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# Liminal Spirituality: Why Religion is Changing and How Churches Can Respond

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**LIMINAL SPIRITUALITY: WHY RELIGION IS CHANGING  
AND HOW CHURCHES CAN RESPOND**

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CHTH 581: THESIS RESEARCH & WRITING

PORTLAND SEMINARY

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the dynamic factors influencing religious disengagement in the United States and identifies five best practices for churches interested in responding to the growing number of “nones” and “dones.” Placing religious disengagement within the framework of Christian history, relative to the cyclical nature of religious movements, it confirms the occasion and purpose of the ensuing “liminal spirituality” and explores what many scholars suggest is a new era of Christian history. Factors influencing religious disengagement considered include; the impact of post-modern and metamodern cultural logic, the role of doubt in personal faith formation, the ways in which the Church inoculates people against itself, familial influence on faith formation, and the impact of new media. Characteristics of generational cohorts Z, Millennial, Gen X and Baby Boomer are explored relative to religious disengagement. Best practices for churches wishing to engage the religiously disengaged are recommended with practical examples and suggested first steps to initiate change in faith communities. Finally, a pneumatological purview is put forth, suggesting the role of the Holy Spirit as a motivating force ushering in the dawn of a new era.

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## Introduction

At one time, it was nearly impossible *not* to believe in God. We are now in an age where the opposite is true and, particularly in the West, belief in God is no longer the default as religious affiliation plummets and church attendance dwindles.<sup>1</sup> Even so, many identify as “spiritual but not religious,” a phrase that suggests a divide between perceptions of what qualifies as spiritual and what qualifies as religious. Spiritual formation scholars Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich found that most people they speak with outside the Church “make it clear that for them ‘spirituality’ is not to be equated with religion. They are emphatic in not wanting to be identified with the Church or organized religion.”<sup>2</sup> This divide indicates an important transition at the core of our culture. While spirituality once found expression in and through religious practice, the two are now viewed as incongruent, a trend that requires our attention if we are to understand why more and more people are disengaging from organized religion.

Traditional belief in God is uncommon and adults of all ages remain absent from churches, yet theological paradigms are shifting, driven in large part by members of the Christian diaspora, who are challenging dogmas keeping the *nones* and *donees* at bay.<sup>3</sup> Many believe that the trend of religious disengagement, recognized first by statisticians in 2007 and accelerating ever since, marks the beginning of a new era, even as it marks the end of an era of Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> See George Barna, and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Salem, WI.: Sheffield Pub., 2005), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Nones* are those who have never seen the church's value and *donees* are those who once attended, but no longer do. See Chapter Two for a broader description.

that began five hundred years ago with the Protestant Reformation. The “liminal spirituality” that characterizes this new era is creating new definitions for old truths and shedding new light on traditions, as religious disengagement breaks down barriers that traditional organized religion held firm.<sup>4</sup> Those who minister to this generation are wondering how to make sense of the many factors influencing religious disengagement and how to respond to the spiritual life of *nones* and *dones*.

Perceptions of Christianity among the *nones* and *dones* indicate a view of the Church as markedly anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing.<sup>5</sup> Values of *nones* and *dones*, on the other hand, reflect a high regard for tolerance, diversity, acceptance, a desire for social change, moral-intuitionism, and a non-dualistic worldview.<sup>6</sup> Though these values contradict the perceived values of the Church, they are congruent with the core values of the Christian Gospel. To what can we attribute this disconnect and how is the Church to respond?

Contemporary churches are uncertain how to engage *nones* and *dones* and spiritual leaders are concerned about the implications of religious disengagement. Congregations that present themselves as new, hip, versions of the traditional church, aiming to be “seeker friendly” in order to attract larger numbers of people, often focus their energy in the wrong place. These churches appear to be “new wineskins”—but their theological wine is that which caused *nones*

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7. Sociologist of religion, Elizabeth Drescher examines the rich spiritual life of *nones* and *dones*. She uses the term *liminal spirituality* to describe the spiritual practices characteristic of the religiously disengaged, suggesting the increase in religious disengagement as a transition within human history.

<sup>5</sup> George Barna, and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2014), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Randall Reed, “A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones.” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 2 (2016): see pages 160-161.

and *does* to disengage with Christianity in the first place. Whereas seeker-friendly churches may succeed in engaging those already identifying as Christians, faith communities intent on engaging *nones* and *does* must reconsider method (new wineskins) *and* message (new wine) in light of the unique values, priorities, and spiritual practices of the religiously disengaged. Churches must not simply focus their energy on creating new wineskins but must also find ways to welcome the new wine of liminal spirituality.



## Chapter 1: The Religion Cycle

### *Historic Patterns*

To make sense of the current trend of religious disengagement, we turn to the work of three late-20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars: Phyllis Tickle, William McLoughlin, and Harvey Cox. Each of these individuals recognized the shifting religious horizon and identified overarching patterns within the scope of Christian history into which current trends fit. Their work constitutes a framework of historic ebb and flow that lends the perspective necessary to understand religious disengagement as a beginning rather than an end, while also providing useful schemas for predicting the future trajectory of Christianity.

Tickle provides an excellent 2,000-year overview of Christian history, illustrating the natural and incremental evolution of faith. She likens the distinct transitions within theological and ecclesial structures to a “gigantic rummage sale” which she suggests is integral to growth and momentum. Tickle observes that “about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”<sup>7</sup>

The 500-year cycle Tickle outlines begins with the life of Christ and ensuing birth of the early church, which, despite hardships and persecutions, grew and spread from the gathering center of disciples following “the Way.” Yet the founding of the early church was not just the beginning of something new; it was also the product of an end. The inauguration of Christianity was itself the outcome of a “rummage sale” within the Jewish tradition where this 500-year cycle

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<sup>7</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 16.

of transformation can also be observed. Regardless, the humble beginnings of the early church mark a turning point in human history.

The next “rummage sale” in Christian history took place around 500 CE with the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages in which monastic Christianity emerged as a new form of the still developing religion, serving to both protect and further the faith. Then around 1000 CE the Great Schism divided Christianity into two distinct expressions of faith, ensuring the growth of the religion by multiplying and diversifying the movement into eastern and western branches. Five hundred years later, Martin Luther initiated yet another “rummage sale” when in 1517 CE he penned the 95 Theses in protest of what had become in his eyes an overly hierarchical institution of the Christian church that limited religious expression due to the required clerical mediation between God and the people. Half a millennium later brings us to the present age, which is also marked by the questioning of religious norms and authority as religious experience passes from sacred to secular space.<sup>8</sup> The church is re-forming once again, as the impact of religious disengagement and the ensuing liminal spirituality shape the religious horizon.

### *Roots of Change*

Thirty years prior to Tickle’s observations, religious historian William McLoughlin identified a similar, though shorter, pattern of dialectic ebb and flow through the course of religious and cultural history in the United States. He associated this pattern with the shifts in religious behavior over the previous forty years, and suggests these changes are indicative of a period of creation and renewal. The roots of which are apparent in the early part of the 20th

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<sup>8</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 106.

century, finding fruition in the 1960s and continuing, it would seem, into the second decade of the new millennium.

