

Still Sacred: A Companion Guide For Leaders & Communities

Stewardship in the Wake of Spiritual Harm

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A WORD ABOUT THE COVER ART

The image on this cover is a spiral rendered in muted greys - layered, unfinished, and quietly widening.

Unlike the luminous spiral of *Still Sacred: Pathways of Return*, this one does not draw the eye outward with color. It turns in restraint. Its tones are subdued, reflective, deliberate.

The spiral remains the same shape - a pattern of return and widening - but its mood has shifted. In this guide, the work is not personal reclamation. It is institutional responsibility.

Each turn of the spiral suggests revisiting what we believed was settled. Policies are reviewed. Leadership practices are examined. Structures are widened. What once relied on good intention is strengthened through accountability.

The greys speak of humility. They resist triumph. They suggest that stewardship is not dramatic work, but steady work - often quiet, often unseen.

The spiral does not close.

It remains open at its outer edge, reminding us that communities, like individuals, are always becoming.

Where *Still Sacred* names belovedness, this spiral names responsibility.

Together, the two spirals belong - one tending the healing of persons, the other tending the safeguarding of what is sacred.

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INTRODUCTION:
Why This Guide Exists – and How it Moves

Still Sacred: *Pathways of Return* was written as a companion for Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people who have experienced spiritual harm and who may be seeking a pathway of return - not necessarily to organized religion, but to their own spiritual aliveness.

This Companion Guide exists for a different audience.

It is written for clergy, lay leaders, and Affirming committees who desire to offer *Still Sacred* responsibly, humbly, and without re-centering institutional power.

These are not the same tasks.

The first asks:
How can we accompany those who have been harmed?

The second asks:
Are we prepared to accompany without causing further harm?

This Guide assumes good intentions. It does not assume readiness.

Many congregations long to respond faithfully to the history of exclusion and pain carried by Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities. Many have worked diligently toward affirmation. Many have changed policies, language, and public statements.

These efforts matter.

At the same time, they do not erase the past.

Affirmation is not the same as safety.
Welcome is not the same as repair.

Goodwill is not the same as trust.

If you are reading this Guide, you likely carry some measure of authority within your community. You shape conversations. You influence tone. You participate in decision-making. That power is neither shameful nor neutral. It needs to be examined.

This Guide is not a program manual. It will not tell you how to "run" *Still Sacred*. It will not offer scripts for difficult conversations. It will not certify your congregation as ready.

Instead, it invites formation.

It invites you to examine how power functions in your context. It invites you to slow down institutional reflexes. It invites you to consider whether accompaniment is possible in your current structure - and what might need to change if it is not.

You may read this privately.
You may study it with others.
You may pause often.
You may feel discomfort.

Discomfort is not failure. It is often the beginning of clarity.

This Guide is offered in the hope that communities will learn not only how to support healing, but how to participate in repair - slowly, honestly, and without claiming ownership of the journey.

If at any point you find yourself eager to "get this right," consider slowing down.

This work is not about readiness.

It is about becoming more trustworthy.

How This Guide Moves

This Guide is not designed to be completed.

It does not move in a straight line from readiness to action. It moves in widening circles - returning again and again to humility, self-examination, and shared responsibility.

You may notice that the early sections feel reflective and searching. This is intentional. Before practices are suggested, posture must be formed. Before strategies are discussed, power must be named. Before offering support, we must examine the habits that shape our leadership.

The movement of this Guide follows a quiet arc:
From humility,
to examination,
to reorientation,
to restraint,
to responsibility,
and finally to release.

These movements are not stages to pass through. They are practices to revisit. You may find that later sections send you back to earlier questions. You may discover that conversations you thought were settled require deeper listening. This is not failure. It is the nature of moral and spiritual formation.

If at any point you feel eager to reach the practical sections, consider pausing. The pace of this work is part of its integrity.

This Guide assumes that trust is rebuilt slowly.

Read it in that spirit.

I. BEGINNING WITH HUMILITY

We begin here because anything else would be premature.

Before offering resources, before organizing conversations, before announcing support, we must name what has been true.

