Episcopal Church removes priest who founded Christian psychedelic society

by Kathryn Post
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Hunt Priest (photo courtesy of Ligare)

In 2016, a priest in the Episcopal Church had what he described as a profound, “very Christian” encounter with psychedelics in a study on religious professionals and psilocybin. Five years later, Hunt Priest said his experience inspired him to pivot from being a parish priest to founding the nonprofit Ligare, a Christian psychedelic organization.

But on August 5, after 20 years in the priesthood, Priest was removed from ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church, largely due to concerns that he was using pastoral

authority to endorse psychedelics, most of which are illegal under federal law. Bishop Frank Logue of the Diocese of Georgia concluded after a 13-month process that Priest committed “conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy” and “conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation.”

Priest’s removal suggests debates involving Christianity and psychedelics, long reserved for academic circles and grassroots or underground groups, are surfacing in institutional church settings. Experts say the situation raises important questions about the risks, benefits, and theological legitimacy of framing psychedelic use in spiritual terms.

Ligare, founded in 2021, was designed to convene Christians and spiritual leaders looking to learn about and process psychedelic experiences. In September of that year, Joe Welker, then a Harvard Divinity School student with his own history of psychedelic experimentation, enthusiastically joined Ligare as an intern. Six months later, he resigned.

Welker’s concerns in his resignation letter centered on Ligare not being upfront about potential negative outcomes from psychedelic use. He worried that framing psychedelics as a spiritual experience could lead to spiritual harm if a person had a bad trip.

“I felt there was a really reckless disregard for public safety and for considering the risks of psychedelic usage,” Welker said in an interview.

He also raised concerns about Ligare putting on a legal psychedelic retreat in the Netherlands without proper training.

“None of us in Ligare had any kind of medical or clinical background,” Welker said.

Priest said Ligare had five trained facilitators for 13 people at the retreat and hasn’t held other retreats since.

Welker continued to share his critiques on Substack, including about the clergy psilocybin study by Johns Hopkins University and New York University that had kickstarted Priest’s interest in religion and psychedelics.

“It was done to try to influence religious attitudes to accept psychedelics by giving clergy drugs which make you really open to suggestion,” Welker said. “I came to believe that Priest was a victim, and the other folks were a victim of a really

unethical study."

Matthew Johnson, a researcher on the study, has raised concerns about it, saying researchers had biased the outcome by framing the trial in spiritual terms and involving funders and psychedelic legalization advocates in the study itself. An audit by the Johns Hopkins Medicine Institutional Review Board noted that two of the study's funders had been involved in the trial.

These conflicts of interest, per the audit, "were not appropriately disclosed nor managed." The review board's reservations were included in the study's findings.

When the study's findings were finally released in May, they indicated that 96 percent of the 24 participants retroactively rated one of their psilocybin experiences among the top five most spiritually significant of their lives.

Priest has vehemently rejected Welker's characterization of his experience, saying the trial was "the most edifying and supportive and respectful process I've ever been through." Several trial participants said in interviews that while the trial was imperfect, it is "offensive" and "patronizing" for Welker to speak for them and imply they were brainwashed into promoting a pro-psychedelic agenda.

In May 2024, Priest's lawyer issued a cease-and-desist letter in response to Welker's posts.

Welker saw the letter, which incorrectly claimed Welker had been terminated from Ligare, as defamatory and he filed a complaint with the Episcopal Church. That complaint launched a Title IV process, the denomination's procedure for responding to clergy misconduct allegations.

In April 2025, after an investigation conducted by an outside lawyer, a four-person reference panel of the Diocese of Georgia recommended the bishop seek an agreement for discipline with Priest. In that report, which Priest shared with reporters, the panel cited three examples of "conduct unbecoming a clergy member."

They claimed Priest began speaking publicly about the "safe" use of psychedelics, rather than their "legal" use; that he allowed a cease-and-desist letter to be sent "without being sure the information presented was true"; and that Priest's role with Ligare did not involve sacramental ministries of the priesthood, such as celebrating

the Eucharist or presiding over other rites.

“This leads the Reference Panel to the conclusion that his priesthood is solely a way to lend credence to the work of Ligare,” the report said. Logue later concluded the reference panel had also found evidence of misrepresentation, resulting in a second offense of “conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation,” according to Loren Lasch, canon to the Ordinary and chief of staff for the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia.

On August 5, Priest submitted to the terms of that agreement, which deposed him from ordained ministry.

Welker posted the news on his Substack three days later.

The following week, in a letter to some 2,500 recipients on the Ligare email list, Hunt said he had “resigned” his ordination, emphasizing he had been offered the choice to resign from Ligare or resign his ordination, and noting he could later apply to be reinstated. “Had the investigating committee or the bishop determined that I was harming individuals or communities, or if I was somehow operating outside Christian orthodoxy, I would have been removed, not given a choice,” he wrote.

However, per denominational bylaws, an Episcopal priest cannot resign during a Title IV process, and deposition is the most serious disciplinary action that can be taken against a clergy member. Priest, like any deposed clergyperson, can apply to be restored to ministry, but the process outlined in the bylaws is rigorous and rarely executed.

In an email, Lasch clarified that prior to Priest’s being deposed, Logue offered him a path to return to active ministry. (Priest was restricted from ministry during the Title IV process.) That path would have required Priest to stop his work with Ligare, and “there would have been additional stipulations,” she said.

In interviews, Priest reiterated that he and Ligare do not promote the illegal use of psychedelics. He said Ligare is “neutral” on using them and added that he tends to use the words “safe” and “legal” interchangeably. Priest said the Title IV outcome highlights why Ligare’s educational efforts around psychedelics and religion are necessary.

“I understand that on these big, hot-button issues in the culture, when you’re out front on them, there can be a cost to that,” said Priest. “And I’m willing to bear it, because I do continue to believe this is a very important cultural conversation.”

Welker, who is now a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) serving a congregation in Vermont, sees the outcome of the Title IV process as a consequence of the Hopkins/NYU research trial, though the Diocese of Georgia did not cite the trial in its decision.

“This hype has, I do believe, contributed to Priest and others just having their guard down. We’re dealing with a risky medical intervention,” said Welker. “People do get hurt. It may not be the majority, but they regularly have prolonged harm, and when it happens, it’s sometimes quite catastrophic.”

For others in the Christian psychedelic space, Priest’s removal from ordination is less a referendum on the clergy psychedelic study, and more of a gauge for measuring the institutional church’s current comfort with psychedelics. Like many Christian denominations, the Episcopal Church doesn’t have a churchwide policy on psychedelics, but so far that hasn’t stifled conversation on the topic. In the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon, psychedelics are part of an ongoing conversation among clergy.

Eastern Oregon’s bishop, Patrick Bell, said in a statement he appreciated other Episcopal leaders’ caution regarding “the use of psychedelics for healing purposes” but has “come to a place of openness to the potential of their use,” noting he lives in a state where psilocybin is legal under certain conditions. Earlier this year another mainline denomination, the United Church of Christ, was poised to consider a resolution advocating for psychedelic decriminalization before it was delayed on technical grounds.

According to scholar Bryan McCarthy, a friend of Priest who studies the religiosity of psychedelic medicine, Priest’s removal from ordination is prompting Christians to have necessary discussions about psychedelics.

“It’s the conversation I always thought should be happening. Should we? Shouldn’t we? Is it good? Is it bad? How to do these things, if we do them?” said McCarthy. But while essential, McCarthy noted that, at least in this case, these debates have real consequences. —Religion News Service