In his extended essay *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, McLoughlin describes the revolutionary and reactionary nature of religious movements, identifying them as “periods of fundamental social and intellectual reorientation of the American belief-value system, behavior patterns, and institutional structures.”<sup>9</sup> He scrutinizes the nuanced patterns of religious movement within the last three centuries, identifying four periods of transformation, or “great awakenings,” closely tied to cultural change: the First Great Awakening (1730-60), which led to the creation of the American republic; the Second Great Awakening (1800-1830), which solidified the Union and the rise of Jacksonian democracy; the Third Great Awakening (1890-1920), which led to the “rejection of unregulated capitalistic exploitation and the beginning of the welfare state”;<sup>10</sup> and the Fourth Great Awakening (1960-90 (?)), which was still unfolding when McLoughlin published his work in 1978.<sup>11</sup>

Adapting a theory of cultural change derived by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace, McLoughlin identifies the influential forces at work during four cycles of cultural, political, and religious reorientation within United States history.<sup>12</sup> Each of these four historic cycles exhibits a process of social transformation taking place in predictable stages over a thirty- to forty-year

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<sup>9</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago History of American Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 10.

<sup>10</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> McLoughlin includes a parenthetical question mark to end the Fourth Great Awakening, since he was uncertain about the trajectory of this movement when he wrote about it in the 1970s.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace puts forth this formula in his 1956 book *American Anthropology*.

period. These stages unfold chronologically in the following order: “individual stress,” “cultural distortion,” “appearance of a prophet or prophets,” formation of “new-light” communities composed of individuals attracted by the prophets, and the final stage during which the prophets succeed in winning over most of the people and the “control of old institutions passes to the new leadership.”<sup>13</sup> Each cycle is followed by an era wherein social, political, and economic institutions are restructured, often through political action.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, McLoughlin notes, “Familial patterns change, sex roles alter, schools reform their curriculums and teaching methods, courts revise their interpretations, governments enact new laws and reorganize their recruitment of civil servants.”<sup>15</sup>

Nativism is an additional, seemingly retrograde stage which usually appears early in the cycle of cultural revivalism. This “nativist” or “traditionalist” movement attracts those in society with more rigid personalities, often those in older generations, who are reacting to cultural changes by looking back with longing to a “golden time.”<sup>16</sup> McLoughlin points out that those in positions of authority often initiate these movements. He notes some of the following identifying factors: “They mistake symptoms for causes . . . calling for a return to the ‘old-time religion,’ ‘the ways of our fathers,’ and ‘respect for the flag’ (or other symbols of the old order). Second, they tend to find scapegoats in their midst (aliens, witches, conspirators, foreigners, traitors) upon whom they can project their fear.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Those who hold a nativist stance often have the hardest time adapting to the restructuring of institutions, and many continue to maintain old ways as much as possible. However, “many who at first adopted a traditionalist stance gradually drift into the new consensus when they find it more satisfactory or when they conclude that they cannot sustain the old order.”<sup>18</sup>

McLoughlin puts forth a cultural analysis of each of the four “great awakenings” that traces the evolutionary pattern modeled in Wallace’s formula. The author’s observations about “the Fourth Great Awakening” are of great interest relative to the current trend of religious disengagement because they elucidate the historic roots of this movement away from organized religion, while suggesting that a new form of spirituality is emerging. McLoughlin dates this period of cultural reorientation from 1960 and predicts its conclusion around 1990. This coincides with what Tickle identifies in her work, described above as “the Great Emergence.”

McLoughlin diagnoses the initial pangs of the Forth Great Awakening by tracing its early roots from transcendental thought in the late nineteenth century to full maturation in the countercultural extremism of the 1960s. He points out that the “ferment of the sixties” was the catalyst for a “new shift in our belief-value system, a transformation of our worldview that may be the most drastic in our history as a nation.”<sup>19</sup> He notes the “individual stress” of the first stage, apparent in the “Age of Anxiety” when self-doubt and societal pessimism began to allude to a “crack in the picture window” of the idyllic 1950s. By the early 1960s there was a pervasive sense in the country that individuals were beginning to feel a loss of control of their lives. This was followed by a stage of “cultural distortion” marked by an increase in countercultural

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<sup>18</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

manifestations, such as the Beat Generation, increased interest in eastern religions, LSD use, rise of the occult, and growth of the rock-concert scene.<sup>20</sup>

Though his work does not address this since it had not yet occurred, a nativist movement appeared in the 1980s with residual effects stretching into the 1990s. This was apparent in the rise of the religious right and evangelical conservatism. The final vestiges of these nativist movements are still active today, exacerbated by the anxiety of white Americans who feel their sense of dominant-group status is threatened by the rising majority-minority.<sup>21</sup> If McLoughlin is correct, we are still experiencing the effects of the cultural reorientation of the Fourth Great Awakening, and therefore it may be too soon to discern the realization of institutional restructuring, though in Chapter 6 we will examine the ways in which the church is showing evidence of creation and renewal.

### *A New Era*

Theologian and historian Harvey Cox also directs our attention to the metamorphosis of religious engagement in his book *The Future of Faith*, calling religious disengagement a “religious upheaval” and a “tectonic shift in Christianity.” Like Tickle, Cox attempts to define all of Christian history, and does so in three stages: the “Age of Faith,” spanning the first 300 years after Christ; the “Age of Belief,” which began to crumble in the 1960s; and the current “Age of the Spirit.” Cox adds an important contribution by noting the difference between “faith” and “belief.” He illustrates how people of “The Way,” the earliest term used to describe Christianity in the New Testament, moved from a dynamic expression of faith to an axiomatic system of

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<sup>20</sup> See McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 196-211.

<sup>21</sup> Diana C Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 19 (2018): E4330-E4339.

belief and consequently behaviors, the character of which marks the majority of Christian history. He notes that “a movement of Spirit guided by faith soon clotted into a catalog of beliefs administered by a clerical class” and that “we have been misled for centuries by the theologians who taught that ‘faith’ consists of dutifully believing the articles listed in one of the countless creeds they have spun out, but it does not.”<sup>22</sup> Of this current age he says, “the Age of the Spirit is marked with Christian growth outside the West, in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope, pay scant attention to creeds, and flourish without hierarchies.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet the phenomenon of religious disengagement is not particular to North America or to Christianity. Cox notes that there is a transition taking place in the spiritual fabric of the world as similar shifts occur in other religions, ushering in the “Age of the Spirit.” Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism are seeing changes similar to Christianity, indicating a renaissance of spirituality and transformation in the nature of religiousness that indeed is a global phenomenon. The last century ushered in a refocusing within the Muslim community as Islam was again viewed as a way of serving God and neighbor, rather than a set of ritual obligations to follow.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Buddhism experienced sweeping change, best illustrated in the “Buddhist Reformation” of Japan where lay followers initiated a controversial and rapidly growing movement encouraging creative thought, peace efforts, women’s rights, and interfaith dialogue.<sup>25</sup> Developments in

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<sup>22</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Cox, *Future of Faith*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Judaism include the adoption of eastern spiritual tropes, the mixing of Hasidic, Asian, and Sufi spirituality, and a turn to labeling synagogues as “post-denominational.”<sup>26</sup>

These movements share many commonalities with the Christian “emerging-church movement” which, according to Cox “began in New Zealand, far from the old power centers of Christendom” and is distinguished as “non-denominational, decentralized, suspicious of institutional churches, critical of dogmas . . . preferring conversation and cooperation to conversion.”<sup>27</sup> This is Tickle’s “Great Emergence”: a “new configuration of Christianity” which she notes is first and foremost “a body of people, a conversation” rather than a “corpus of solutions, characteristics, accommodations, and principles.”<sup>28</sup> An important contribution of the emergent church conversation is the de-Hellenization of Christian theology, which after Constantine moved from Judaism’s holistic conceptualization of life to the dualism of Greek philosophy and Greco-Roman culture. The *nones* and *donees*, on the other hand, due to their inculcation with postmodern thought, hold paradox in high regard, a fact that is helping to loosen and shake free the dogmas of belief that have held the Christian faith captive for so long.