The Church has caused harm.

Not only through explicit exclusion, but through silence, moral certainty, and the misuse of sacred language. Not only through official statements, but through everyday practices that made some bodies feel unsafe and some identities feel conditional.

We inherit that history.

Whether or not we personally enacted it, we stand inside institutions shaped by it.

If you are clergy or a lay leader, you hold authority within that inheritance. Your tone, your decisions, your framing of events, your theological language - all of these shape whether a space feels trustworthy or guarded.

Good intentions are not protection against harm.

Many communities want to respond differently now. Many want to be known as affirming, inclusive, welcoming.

That desire matters.

Yet desire is not the same as readiness.

Humility asks us to pause long enough to examine our reflexes.

When someone names harm, do we defend?
When someone expresses anger, do we interpret?
When someone hesitates, do we reassure too quickly?

When someone chooses distance, do we experience it as rejection?

We cannot accompany what we have not first examined in ourselves.

Before asking whether your congregation is ready to offer *Still Sacred*, ask:
Are we prepared to listen without correcting?
Are we willing to hear stories that implicate us?
Are we ready to relinquish control over outcomes?

Humility is not self-condemnation.
It is honest ground.

Without it, accompaniment becomes performance.
With it, we open ourselves to begin to change.

II. THE POSTURE OF ACCOMPANIMENT
Humility names the ground beneath us. Posture shapes how we stand upon it.

Many clergy and lay leaders are trained to lead with clarity. To interpret. To hold space. To offer theological framing. To respond when pain surfaces. These are faithful skills. They are also powerful ones.

When someone who has experienced spiritual harm enters a conversation, those same skills can unintentionally overwhelm.

Accompaniment requires a different posture.

It asks less of your ability to guide and more of your capacity to remain.

It asks you to notice when your reflex is to reassure.
To soften.
To defend the Church.
To offer explanation.
To frame suffering in theological language.

It asks you to pause before speaking.

If you are clergy, your voice carries weight even when you intend it to feel equal. If you are a lay leader, your role in shaping tone and expectation carries influence. Authority does not disappear simply because you hope it will.

Accompaniment begins with consent.

Not a single permission at the beginning of a gathering, but an ongoing awareness of whether your presence is welcome.

You may need to ask:
Is this conversation still helpful?
Would you prefer silence?
Would you like me to listen without response?
Would it feel safer to step away?

Consent also means receiving "no" without disappointment. It means allowing someone to withdraw without interpreting their absence as rejection of you or your congregation.

Slowness is another discipline of accompaniment.

Institutions are accustomed to momentum. We plan events, announce initiatives, publish statements, create timelines. Healing does not move at that pace.

When you introduce *Still Sacred*, resist urgency. Resist the desire to demonstrate readiness. Resist the temptation to signal progress.

Trust grows quietly.

Restraint is often the most faithful response.

You may feel the impulse to make meaning of what you hear - to name where God is present, to reinterpret painful theology, to reassure someone that things are different now.

There will be moments when silence is more trustworthy than speech.

There will be moments when simply bearing witness without commentary is the most responsible act of care.

This posture can feel uncomfortable. It may feel passive. It may feel as though you are not doing enough.

Accompaniment is not passive.

It is disciplined presence. It is the willingness to relinquish control over outcome. It is choosing to remain even when there is no resolution.

Before moving into practical considerations, ask yourself:
When someone expresses anger toward the Church, can I listen without defending?
When someone speaks of distance from faith, can I honour that without trying to restore it?
When someone questions theology I cherish, can I remain curious rather than corrective?

Accompaniment does not require you to abandon your convictions. It requires you to hold them with humility.

This is the posture that makes trust possible.

III. UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL TRAUMA

Before examining how leadership functions in spaces of healing, we must understand what spiritual trauma is - and what it does.

Spiritual trauma is not simply disagreement with doctrine. It is not discomfort with belief. It is not frustration with a particular congregation.

It occurs when sacred language, sacred authority, or sacred community is used in ways that wound identity, distort belonging, or threaten safety.

