

Atheist Support Group Serves Faithless Christian Pastors

Support groups exist for people struggling with all sorts of things—from mainstream issues like divorce and cancer to offbeat items like caffeine and hoarding—but many are shocked by a new community created by atheists.

The Clergy Project, formed by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, aims to help clergy who have “seen the light” move beyond faith.

“The Clergy Project exists to provide a safe haven, a forum where clergy who have lost their faith can meet each other, exchange views, swap problems, counsel each other—for, whatever they may have lost, clergy know how to counsel and comfort,” atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins writes on the site.

Although the Clergy Project launched as a private, invitation-only website in March, it went public on Oct. 7. It started with 52 members and has grown to nearly 100. With the unveiling of the website, the group expects hundreds more.

“We know there must be thousands of clergy out there who have secretly abandoned their faith but have nowhere to turn,” Dan Barker, a former evangelical preacher, said in a statement Friday.

“Now they do have a place to meet, a true sanctuary, a congregation of those of us who have replaced faith and dogma with reason and human well-being.”

The Clergy Project was started by Barker, Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett and researcher Linda LaScola.

In a study conducted by Dennett and LaScola, "Preachers Who Are Not Believers," several pastors were interviewed in 2008 and 2009 who no longer believed what their parishioners thought they believed. The study was the source for some initial members of the project.

The administrators of The Clergy Project are both active pastors in the United States who claim to have lost their faith and are looking for an "exit strategy." The project says the most difficult issue for these religious leaders is financial.

"It is hard to think of any other profession which it is so near to impossible to leave," Dawkins wrote on the site in a welcome message. "If a farmer tires of the outdoor life and wants to become an accountant or a teacher or a shopkeeper, he faces difficulties, to be sure. He must learn new skills, raise money, move to another area perhaps. But he doesn't risk losing all his friends, being cast out by his family, being ostracized by his whole community."

The website currently features two testimonies: one from "Lynn," who writes she is "an active Methodist pastor who is also an atheist;" and one from "John Compere," a psychologist and former Baptist minister.

What could cause these pastors to lose their faith? It could be loneliness and discouragement. According to a recent LifeWay Research survey, 98 percent agree with the statement, "I feel privileged to be a pastor," with 93 percent strongly agreeing. Only about 0.5 percent of pastors disagree with the statement. Still, these same pastors are keeping their faith.

"Many oft-quoted statistics speak of miserable and unhappy pastors, but that's not what we see when we actually ask them," explained Ed Stetzer, vice president of research and ministry development at LifeWay Christian Resources. "There is discouragement and loneliness, but when 98 percent agree it is

a privilege to be a pastor, we also know there is a great honor to being a pastor.”

Could these pastors be part of the great falling away that Paul described in 2 Thess. 2:3? Or is this atheist group simply trying to exploit a rare occurrence?