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<sup>26</sup> Cox, *Future of Faith*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 104.



## Chapter Two: Rise of the *Nones* and *Dones*

### *Nones, Dones & Somes*

Named after a shortened version of “none of the above,” *nones* are religiously unaffiliated, selecting no religious affiliation on national surveys, while *dones* are those who were once engaged with the church, but have since become disillusioned and no longer find church their spiritual home. *Somes* refers to the religiously affiliated. Sociologist of religion Elizabeth Drescher coined this term in her book *Choosing Our Religion*. Drescher’s project draws attention to the rich spiritual life of *nones* and *dones*, noting that this group is not a homogenous tribe in competition with the religiously affiliated *somes*; rather it is a diverse group of spiritually eclectic individuals whose spiritual expression in fact overlaps with the *somes*.<sup>29</sup> This perspective is a helpful counterpoint to the ideas of lack and loss often associated with the religiously unaffiliated: “lack of faith, loss of belief, lack of commitment, loss of community, and so on.”<sup>30</sup>

First identified nearly ten years ago, the *nones* and *dones* represent a growing number of Americans who have no interest in finding a religion that is right for them, yet they also express a deep spirituality consisting of an eclectic mix of “existing ideas, artifacts, traditions, rituals, and modes of interpreting experience.”<sup>31</sup> This begs the question, do they even need the church, or organized religion for that matter? Their answer would be a resounding no. Overwhelmingly, they view religious organizations as overly concerned with money and power, too focused on

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

rules, and too involved in politics.<sup>32</sup> Among the *nones* and *dones*, the Christian church is perceived to be markedly anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing.<sup>33</sup>

The number of *nones* continues to grow at a rapid pace, due in large part to religious disengagement among the youngest generational cohorts; 77 percent of the religiously disengaged are Millennials (ages 21-36) or Gen-Xers (ages 37-52).<sup>34</sup> While ten years ago we could have pointed to a culture that was saying, “God, yes; church, no,” as the religious disengagement trend has progressed, an accurate assessment today reveals a culture that says, “God, perhaps; Christianity and Christians, no.” For most, the idea of even considering church engagement is off the table.<sup>35</sup> It is imperative, as we will see later, that we understand this group as distinctly different from “seekers.” The *nones* and the *dones* are not looking for a church to call home, and for those faith communities interested in engaging these folks, “trendy” attractional models that rely on overly programmatic elements may not work; in fact, they may have the opposite effect. In the current socio-religious climate, we do not have the luxury of engaging people where we *wish* they were; we must instead meet them where they *are*.

It is important to understand the dynamic quality of the *nones* and *dones*; they are not a monolithic group, but a diverse and nuanced set of individuals who have chosen to disengage

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<sup>32</sup> Barna Group. 2011. “Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church.” Sept 28. <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/> (accessed 6 August 2017).

<sup>33</sup> George Barna, and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2014), 105.

<sup>34</sup> Allison Pond, “Religion Among the Millennials” [pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org). <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/> (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2014), 41.

with religion, or simply never have at all, for a variety of reasons. There is no archetypal *none* or *done* and, as Elizabeth Drescher noted in the book which followed her in-depth study, “the tremendous diversity of self-identification of American Nones is among the most difficult things for commentators—academic, journalistic, and religious alike—to grasp about a demographic category that does not, in fact describe a distinct social group.”<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, Drescher presents a view of the religiously unaffiliated that is neither homogeneous nor in competition with the religiously affiliated, as many discussions of this group are wont to suggest. Rather, she “situates nones as diverse participants in an increasingly vibrant, historically rich, and religiously pluralistic landscape within which conventional measures like institutional affiliation, worship attendance, and belief in God or a Higher Power are increasingly less meaningful indicators of religiosity or spirituality.”<sup>37</sup> She also argues: “None is a matter of social identity. . . . This self-understanding develops over time as circumstances—relationships, intellectual and physiological development, geographic location, education and employment, economic realities, technologies, and so on—infect, amplify, redirect, and sometimes substantially reconfigure an ongoing narrative of the self.”<sup>38</sup>

The growing numbers of the religiously disengaged could be discouraging news, especially for churches interested in keeping the traditional model of church alive. However, this seismic shift in religious cultural identity could in fact prove to be the seedbed of renewal. Krista Tippett, the Yale Divinity School graduate and host of the popular podcast *On Being*, takes this

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<sup>36</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 53.

view and considers that these changes are indicative of “a crucible of renewing and reforming religion in the coming period.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Gen X*

Disaffected and cynical, Gen-Xers are the big brothers and sisters, camp counselors, and youth-group leaders that served the Millennial generation. Born between 1965 and 1984, they are distinguished by their self-reliant, savvy, skeptical nature. The first ‘latch-key kids,’ Generation Xers were largely left to fend for themselves as the divorce rate rose and more and more women entered the workforce. This allowed a generation of independent thinkers to emerge, one that has, according to Stephen Katz, “created a new sensibility around living in smaller sustainable ways in more peripheral spaces and more cognizant of its diverse gender, ethnic, and racial groupings, both as part of rejecting mainstream (and Baby Boomer) cultural expectations for achievement and accumulation and because of struggling in an increasingly exploitative and degraded labor environment.”<sup>40</sup> With their expertise in promoting cultural tolerance and social justice, it could be that Gen-Xers will play the important role in bridging the two generations between which they are sandwiched.

### *Millennials*

The largest cohort in history, Millennials are those born between the years of 1984 and 2002: 80 million people. This group is distinctly tech-savvy, optimistic, more tolerant than older generations, and are multi-taskers who are engaged and expressive. With a high graduation rate and college enrollment rate, they also have an average of \$25,000 in student loans. They struggle

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<sup>39</sup> Tim Funk, “A Chat With Public Radio Host Krista Tippett,” *Funk on Faith*, March 15, 2013, <http://funkonfaith.blogspot.com/2013/03/a-chat-with-public-radio-host-krista.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Katz, “Generation X: A Critical Sociological Perspective,” *Generations*, no. 3 (2017): 12-19.

with mental illness: anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and more. The sheer stress of living in today's society, with its ensuing demands and expectations, is enough to give anyone an anxiety disorder. Without the resources or structure of preceding generations, who could pull themselves up by the bootstraps because they could afford college tuition on minimum wage, find a job that offered a living wage post-graduation, and access affordable healthcare, Millennials are increasingly burdened by the compounding pressure to meet higher societal demands with less resources and less structural support.

Millennials—roughly those 15 to 35 years of age—are the largest and most diverse generational cohort of the U.S. population and major contributors to the increasing numbers of religiously unaffiliated. This presents a major concern for traditional Christian churches since dwindling religious engagement equates to shrinking congregations. The values, priorities, and core identity of Millennial *nones* and *does* clash with perceived values of the traditional church, causing those who have never attended church to remain disengaged, and those who were once active in the church to disengage as their personal identity develops.