For many Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people, this has taken the form of:
Being told their identity is incompatible with God.
Being pressured to change what cannot be changed.
Being required to silence parts of themselves to remain included.
Hearing their love described as broken, sinful, or incomplete.
Being made responsible for protecting the comfort of others.

These experiences do not remain intellectual.
They settle in the body.

Spiritual trauma can reshape a person's nervous system. It can make sacred spaces feel dangerous. It can make prayer language feel loaded. It can cause vigilance, withdrawal, anger, numbness, or sudden grief.

A hymn may trigger memory.
A sermon tone may tighten the chest.
A passing theological phrase may reopen a wound that was thought to be healed.

> ***Consider this:***
> *A trans congregant has shared their pronouns with the minister and leadership team. It has been acknowledged publicly once, gently.*
> *The following Sunday, during announcements, the minister uses their former pronoun. There is a quick correction - "sorry" - and the service continues.*
> *No one **intends** harm.*
> *Afterward, several people approach to say, "We're trying," or "It's hard to remember," or "Please be patient with us."*
> *Nothing **overtly** hostile has occurred.*
> *And yet, the congregant leaves feeling exposed.*
> *Their shoulders lift.*
> *Their breath shortens.*
> *They begin scanning each interaction for repetition.*
> *They speak less.*
> *They volunteer less.*
> *They weigh whether returning is worth the vigilance.*

From the outside, it may **appear** small.
From the inside, it is **cumulative**.

When identity has already been questioned in sacred spaces, even **accidental** misnaming can reactivate the memory of not being seen.

Spiritual trauma does not always come from dramatic rejection. It can be cumulative rather than catastrophic. Often, it emerges from repetition -small fractures that communicate, over time, that full belonging is conditional.

This is why attentiveness matters.

These responses are not overreactions. They are the body's effort to protect itself.

We must resist the temptation to measure someone's pain by our understanding of the event that caused it. Trauma is not calibrated by intention. It is shaped by impact.

Some people will carry visible anger.
Some will carry quiet distance.
Some will speak openly about harm.
Some will never return to church again.
Departure is not always rejection of God. For some, it is an act of survival.
When leaders misunderstand trauma responses as bitterness, rebellion, or theological immaturity, harm deepens.

When we interpret anger as lack of faith, we reenact the original injury.

Understanding spiritual trauma does not require clinical expertise. It requires attentiveness and restraint.

Ask yourself:
When someone expresses anger toward the Church, do I hear accusation - or do I hear history?
When someone hesitates to participate, do I see resistance - or do I recognize self-protection?
When someone avoids sacred language, do I interpret spiritual absence - or do I recognize that language has been weaponized before?

Trauma-informed accompaniment means assuming that reactions have context. It means recognizing that safety must be experienced, not declared.

It means understanding that trust may take years to rebuild - and that rebuilding may not involve institutional return at all.

We cannot rush this.

Healing unfolds slowly.
Trust grows quietly.
Repair requires consistency over time.
The work of this Guide is not to fix trauma.

It is to ensure that we do not add to it.

IV. POWER IN CLERGY & LEADERSHIP ROLES

Power is not the opposite of care. It is the context in which care occurs.

If you are clergy or a lay leader, you hold power - whether you seek it or not. You shape language. You frame theology. You determine what is discussed publicly and what remains private. You influence who speaks, who leads, and who is believed.

In communities where spiritual harm has occurred, power must be examined with particular care.

You may believe you are speaking as a fellow human being. Others may experience you as authority.

You may intend conversation. Others may experience evaluation.

You may hope to offer reassurance. Others may hear correction.

Power does not disappear because you are kind.

It does not dissolve because you are affirming. It is carried in title, role, visibility, and access.

Clergy, especially, are trained to respond quickly when pain surfaces. We are trained to offer meaning. To hold silence briefly and then speak. To weave theology into lived experience. These skills are often life-giving.

In the context of spiritual trauma, they can overwhelm.

When someone names harm, the reflex to interpret - even gently - can shift focus away from the person and toward theology.

When someone expresses anger toward the Church, the reflex to contextualize or explain can feel like minimization.

