16 · RESEARCH AND USE

This brief synthesizes seven public Athority Ministries® articles assigned to the Leaving, Returning, and Rebuilding Faith resource in the approved 44-post source matrix. It draws on controlled findings from the *Multi-Pathway Meaning-Making Model™*, *The Authority Loop™*, and *The Felt Commons™*, alongside external Barna Group and Springtide Research Institute findings.

The foundational Multi-Pathway corpus contains 281 public online conversations across 53 distinct communities. The nine primary narrative counts total 281. Separate dominant-model and language-code layers can overlap the primary narrative categories and each other. They must not be added together. The study did not follow participants over time, estimate the wider public, verify divine action, establish a crisis-to-return sequence, or predict an individual's outcome.

The Authority Loop™ figures describe thread-level language within 281 stored Reddit threads across 53 communities. Co-occurring helpful and controlling frames do not establish that one person expressed both views or that every departure contains the same contradiction.

The Felt Commons™ results come from separate own-audience questions answered by an engaged, self-selected audience. They are not representative estimates, diagnoses, or one longitudinal pathway.

The Nomad, Prodigal, and Exile language comes from Barna Group's earlier young-adult research and is used only as a listening lens. It is not an Athority Ministries® typology, a fixed identity, or a prediction. See Barna's [Five Myths about Young Adult Church Dropouts](#) and [Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials](#).

The external findings about young people's experience of religious communities come from [Springtide Research Institute's State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty](#). They do not explain every departure or describe every age group.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGED

2 Kings 22 through 23; Luke 24:13-35; Matthew 20:1-16; and 2 Timothy 2:24-25. The Emmaus account is used as a ministry analogy. The text presents disappointed disciples traveling away from Jerusalem, not people explicitly leaving Christian faith or a congregation.

USE AND PERMISSIONS

Prepared by Athority Ministries® Applied ministry intelligence for the Church. Last reviewed: August 15, 2026.

Read the web edition:

athority.org/formation-briefs-for-teams/leaving-returning-rebuilding-faith/

Free for internal ministry-team use, printing, and sharing. For other uses, see [Permissions and Content Use](#).