### *Gen-Z*

This post-millennial generation is just coming of age and, while researchers are still taking stock of the characteristics of this generation, it is clear that, like the Millennial generation, this cohort is tech-savvy, informed, and socially connected. They prefer interactive experiences to one-sided communication such as lectures and would rather engage with media rather than passively watch or listen to it.<sup>41</sup> They are the most diverse generation to date; race

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<sup>41</sup> T Wiedmer, (2015). Generations Do Differ: Best Practices in Leading Traditionalists, Boomers, and Generations X, Y, and Z. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 82(1), 51-58.

and ethnicity are likely to be very important factors influencing self-identity, especially in minorities. This generation is notably career-driven and concerned with success. Research from the Barna group indicates that “two-thirds of Gen Z want to finish their education (66%), start a career (66%) and become financially independent (65%) by age 30, while only one in five wants to get married by then (20%).”<sup>42</sup> This prioritization of education and career over family may reflect the developmental stage of this young cohort and is likely to shift as this group matures into adulthood.

### *Boomers*

This generation was born during the “baby boom” that followed World War II. Though less likely than younger cohorts to disengage with organized religion, Baby Boomers still contribute to the growing numbers of *nones* and *donees* and should not be overlooked in efforts to understand religious disengagement. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof identified this generation as “spiritual seekers,” noting how the experiences and politics during their coming of age in the cultural upheaval of the 1960s impacted their spiritual and religious trajectories.<sup>43</sup> The active spiritual “seeking” performed by the Boomers in their youth set the stage for the fluid, eclectic spirituality characterized by the *nones* and *donees*.<sup>44</sup>

### *Spiritually Homeless, Evangelical Diaspora, and SBNR*

Within the religiously disengaged is a spectrum of those who do not find expression for their faith in organized religion and have chosen not to assimilate into the Christian culture,

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<sup>42</sup> Brooke Hempell, David Kinnaman, Roxy Stone, *Gen Z, Your Questions Answered*, February 6, 2018. <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/> (accessed August 1, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993) 60.

<sup>44</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 84.

though they also would not categorize themselves as “unbelievers.” Ranging from the evangelical diaspora, who once felt at home in the conservative evangelical church but no longer do to those who are “spiritual but not religious,” or SBNR for short, a large contingent of *nones* and *dones* find themselves spiritually homeless.<sup>45</sup> Though variant in their experience and beliefs, this group could be considered the church in exile. They live an exilic reality because, though many of their beliefs and values parallel those of Christianity, they do not feel welcome or at home in the Christian Church because aspects of their identity, be it values, or physical appearance, or political beliefs, differ from the dominant culture of the Christian Church. The church therefore is not in exile from the culture, as some Christians would believe; rather the church has exiled those who do not assimilate to its culture.<sup>46</sup>

The popular Christian podcast “The Liturgists,” echoes the outsider experience of the *nones* and *dones* and even identifies itself as a “home for the spiritually homeless.” The Liturgists’ website states its mission to “produce clarity and insight by looking at essential topics through the lenses of art, faith, and science,” efforts which have “helped millions start the journey to growth and recovery following spiritual estrangement.”<sup>47</sup> The Liturgists podcast has a strong following, with millions of listeners and several well-attended, in-person gatherings around the world every year. They fill a void by providing something that the local church does

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<sup>45</sup> Evangelical diaspora is a term I have coined for those who once belonged to the evangelical church community but have left for some reason.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Seminary, titled his September 2016 chapel sermon, “The Church in Exile.” Utilizing the theme of Babylonian exile in Daniel 1, he highlights how Daniel and his friends refuse to completely assimilate to the narrative of the dominant Babylonian culture. They learn the language and take foreign names, for example. However, they also keep themselves set apart. They refuse to buy the lies about their identity and assimilate into a set of systems they disagree with and instead live in the culture as diaspora. The *nones* and *dones* are in many ways like Daniel and his friends.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.theliturgyists.com/>

not; an inclusive space where every perspective is welcome and where the inevitable doubts of the spiritual journey are embraced.

I attended The Liturgists Gathering in Los Angeles in September of 2017 and among those I met there, I heard story after story of shifts in Christian beliefs, such that individuals felt they could no longer participate or fit in with their faith communities in the same way that they did before. Many used the term “deconstruction” to describe the experience of their changing faith and expressed how they were exiled from their faith communities, and sometimes families, either explicitly or implicitly, after expressing their shifting beliefs. Many choose to keep these beliefs secret for fear of being ostracized, or for fear of losing their jobs if they are employed by churches or other evangelical institutions. Most of the attendees were Millennials and Gen-Xers, though Boomers and Gen-Zers were present as well.

What I heard in Los Angeles is not an experience unique to one or two generational cohorts; individuals from Gen-Z to Boomers are disengaging from religion. Many spiritually homeless *nones* and *ones* are experiencing this deconstruction of their Christian beliefs. Whether they are evangelical diaspora or SBNR, they have refused to assimilate into the Christian system and the Christian system has not made room for them. The evangelical diaspora and SBNR are rejecting the Christian culture that builds its dogma on biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, Christian salvific exclusivity, and patriarchal gender roles. Then there is also the deconstruction of the religious structures: church is not just Sunday morning in a pew; not going every week does not make me a bad person; meeting God on the trail or in the ocean still “counts;” I can have doubt and faith at the same time. They are looking for a place to express their spiritual identity but are finding few faith communities that fit the bill. They are living differently in an assimilationist world, faithful exiles of the church.



## Chapter Three: Rich Spiritual Life

### *Eclectic, Fluid, but Anti-institutional*

As many have noticed, the Christian faith is not dying; rather it is taking new forms, as it has many times in the past. A dynamic set of factors is fueling this movement. Top influences include:

- Discontent with the Christian status quo, sometimes referred to as “American pop-Christianity” or “cotton-candy-Christianity,” terms that demonstrate the perceived superficiality of fundamentalist faith, which appears to conflict with what *nones* and *does* view as more authentic expressions of Christianity.<sup>48</sup>
- The marriage of religion and political nationalism that links right-wing politics with Christian values and evangelicalism with the current presidential administration.
- Personal theological deconstruction, motivated by postmodern cultural logic, and amplified by perceived inconsistencies between Christian values and Christian actions performed in the public sphere (for example, the allegations of sexual misconduct directed to outspoken Christian judge and former Republican candidate for U.S. Senate Roy Moore.<sup>49</sup>)

These factors are compounded by a consumerist faith that appears vulgar in the face of the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed.

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<sup>48</sup> Brian Zahnd uses the terms “American pop Christianity” and “cotton-candy-Christianity” to bring attention to the disdain some Christian leaders have with fundamental Christianity. See his note regarding the Water to Wine Gathering, hosted June 28-30 in St. Joseph Missouri, <https://www.watertowinegathering.com/>.

<sup>49</sup> Kate Shellnutt, “Where Evangelicals Fall on Roy Moore vs. Trump, Lauer, Franken, and Six More Men,” last updated December 11, 2017. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/december/evangelicals-roy-moore-trump-lauer-franken-alabama-election.html> (accessed March 8, 2018).