When someone questions doctrine, the reflex to clarify can feel like correction.

None of these responses are malicious.

They are trained reflexes.

But reflex without reflection can re-create the very dynamic that caused harm: authority interpreting lived experience for someone else.

> ***Consider this:***
> *A congregant shares that a previous church told them their identity required repentance. They speak with visible anger. The minister listens carefully and then responds, "I'm so sorry that happened. I believe God loves you exactly as you are."*
> *The words are kind.*
> *But the minister continues: "Sometimes churches misunderstand Scripture. The Bible really says…"*

The conversation shifts. The congregant nods politely. Something in their body tightens. The story they were telling becomes a theological discussion.

No harm was **intended**.

And yet, authority has again shaped the meaning of their experience.

Power often operates in subtle redirections.

To examine power is not to condemn leadership. It is to become conscious of its **weight**.

Ask yourself:
When I hear critique of the Church, do I feel personally implicated?
When someone questions theology, do I feel responsible to defend it?
When someone expresses anger, do I move quickly to soften it?

Power becomes protective when it is acknowledged.
It becomes harmful when it is denied.

There may also be moments when your first concern is not the person speaking, but the institution itself. You may feel the impulse to protect the congregation's reputation, to clarify that "we are not like that anymore," or to distinguish your community from others. Notice that impulse gently but honestly. When institutional self-protection becomes the priority, even briefly, the person in front of you can feel secondary. Repair begins when safeguarding the institution is no longer more urgent than safeguarding the vulnerable.

If you hold leadership, your task is not to relinquish power entirely. It is to steward it carefully.

This may mean:
Speaking less than you are accustomed to.
Allowing silence to linger.
Resisting the urge to interpret.
Receiving anger without reframing it.
Accepting that trust cannot be declared - only earned.

Authority used gently can create safety. Authority used reflexively can retraumatize.

The difference lies not in **intention**, but in **awareness**.

Accompaniment requires leaders to hold power lightly - not to disappear, but to remain accountable.

V. INTRODUCING THE RESOURCE CAREFULLY

How a resource is introduced shapes how it is received. If *Still Sacred* is offered too quickly, too publicly, or with too much institutional enthusiasm, it can feel less like an invitation and more like an initiative.

Before announcing anything, ask:
Why are we offering this now?
Who requested it?
Who shaped the decision?
Have we listened to those most impacted?

Timing matters.

If your congregation has recently experienced conflict, harm, or public debate regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion, introducing this resource may feel premature. If trust is fragile, quiet availability may be wiser than public launch.

Language matters even more.

Avoid framing such as:
"We are excited to offer a healing resource."
"Our church is ready to support your journey back."
"This will help repair past wounds."

These phrases may carry unintended weight. They centre the congregation's readiness rather than the individual's autonomy.

Instead, consider language that protects agency:
"This resource is available if it serves you."
"There is no expectation of participation."
"You are welcome to engage privately or not at all."

Participation must be entirely voluntary.

Not all engagement with this resource will be communal. In some cases, the most appropriate offering is quiet availability. A clergy person or leader may simply say, in private conversation, "There is a resource called *Still Sacred*: *Pathways of Return* that some have found meaningful. If it would serve you, I can share it." No explanation beyond that is required. No follow-up is necessary unless invited. Allow the individual to decide whether to receive it, when to read it, and whether to speak of it again. Sometimes accompaniment means placing something gently within reach and stepping back.

This protects autonomy and prevents over-pastoralization.

Even subtle signals of oversight can activate vigilance.

It is also important not to conflate the resource with your congregation's affirmation status.

Offering *Still Sacred* does not prove safety.
It does not complete repair.
It does not certify trustworthiness.

It is simply an offering.

Consider this:
A congregation announces during worship: "Next month we will begin a healing series using Still Sacred for anyone who has experienced harm. We are committed to walking this journey together."
The announcement is met with warm applause.
On the surface, this appears ***supportive.***
But a queer congregant who has not spoken publicly about past harm feels exposed. The word "healing" feels presumptive. The phrase "walking this journey together" feels binding. The applause feels like expectation.
They had been considering reading the resource privately.
Now they are unsure.