As noted in Chapter 1, Religious historian William G. McLoughlin uses anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace's formulation of cultural change to identify factors evident in religious movements as "broad and complex as the rise of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Wesleyan Methodism."<sup>50</sup> Within this framework are several predictable steps, which are useful to track the process of the current religious shift. McLoughlin recognized that new religious movements, such as awakenings and reforms, historically include a loss of faith in the "legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions and the authority of our leaders in church and state."<sup>51</sup>

Though it would seem that this shakeup of institutional religion began outside the (conservative) Christian community, and slowly made its way in, the pattern is actually bi-directional, visible in the movement of those like Rob Bell, Glennon Doyle, and Jenn Hatmaker, who moved (or were removed) from the center to the margins, and by those who began in the margins, like Nadia Bolz-Webber, William Barber, and Shane Claiborne, and moved closer to the center, gaining momentum and popularity. The movement of those such as Bell, Doyle and Hatmaker from the center to the margins is a result of their expressed beliefs that stand in contrast with the beliefs of the Christian community. Interestingly, once on the margins their voices were not silenced as their critics had hoped; rather they used their influence and charisma to lead from the edge, continuing to resonate with the many *nones* and *donees* who share their perspective. Bolz-Webber, a former-drug-addict-turned-Lutheran-pastor and founder of the House for all Sinner and Saints in Denver, Colorado, notes how she has "often felt like one of society's outsiders" and the church she founded caters to those generally pushed to the margins by traditional Christian communities. More frequently, voices from the center of the religious

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<sup>50</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

spectrum are expressing that they too are fed up with the status quo. Take for example the Boston Declaration, a statement by theologians and faith leaders from the academy and the Church challenging the status quo of “the corruption of US Christianity.”<sup>52</sup>

### *Christian Deconstruction*

Over the past few years, the term “Christian deconstruction” or “theological deconstruction” has been increasingly bandied about to describe the changing set of beliefs, or perhaps more accurately, the *process* of changing beliefs, that many *nones* and *donees* are experiencing. One important component of the current shifting religious horizon is the large percentage of the religiously unaffiliated that once had a relationship with Christianity. Recent data tells us that “more than 70% of Nones were raised in families affiliated with institutional religions, generally Christian denominations.”<sup>53</sup> Those who had some relationship with Christianity are finding that their doubts and questions, paired with their lack of trust for religious authority, including the Bible, are creating a situation not entirely unlike the game of Jenga, where the removal of one or two pieces at vulnerable points brings the whole structure crashing down.

Some of the dogmatic components that *nones* and *donees* are deconstructing include biblical inerrancy, substitutionary atonement, Christian salvific exclusivity, and patriarchal gender roles, to name the top few. Then, as stated earlier, there is also the deconstruction of the

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<sup>52</sup> This statement was proffered November 20th, 2017 at the conclusion of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Boston. See <https://thebostondeclaration.com/>. Over 100 theologians, bishops, and leaders in Christian seminaries and denominations signed the Boston Declaration, including Noel Castelanos, Amos Yong, Christian Collins Winn, Timothy J. Scherer and Kay Higuera Smith.

<sup>53</sup> Elisabeth Drescher references “Nones on the Rise” (Funk and Smith 2012, 16) and “2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones 2014, 29) in *Choosing Our Religion*, 8.

religious structures themselves. Spurred by the questions, “what is church anyway” and “why do I need it,” the early “emergent church movement” abandoned traditional church buildings and instead formed faith communities that began meeting in nontraditional sites such as cafes, old movie theaters, and skate parks.<sup>54</sup>

Though it is clear what *nones* and *donees* are against, it is hard to tell what they are for, due to the inherent lack of doctrinal statements thus far (their aversion to doctrinal statements makes the creation of one less likely). However, it is possible to discern some shared values among those disengaged with the church, including a high value for art and creative expression, an emphasis on dialogue, consideration for how science and faith overlap, and a focus on inclusivity in regard to age, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

For this reason, a new definition of faith is necessary. “Faith” has traditionally meant adherence to a set of beliefs and behaviors and is even used as a noun referring to a community of similarly believing and behaving individuals. But, as beliefs and their ensuing behaviors are challenged and dismantled by the *nones* and *donees*, a new understanding of faith is forming that is not associated with a set of beliefs or behaviors, but rather leans into the mystery. In the early Christian context, faith had strong connotations with trust, relationship building, and the risk involved in both—it had nothing to do with certainty, believing, or behaving. Rather than equating faith to a set of beliefs or something abstract at work in the heart and mind, *pistis*, or faith, in the context of the New Testament, meant trust and is fundamentally about a relationship

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<sup>54</sup>It should be noted that the term “emergent” or “emerging” was tied, perhaps prematurely, to early indicators of what was seen as a new movement within the Christian church, gaining momentum in the U.S. in the early 2000s. The term “emergent” was apropos for these indicators and is in some ways still a fitting definition for the process of religious change that we are still seeing unfold.

that creates community among individuals and with God.<sup>55</sup> Christianity is losing out because it has confused a rich compelling faith, full of mystery and connection, with a codified system of beliefs and behaviors that determine who is in and who is out.

### *A Gathering Center*

If this movement followed the historic patterns that Tickle, McLoughlin, and Cox set forth, any day now a gathering center would generate leadership. Traditionally, religious movements form a center around a charismatic leader, like John Wesley, Martin Luther, or Joseph Smith.<sup>56</sup> However, hierarchy and traditional hierarchical power structures dominated by those historically seen as “privileged” are intrinsically viewed as counter to the efforts of religious *nones* and *done*s. They consider this tight hierarchy where a privileged few hold the power to be one of the critiques of the church, and so replicating this structure is unappealing.

That said, there are faith communities which appear to cater to the *nones* and *done*s, by adopting such visual cues and cultural symbols as non-traditional sounding un-churchy names, pastors who dress informally, and graphically appealing websites touting “all welcome.” However, some of these faith communities have simply done a fine job of masking an underlying conservative evangelical church. They may initially attract followers by appearing different from the traditional church, while their convictions and dogma remain the same. One may discern the values of an organization by looking at the leadership page on their website. Who is, and is not, represented and how the leadership is structured says a great deal about an organization. If a church’s staff page is top-heavy with male leadership—literally listing all the male pastors at the

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<sup>55</sup> See the work of Theresa Morgan, who outlines the evolution of faith in *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 16.

top and the female “associates,” “directors,” or “admins” at the bottom—this church likely is complementarian and therefore conservative, even if it appears otherwise.

McLoughlin, using Wallace’s cultural-change formula, notes how it is typically a prophet who initiates a new religious movement from within said movement. As stated above, *nones* and *donees* are skeptical of authority and reluctant to develop leadership structures which mirror the very institutions they are critiquing. Identifying one singular prophet or leader is challenging; however, some of the influencers in this movement include Andrew Henry, Austin Channing, Brian Zahnd, Colby Martin, Jenn Hatmaker, Mike McHargue, Nadia Bolz-Webber, Nichelle Goudry, Rachel Held Evans, and Rob Bell. Though these persons of interest are initiating well-attended gatherings around the country, they are reluctant leaders because they assume that leadership means they are buying into hierarchy.

The annual Why Christian event is defined as “a one-of-a-kind gathering of pastors, practitioners, artists, dreamers, and doubters [gathering] around one question: Why Christian?”<sup>57</sup> The recent Water to Wine gathering is for those who “sense the falseness prevailing in Americanized Christianity and yearn for something better.” The website explains that this is “a gathering for those who want to see the church rescued from fundamentalism, consumerism, and nationalism.”<sup>58</sup> An annual gathering in Hot Springs, North Carolina, called The Wild Goose festival continues to grow as a central fixture in the changing religious climate. With a focus on justice, this residential festival touts itself as an “art, music, and story-driven transformational experience grounded in faith-inspired social justice.” Many who have left organized religion are

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<sup>57</sup> <https://whychristian.net/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.watertowinegathering.com/>

drawn to this gathering, which incorporates traditional elements of Christianity, such as hymn singing, with elements of spiritual practices from other religions, such as meditation and tai chi.<sup>59</sup>

### *New Media*

In addition to these in-person gatherings, new media platforms such as blogs, podcasts, Facebook live, Instagram, and Twitter have created space for voices, unsanctioned by organized religion, to develop, grow, attract a following, and connect virtual communities in real time. During religious shifts/movements of the past, new technology was paramount to the spread of information and the initiation of a new movement. For instance, during the Protestant Reformation, moveable type made it possible to proliferate information and spread ideas, in ways that had not been possible before. Billy Graham used the radio, television, and movies to connect with the masses.<sup>60</sup>

Religious futurists have rightly predicted that the Internet will be a major influence of religious change in the current climate and rightly so. Blogs were an early influence of the newest religious movements, giving voice and platform to progressives such as Rob Bell, who were no longer welcome in the traditional church once their conflicting values and beliefs were made known. Due to the independent nature of new media, individuals can distribute content via online platforms without the endorsement, and therefore potential censorship, of an affiliated institution. In addition to contributing to the deconstruction and de-centralization of the institutionalized church, this has created a seedbed for new ideas to develop and for critiques to be presented that might otherwise be kept from public proliferation. Since new media is accessible to all, these ideas and critiques are easy to discover and interact with.

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<sup>59</sup> <http://wildgoosefestival.org/>

<sup>60</sup> McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 186.

A look at the weekly top ten spirituality and religion podcasts on the popular media player iTunes illustrates the popularity of podcasts associated with this new movement. In addition to conservatives such as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and Andy Stanley, other inhabitants of the top ten include progressive perspectives such as Jen Hatmaker's "For the Love," Peter Enns' "The Bible for Normal People," Rob Bell's "The Robcast," and a new podcast with the oh-so-telling title "The Church is Broken." This podcast, which hit the top ten for four weeks in July of 2018, provides a critical perspective of the church, from the personal point of view of host and former pastor Sam Neider, who describes the content thusly;

Sharing his story of walking through darkness and despair to lay hold of the LIGHT that he could not find in 30 years of seeking, searching, and serving in the church. Sam exposes why the church is broken and how the misaimed, man-made system fails at bringing light into the world and at producing transformation in the lives of the believers. Sam will empower you, the listener, with the good news of living the KINGDOM LIFE, based on the TRUTH of what Jesus really taught and commissioned us to do—the TRUTH that has been veiled by the broken system of the church.<sup>61</sup>

The reviews show mixed responses to the content of this podcast, with listeners expressing positive and negative responses on both ends of the five-star spectrum. Regardless of the comments and critiques by listeners, this popularity of this content is significant and means that Neider has tapped into a topic of interest to many.

The echo-chamber effect, an unexpected outcome of the nature of social media, has done much to propagate new ideas. However, it has also created the perfect environment for many to develop an insular perspective, where one's desire for opinion reinforcement perpetuates a one-sided view that remains unchallenged. In 2009, communications scholar R. Kelly Garrett published an article titled *Echo Chambers Online?* which confirmed fears that the Internet

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<sup>61</sup> <http://churchisbroken.libsyn.com/>



encourages a polarized and fragmented citizenry.<sup>62</sup> Though considered “moderate” in Garrett’s findings, the study confirmed that the effects of an abundance of information at one’s fingertips, and within one’s control, is such that one is drawn to engage with sources that confirm biases and reinforce opinions, and to disengage with those that challenge or inform a different perspective. Because we can select our exposure to desirable or undesirable content, and because the algorithmic intelligence of Internet marketing uses our engagement patterns to give us more of what we are already engaging, this creates a bubble of information in which contradictory viewpoints are held at bay, unless an individual actively seeks to engage opposing perspectives.<sup>63</sup>

In an information-driven culture, where conversations about religion are engaged online and “click” patterns determine what other websites, event information, book promotions, and podcast links pop up in newsfeeds and ad sidebars, this bubble effect can happen without us even knowing it. The Liturgists podcast is intentionally addressing this by bringing together opinions that are generally isolated in media, encouraging listeners to subvert the barriers that seem to be forming naturally amongst the citizens of our country. For example, on a recent episode examining the topic of sex and sexuality, evangelical Catholic author and speaker Christopher West shared his conservative views, which he has termed “Theology of the Body,” alongside those of Christian LGBTQ+ activist Darren Calhoun.

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<sup>62</sup> R. Kelly Garrett, “Echo Chambers Online?: Politically Motivated Selective Exposure Among Internet News Users,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (January 2009): 265–285.

<sup>63</sup> Elanor Colleoni, Alessandro Rozza, and Adam Arvidsson, “Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data” *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 2 (2014): 317-32.

As thought leaders among many *nones* and *done*s, The Liturgist's initiative to engage balanced dialogue points to the new cultural logic, metamodernism, that is replacing postmodernism even as it is reacting to it. Metamodernism, or postpostmodernism, or transmodernism as it is sometimes called, is distinguished by optimism, dialogue, and hope.<sup>64</sup> Author and professor Seth Abramson describes metamodernism in a 2017 article for the Huffington Post:

Metamodernism is likely to take something you're certain is bad and show you that it's an opportunity to do something you never imagined before. It's likely to show two people who think they have nothing in common that the ways in which they're different empower them to work together much *better* than any two people "more similar" would be able to. It's likely to say crazy things like the fact that we live in a "post-truth" culture gives us an opportunity to instrumentalize that very culture in the service of—you guessed it—Truth. Metamodernism is, in fact, a "post-post-truth" phenomenon for exactly this reason: it takes the wreckage of meaning and goodwill and hope and refashions it into a new "meta-narrative"—a narrative about how we make narratives—that is fundamentally optimistic.<sup>65</sup>

As polarization becomes more widely recognized as problematic to the unity of our country, faith communities have the opportunity to become venues for civil conversation. Given the high propensity for dialogue that *nones* and *done*s possess, this is an opportune time for faith communities to take shared action in accordance with shared values, hosting conversations for the civil good, where opinions of all sides are shared.

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<sup>64</sup> This term is so new that little academic work has addressed the topic and, ironically, consensus has yet to be reached on a single term, let alone a spelling.

<sup>65</sup> Seth Abramson, "What Is Metamodernism?" *Huffington Post*. January 9, 2017. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-is-metamodernism\\_us\\_586e7075e4b0a5e600a788cd](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-is-metamodernism_us_586e7075e4b0a5e600a788cd) (accessed December 8, 2017).