Enthusiasm has unintentionally become pressure. Good intentions can create unintended weight.

Introducing the resource carefully means ensuring that no one feels watched, expected, or symbolically responsible for the congregation's growth.

Resist the urge to measure its impact.

There may be no visible response.
There may be quiet engagement.
There may be feedback that is difficult to hear.

Trust grows in hidden ways.

If the resource is used in small group settings, ensure that facilitation is gentle and consent-based.
Do not require registration.
Do not track attendance.
Do not publicly identify participants.

Avoid pressuring participants to share personal stories. Avoid turning testimony into evidence of congregational growth.

The goal is not to demonstrate progress.

It is to create conditions where agency is honoured.
Introducing the resource carefully means remembering that it does not belong to the institution once it is offered.

It belongs to those who choose to engage it - or not.

VI. RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURE

At some point, someone may tell you their story.

It may happen in your office.
In a hallway.

In a small group.
In a moment you were not expecting.

Disclosure rarely arrives on schedule.

When it does, the most important task is not to respond well - it is to remain present.

You may feel many things at once:
Sadness.
Anger.
Defensiveness.
Shock.
The desire to fix.
The desire to apologize on behalf of the Church.
The urge to explain how things are different now.

Notice these responses quietly. Do not let them lead. The first gift you can offer is belief.

"I'm glad you told me."
"I believe you."
"I'm sorry that happened."
Simple sentences carry weight.

Avoid theological framing in the first response.
Avoid offering immediate reinterpretation.
Avoid minimizing language such as, "I'm sure they didn't mean…" or "That was a different time."

Even well-intended explanation can feel like correction.

Allow the story to stand without reshaping it.

You are not responsible for resolving the past.
You are responsible for how you hold the present moment.

Consent remains essential.

You may ask:
Would you like me to respond, or simply listen?
Is there something you need from me right now?
Would it feel helpful to pause here?

If tears come, let them.

If anger comes, do not contain it.

Anger is not a threat. It is often grief with strength.

You may feel the impulse to apologize on behalf of the institution. Apology can be meaningful - but only when it does not shift focus toward your own distress or absolution.

Be careful not to say:
"We're not like that anymore."
"Our church would never do that."
"That's not what we believe."

These statements may be true. They may also inadvertently communicate that the story is inconvenient.

Disclosure is not a debate. It is a gift of trust.

Sometimes the most faithful response is: Thank you for trusting me with this.

> ***Consider this:***
> *A congregant shares that, years earlier, they were asked to step down from leadership after coming out. As they speak, their voice shakes with contained anger.*
> *The minister listens, then says, "That must have been so painful. I want you to know our congregation would never do that."*
> *The intention is reassurance.*
> *The congregant hears comparison.*
> *Their story, which had just become vulnerable, now feels evaluated against current standards.*
> *They nod, but something closes.*
> *Reassurance has unintentionally redirected the moment.*

Disclosure does not require you to prove your congregation's progress. It requires you to hold someone's experience without competition.

You will not always respond perfectly.

If you later recognize that your response minimized or redirected, return to the person if appropriate. Say: "I've been thinking about what you shared. I realize I may have moved too quickly to reassure. I'm sorry. If you'd like to revisit that conversation, I'm here."

Repair is part of accompaniment.

You are not expected to be flawless.

You are expected to remain accountable.

Remember there are also limits to what accompaniment can hold.

If someone discloses abuse involving a minor, current risk of harm, or situations where safety is immediately threatened, you may have legal obligations to report. Know the laws that apply before such a moment arises. Do not wait to learn them in crisis.

Be transparent about these limits.

At the beginning of pastoral conversations - especially in small group settings - it is appropriate to say clearly what confidentiality means and where it ends. Hidden limits can fracture trust later.

Not all disclosures require reporting. Many require referral.

Spiritual harm often overlaps with complex trauma, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. While clergy can offer presence and pastoral care, we are not substitutes for trained mental health professionals.