## *Liminal Spirituality*

In *Choosing Our Religion*, Elizabeth Drescher concludes that the *nones* are not devoid of religious expression, but rather have a rich spiritual life. Defining spiritual life by practice, rather than belief, Drescher identifies some clear markers of spiritual life that in turn define a “liminal spirituality” that is neither the same form as that which came before, nor a fully formed movement, and as such is susceptible to changing cultural influences. She looks past typical markers of religion and moves beyond surveys that simply measure relationships with church, belief in a higher power, and attendance at services in institutional settings. Instead, she develops a picture of the rich variety of lived spirituality that *nones* and *donees* are embracing today as “spiritually eclectic” individuals, finding their way through a season of national religious transition.<sup>66</sup> Rather than presenting “none” as a negative position, Drescher’s study and book provide a clear look at what is there, rather than what is not. Within this developing “liminal” form of spirituality are “many seemingly self-styled practices that have discernible echoes of the practitioners’ religious upbringings.”<sup>67</sup> These markers fall into six clear categories of practices that unfold within the context of everyday life:

Gathering and relationship tending, exploring the perceived wisdom of a variety of spiritual teachers, engaging in formal and informal rituals marking sacred space and time, honoring the role of human bodies as created and expressive sites of the sacred, grounding ethical action in care for others and appreciation of difference, and narrating the spiritual life through a distinctive discourse that highlights fluidity, provisionality, diversity, unpredictability, wonder, and awe.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Drescher's study brings to our attention that *nones* and *donees* are “neither more nor less spiritual or moral” than those with some religious affiliation. Suggesting a temporary state of fluidity; liminal religion is “a spiritual religiosity that moves actively between traditional religion and Enlightenment-style secularism.”<sup>69</sup> She notes, in fact, that often the language used by the non-religious *nones* and *donees* to make “pointedly secular claims,” is undeniably religious. For instance, several non-theistic *nones* in the study saw their “spiritual and ethical engagement with people in need as effecting ‘salvation’ and creating ‘eternity.’”<sup>70</sup> This may come as a small reassurance to some, but for Christians concerned with religious disengagement this is still worrisome.

To those concerned with ministering to a population of religiously unaffiliated, Drescher suggests that “those affiliated with institutionalized religion who are committed to the continued vibrancy of religion and spirituality in America” should explore how *nones* and *donees* “make use of traditional religious resources in their spiritual lives.”<sup>71</sup> One of the characteristics that distinguishes the liminal spirituality of the *nones* and *donees* is the co-opting of spiritual practices from a variety of religions. Therefore, it is not the case that religion has nothing to offer *nones* and *donees*; rather, the element of personal choice is key to their engagement.

This potential point of entry creates opportunities not only for exploration, conversation, and shared stories, but also for shared action, especially when the religiously affiliated pursue connection and conversation instead of conversion. “The vast majority of the unaffiliated

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<sup>69</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 248.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 248-249.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 249.

become *nones* and *done*s out of at least nominally religious, usually Christian, backgrounds and within what remains a culture laden with discourses, symbols, and meanings that shape everyday life far beyond congregational settings.”<sup>72</sup> Though Drescher’s discoveries may put at ease some who are concerned with the growing religious disengagement with the Christian community, her book does very little to explore directly the problems this spiritually plural approach may cause for conservative Christians. However, if both sides of the debate continue to face off, disregarding the perspective of the other like a dog chasing its tail, neither side will arrive anywhere soon.

Rather than viewing the “none-ing” of America as a problem, Drescher, like Cox, McLoughlin, and Tickle, sees it as an opportunity and signifier of a new era. She suggests that instead of facing off against the religiously disengaged that faith communities consider the multitude of possibilities this establishes for “creative, responsive ministries presented by liminal spirituality.”<sup>73</sup> Changes in culture are always reflected in ecclesial expression. For instance, During the seeker friendly 1980s and 1990s there was an approach to church outreach that could be caricatured as “the big show,” as in large, highly produced, glitzy services that were presentational in nature. There was professional music, clever drama sketches, and Disneyesque light displays. The 2000s saw a shift towards a stripped-down, communal, ‘authentic’ approach, inspired by MTV Unplugged, that was often labeled “missional,” meaning moving from “come and see” to “let’s go and be.”<sup>74</sup> Religious disengagement and the ensuing liminal spirituality will certainly impact the way churches present themselves as well.

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<sup>72</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 249.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>74</sup> White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 151-152.

We are already seeing the effect of current cultural change on faith communities as they respond to cultural shifts and religious disengagement by updating their outward facing structures, such as webpages, social media presence, sermon podcasts, and overall “branding.” It is as if churches are creating “new wineskins” to replace the outdated models that no longer work. However, even if the re-packaging of church (in new wineskins) keeps some engaged, church growth is often cannibalization from dying congregations and not growth from new “believers.” Churches experiencing growth are not necessarily engaging *nones* and *done*s. They are likely attracting individuals from dying congregations who want to participate in a community that appears to be vibrant, contemporary and relevant.

## Chapter Four: Nuances of Religious Disengagement

### *Faith Development—Losing Travelers on the Journey*

Many liken spiritual life to a journey. In Frederick Buechner's classic memoir *The Sacred Journey*, he emphasizes this quality and notes that "God speaks to us through our lives," through our wandering journeys.<sup>75</sup> Spiritual life, Christian life, is a process. The ancient ones called themselves "followers of The Way," which connotes process, movement, journeying, and change. Spiritual life is not a static point, which we reach with satisfaction after taking the correct number of steps, or a destination we reach after following the right path. In fact, wrong turns, missteps, and seasons of wandering are characteristics that develop a healthy spiritual life and are in fact the very things that form us, shaping our faith and our sense of God. Yet many Christians and Christian churches put forth the notion that there is no place for wanderers in their midst.

The sojourning nature of spiritual life is an important factor to consider relative to religious disengagement. Elizabeth Drescher discovered that many religiously unaffiliated are mindful of the winding nature of spiritual life. She notes that "along with narratives that emphasized *being* and *becoming* over *believing belonging* and *behaving*, for the majority of those she interviewed, spiritual life is seen as emerging organically from the whole of life in relation to a diversity of others, rather than being structured through categories of propositional beliefs, affiliation patterns and the associated ritual and social actions of defined religious groups."<sup>76</sup> The *nones* and *donees* who she talked with consistently saw themselves as "active creators in the story of their own personal lives. Their narratives were populated with the

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<sup>75</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper 1991), 41.

<sup>76</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 14.

language of ‘discovery,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘escape,’ ‘liberation,’ ‘maturation’ ‘journeying,’ ‘enlightenment,’ ‘self-realization,’ and ‘growth.’”<sup>77</sup> They also saw themselves as predisposed towards “questioning, challenging, exploring, curiosity, experimentation, and seeking.”<sup>78</sup>

The spiritual dimension of human life develops much like the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects: in stages and patterns that are somewhat predictable. Stage theory is a helpful means to conceptualize spiritual development and sheds light on critical points in life where people may become disengaged with organized religion. Jean Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development; Erik Erickson identified eight stages of psychosocial development. James Fowler followed suit creating a six-stage typology for faith development, and Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich take that one step farther by proposing a six-stage continuum of spiritual development that is cumulative, each stage building on the other. Other scholars, such as Richard Rohr, W.W. Meissner, and James Edwin Loder, also recognize the process-oriented quality of spiritual life.

In their book *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, Hagberg and Guelich define spiritual life as “the way in which we live out our response to God.”<sup>79</sup> This has connotations with process and movement, an accurate analogy of the winding nature of spiritual development. They imagine a set of six stages, which individuals move through over the course of a lifetime, often moving back and forth between stages, sometimes getting stuck in one for a time, or stuck in one stage indefinitely. These stages are:

- Stage 1 Recognition of God

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<sup>77</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 54.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI.: Sheffield Pub., 2005), 17.