It is not a failure of faith to suggest professional support. It is not an abandonment of pastoral care.

You might say:
"I care deeply about what you're carrying. Some of what you've described may benefit from additional support beyond what I can offer. If you'd like, I can help you find someone experienced in trauma-informed care."

Offer referral gently.
Do not insist.
Do not withdraw if they decline
Remain alongside - but know your limits.

Accompaniment is not rescue.

It is responsible presence. Accompaniment requires both compassion and clarity.
It asks you to remain present - and to know where your responsibility begins and ends.

VII. WHEN HARM HAPPENS AGAIN
Even in communities committed to care, harm may occur.

A misused pronoun.
A sermon illustration that wounds.
A Bible study comment that goes unchallenged.
A committee decision that overlooks representation.
A moment of silence when correction was needed.

You will not prevent every injury.

The question is not whether mistakes will happen. The question is how you will respond when they do.

When harm occurs, resist the impulse to minimize.

Avoid phrases such as:
"It was just a mistake."
"No one meant anything by it."
"You're being too sensitive."

“That’s not what was intended.”

Impact matters more than intention.

If someone names harm, listen first.

Do not gather information in order to defend.
Do not immediately explain context.
Do not move into institutional reassurance.

Begin with acknowledgment:
“I hear that this caused harm.”
“I’m sorry that happened.”
“Thank you for naming it.”

Correction may be needed - but it should not precede care.

If the harm occurred publicly, reparation should be visible. Quiet apologies for public injury often feel insufficient. Public repair does not require spectacle. It requires clarity.

For example:
If a misused pronoun occurred during worship, correction can happen in worship.
If harmful language was used in a small group, the group should address it openly.
If exclusion occurred in leadership decisions, policy should be reviewed.

Repair communicates seriousness. Silence communicates dismissal.

There may be moments when leaders fear that acknowledging harm publicly will undermine confidence in the congregation.

Notice that fear.

Institutional self-protection often competes with relational repair. Choose repair.

> ***Consider this:***
> *During a Bible study, a participant says, “I struggle with the idea of affirming lifestyles that Scripture clearly calls sin.” The facilitator hesitates, hoping not to escalate tension, and moves the conversation along.*
> *Later, a queer participant leaves quietly and does not return.*
> *The comment was not challenged.*
> *The silence was interpreted as agreement.*
> *The harm was not loud.*
> *It was cumulative.*
> *When harm is named afterward, the facilitator says, “I didn’t want to embarrass anyone.”*
> *The intention was to preserve peace.*
> *The impact was isolation.*

Leadership sometimes requires interruption.

Avoiding discomfort can reinforce harm.

Repair, in this case, might involve:
Acknowledging publicly that harmful language went unaddressed.
Clarifying the congregation's commitments.
Creating space for those impacted to speak if they wish - without pressure.
Examining facilitation practices moving forward.

You will not always respond perfectly. You may realize days later that something should have been said. Return if you can.

"I've been thinking about what happened in our study. I wish I had intervened. I'm sorry. I want to do better."

Repair is not weakness.

It is credibility.

There are also times when apology is not sufficient. If harm is repeated, minimized, or dismissed - particularly by those in leadership - deeper discernment is required. Patterns matter. When the same individuals consistently misgender, silence dissent, avoid correction, or resist accountability, the issue is no longer incidental. It may signal a need for additional training, supervision, redistribution of responsibility, or, in some cases, a change in leadership. Structural correction is not punishment; it is stewardship. Protecting vulnerable members of the community must always take precedence over preserving comfort or familiarity within leadership roles.

Communities become trustworthy not because they avoid harm entirely, but because they respond to it with transparency and change. The goal is not flawlessness. It is accountability.

VIII. STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

Care cannot rest on personality alone. A congregation may have compassionate leaders and still lack the structures necessary to protect those who are vulnerable.

Structural integrity asks not only how we respond in moments, but how our systems function when no one is watching.

Begin with honest questions.

Who holds decision-making authority in this congregation?
Whose voices shape policy?
Who is absent from leadership tables?
Who bears the emotional labour of educating others?

Representation is not symbolic.

If Two Spirit, transgender, or queer members are welcomed publicly but rarely present in leadership, something is misaligned. If inclusion depends primarily on one supportive minister or committee chair, safety remains fragile.

Structures must outlast personalities.

Examine your policies.

Are pronouns normalized in introductions and printed materials?
Is there a written non-discrimination policy that explicitly includes gender identity and expression?
Is there a clear, accessible pathway for reporting harm or concern?
Are complaints handled by more than one person?

Ambiguity can protect institutions. Clarity protects people.

Consider your budget.

Is funding allocated for ongoing education in trauma-informed care and LGBTQIA+ competency?
Are guest speakers or facilitators compensated?
Is accessibility prioritized?

Values that are not resourced remain aspirational.

Examine worship and language.

Who writes liturgy?
Whose metaphors shape prayer?
Are images of God expansive?
Are sermons attentive to embodied experience, or do they default to abstract theology?

Inclusion is not only policy. It is atmosphere.

Also consider supervision and accountability.

Do clergy and lay leaders have spaces where they can reflect honestly on mistakes?
Is there openness to external consultation when harm occurs?
Is feedback welcomed - not only when it is affirming?

Communities committed to accompaniment must build feedback loops into their structure.

Finally, remember that structural work is ongoing. A policy written once and placed in a binder will not protect anyone.

Leadership turnover will test your commitments. Cultural shifts will raise new questions. What feels sufficient today may not be sufficient tomorrow.

Structural integrity is not about perfection. It is about coherence.

Consider this:
A congregation identifies as Affirming. Inclusive language appears on the website. Pride banners hang in June. The minister models pronoun sharing in worship.
Yet governance remains largely unchanged.
The church council is entirely cisgender and predominantly heterosexual. No Two Spirit, trans, or queer members hold positions of decision-making authority. When a younger queer congregant expresses interest in leadership, they are not encouraged.
There is no written policy outlining how harm is reported or addressed. When a small group participant repeatedly misgenders a trans member, leaders respond privately and informally. The behavior continues.
No one intends harm.
And yet belonging depends on who is present - and who is not.
When the minister retires, there is no structural commitment guiding the search process. The next leadership team is less practiced in inclusive language. Gradually, queer members begin stepping back. A few leave quietly.
Nothing dramatic occurs.
But without structural integrity, affirmation rests on personality rather than protection.

What you say publicly should align with how you function privately.

When structure supports posture, trust becomes more than hope.

IX. ONGOING REPENTANCE: The Discipline of Return
This guide has named posture, power, responsibility, and repair. It has asked communities to examine not only how they speak, but how they are structured.

None of this is a one-time task.

Structural integrity is not a project to complete. It is a discipline to practice.

Congregations change. Leadership turns over. Cultural language evolves. What feels sufficient today may feel incomplete tomorrow. A community that once believed itself attentive may discover new blind spots.

This is not failure. It is formation.

Repentance, in its deepest sense, is not public apology alone. It is a turning - again and again - toward alignment. Toward coherence. Toward the protection of those who have been harmed.

The spiral on the cover offers a quiet image of this work.

We return.
We widen.
We revisit what we thought was settled.
We ask new questions of familiar structures.

Not because we are unstable, but because we are serious.

Communities that accompany survivors of spiritual harm must be prepared to change more than their language. They must be willing to change their habits, their policies, their leadership patterns, and sometimes their assumptions about themselves.

This kind of repentance is not dramatic.

It is patient.
It is attentive.
It is often unseen.

It looks like:
Reviewing policies annually rather than once.
Revisiting leadership representation intentionally.
Inviting feedback without defensiveness.
Seeking outside consultation when needed.
Naming harm publicly when it occurs.

It also looks like humility.

There will be moments when you realize something should have been done differently. There will be times when harm is named and you feel exposed. There will be seasons when your community grows tired of self-examination.

Return anyway.

Ongoing repentance is not about institutional shame. It is about institutional maturity.

It acknowledges that trust is fragile - and that trust, once given, must be safeguarded carefully.

Where "Still Sacred" speaks of belovedness, this guide speaks of stewardship.

To steward well is to remain teachable. To remain teachable is to accept that the spiral does not end.

It widens.

And we widen with it.

A BLESSING FOR COMPANIONS
May the Holy One grant you the courage to listen
without rushing to defend.

May the Spirit steady you
when discomfort rises
and truth unsettles what feels secure.

May you be willing to examine
what has long felt familiar,
trusting that repentance is not humiliation,
but holy turning.

May you resist the comfort of good intention
when justice asks for more.

May your structures reflect
the wideness of God's mercy,
and your leadership bear witness
to the dignity of every body.

May you remember that accompaniment
is not control,
and that authority, rightly held,
protects rather than silences.

When harm is named,
may you respond with humility.
When correction is needed,
may you choose courage.
When you falter,
as all communities do,

May you return -
again and again -
to alignment with the One
who stands always with the wounded.

And as the spiral widens,
may you widen with it.

APPENDIX

Using This Guide in Leadership Settings

This guide was not written as a curriculum. It was written as an examination of posture, power, and responsibility.

If you choose to engage it as a leadership body - clergy, Official Board, Council, or Affirming Committee - let the pace be slow. This is not work to complete. It is work to inhabit.

The purpose of gathering around this guide is not to assess survivors, nor to refine messaging. It is to examine leadership itself.

Before beginning, consider the following commitments:
This work is for those who hold decision-making power.

Survivors are not invited to educate the room.
Lived experience will not be debated.
Confidentiality will be honored.
Defensive explanations will be resisted.
If harm is named during your gathering, pause. Attend to it immediately and appropriately. Do not continue as though nothing has happened.

Possible Ways to Engage This Guide

Option One: Leadership Retreat (Half Day)

Open with silence.
Read selected sections quietly (e.g., Humility, Trauma, Structural Integrity).
Reflect in pairs:

- What unsettles you?
- Where do you recognize yourselves?

Gather as a whole:

- What structural changes are required?

Identify no more than two concrete commitments.
Keep the work focused. Depth matters more than volume.

Option Two: Four-Meeting Series

Meeting One:

- Humility & Understanding Spiritual Trauma

Meeting Two:

- Power & Responding to Disclosure

Meeting Three:

- When Harm Happens Again & Structural Integrity

Meeting Four:

- Ongoing Repentance & Discerned Commitments

Between meetings, leaders are encouraged to sit quietly with what surfaced, rather than rushing toward solutions.

Questions for Institutional Discernment

- Where does our welcome rely on personality rather than policy?
- If harm occurred tomorrow, where would it go?
- Who is absent from decision-making tables?
- Where might we be protecting reputation more than people?
- What would change if the most vulnerable person shaped our procedures?

These are not questions to answer quickly. They are questions to return to.

A Gentle Warning

Group work can easily become performative. It can drift toward theological debate, institutional defensiveness, or premature reassurance.

If the conversation begins to center comfort rather than accountability, pause.

If this guide is used publicly, ensure that those who have experienced spiritual harm are not made examples, witnesses, or test cases.

The work of accompaniment begins with restraint.

A Final Word

Still Sacred: Pathways of Return was written to remind individuals of their belovedness.

This Companion Guide was written to remind institutions of their responsibility.

The two must move together.

Let this appendix serve not as instruction, but as protection - for those who gather, and especially for those who may one day entrust you with their story.



This Companion Guide accompanies *Still Sacred: Pathways of Return*, offering clergy, councils, and Affirming Committees a framework for humility, accountability, and structural integrity.

Affirming language alone does not guarantee safety. Good intentions do not prevent harm. Communities that seek to welcome those who have experienced spiritual trauma must be willing to examine their posture, their policies, and their power.

This guide invites leaders into the steady work of stewardship - the widening work of becoming trustworthy. It calls institutions not only to speak of sacred worth, but to shape structures that reflect it.

***Still Sacred* reminds individuals of their belovedness.**

This Companion Guide calls communities to shared responsibility.

What is sacred must be safeguarded