- Stage 2 Life of Discipleship
- Stage 3 Productive Life
- Stage 4 Journey Inward
- The Wall (a pivotal point of spiritual and psychological transformation)
- Stage 5 Journey Outward
- Stage 6 Life of Love.<sup>80</sup>

Though they conceptualize spiritual development in steps or stages, Hagberg and Guelich make it very clear that this does not suggest an end goal that once achieved places an individual above those in stages that come before. They suggest instead that spiritual life is a level playing field where all individuals are travelers together on the journey.

Yet as emphasized repeatedly in this paper, churches are losing travelers on the journey. Hagberg and Guelich note that they “have met far too many people for whom the mention of spirituality and/or religion brings such painful and sad memories that they cannot consider a journey of faith.”<sup>81</sup> In fact, “the mention of anything remotely religious or related to the Church brings guilt, shame, anger, embarrassment, fear, or overt hostility.”<sup>82</sup> It may surprise churches to hear that they are indeed part of the problem. Hagberg and Guelich found that “when pursued it becomes clear that this separation between one’s self and the Church usually stems from deep unresolved pain or dissatisfaction rooted in early religious upbringing.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## *Church Influence*

A recent interview with Mike McHargue, co-host of The Liturgists podcast, draws attention to how religion itself contributes to the growing number of *nones* and *done*s. Noting the 2016 Pew religious survey, McHargue says of the religiously disengaged, “Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they were raised in a particular religion but lost their faith as adults. The top reason for leaving: no longer believing in the faith they were raised with. One in five people surveyed cited a dislike of organized religion. Others cited the divisive nature of religion and the church’s teachings on homosexuality as reasons they left.”<sup>84</sup>

Further describing the nuanced nature of religious disengagement and the ensuing liminal spirituality, he says, “We realized that a lot of people today find themselves in an odd situation, in that they find the church too dogmatic, too obsessed with the culture war, but [find] skepticism to be too dismissive of the human desire for mystery and connection and are finding a longing for something we would probably call God.”<sup>85</sup> As for the antidote to the growing numbers of *nones* and *done*s, McHargue says that “there’s just so many people that feel similarly caged in by the polarizing factions of the world, and want to be able to ask questions, have conversations, seek truth in a way that doesn’t have to be so tribal, doesn’t have to be so fearful, that’s not threatened.”<sup>86</sup> He notes that the Liturgists podcast fills the void left by the church because “we’re just having the conversation, that’s why we’re there, to have conversations that are open and honest.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Abby Olcese, “Unafraid of Hard Questions” *Sojourners Magazine* 46, no. 3 (2017): 41.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet the open and honest conversations that *nones* and *donees* crave are not happening in most churches, and pivotal points of spiritual development, where questions and doubts naturally arise, are not being met with integrity. Traditionally, programs for children and youth do not engage the deep questions and doubts that lie at the heart of spirituality, but instead promote systems of belief one must fit into or adopt in order to participate in the faith community. As part of its extensive study, Fuller Youth Institute asked 500 youth-group seniors what they wished they had done more of in youth group. “The top answer was ‘time for deep conversations’ followed by mission trips, and service projects . . . last was games.”<sup>88</sup>

Traditionally, the goal of youth group and confirmation class is to initiate youth into the community of adult believers by instructing students in “right belief”; however, these efforts fall short and in fact have the opposite of the intended effect. Instructing students in “right belief” without providing the opportunity to explore doubts and come to understand the process of how to “believe rightly” creates a constrained way of thinking, believing, and living. Students reject “right belief” once they become independent of the belief system and begin to develop values and beliefs of their own. Furthermore, binary belief systems based on ultimate truth, right and wrong, in and out, contend with postmodern ideals. Youth-group and confirmation students instructed in right belief alone miss the opportunity to develop the critical skills necessary to learn how to “believe in the right way.” Many then come to view church as an elementary school of morals, which they outgrew.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 111.

<sup>89</sup> Christian Smith, and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149.

Though the confirmation process is intended as a rite of passage to welcome youth into the community of adult believers, the emphasis on “personal” salvation and “personal” relationship with God, combined with western cultural norms that overvalue individuality, eliminate the necessity for spiritual community and group identity altogether. Emphasis on personal soteriology promotes a therapeutic “self-help” view of God, which is easily threatened by the reality and trials of adult life. Theological narratives that suggest afterlife as the primary impetus for belief fall short when met with critical engagement at future steps of spiritual development.

Some programs for children and youth “inoculate” them against church membership. Recent studies show that 40-50 percent of youth-group seniors leave the church they were raised in after high-school graduation, yet churches dedicate considerable resources to programming for children and youth.<sup>90</sup> These programs are meant to create a welcoming space and provide a sound theological foundation, compelling children into spiritual adulthood. However, programs that separate youth and children from the rest of the faith community create a psychological divide that inhibits post-high-school integration with the larger group.

Many high-school graduates are discouraged by the challenge to find a sense of belonging at the church of their youth, once they return from college. Without the ready-made relational network provided by youth group, young adults find the sense of social isolation and the pressure of navigating church alone far too challenging for the perceived benefits of religious engagement, opting instead to attend a church with a vibrant young-adult community, or more likely leaving religion behind entirely.

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<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Drescher references “Nones on the Rise” (Funk and Smith 2012, 16) and “2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (Cox, Navarro-Rivera and Jones 2014, 29) in *Choosing Our Religion*, 8.

### *Value Clash*

As noted earlier, Millennials and Gen-Xers constitute the majority of *nones* and *ones*, and perennially these cohorts are missing from church pews. This is not surprising, given their characteristics:

- They are skeptical of institutions, particularly the Christian church, and see institutionalized religion as antithetical to their system of beliefs and values;
- Core values of diversity, tolerance, inclusivity, acceptance, and relevance, which are integral to the identity of this cohort, contradict the perceived values of the church;
- The exclusivity of the Christian belief system implies supremacy, contending with pluralistic beliefs;
- They reject belief systems founded on binary principles such as absolute truth, preferring instead to employ moral intuitionism, in which *rightness* or *wrongness* of issues is self-evident.

This, combined with their distaste for the perceived judgment of Christian culture, has caused many to conclude that religion, as a moral guide, is irrelevant and even destructive. Additionally, the needs of this cohort are met outside the faith community, and so church is perceived as pointless. Those young adults who remain engaged with the church, however, cite “community” as the number one reason for doing so.

### *Familial Influence*

Well-intended parents who raise their children “in the church,” expecting them to embrace the same faith as adults, are perplexed by their adult children’s disengagement with religion and rejection of the faith communities they once belonged to. It is important to

understand that for many young adults, the church is equated to the identity and values of parents and, as children become independent of family systems, religious identity loses out to the more salient sense of their own developing personal identity.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, their values are informed by the larger generational cohort, rather than by the family or the church, further encouraging religious disaffiliation.

For many, the Christian faith community is perceived as synonymous with political conservatism, due to evangelical support of the GOP, while most Gen-Xers and Millennials identify with more liberal views, causing them to further distance themselves from Christianity. In a study conducted in early November of 2016, the Barna Group found that “left-leaning people of faith may encounter political discord with their church, prompting an exit.”<sup>92</sup> It is likely that since the 2016 presidential election, this effect has reverberated as the political horizon has become more polarized. In summary, as young adults develop values and identity apart from their parents and the church, including political values, it becomes clear that their own developing set of personal values conflict with those of their parents and therefore the church.<sup>93</sup>

With this growing sense of personal identity, a desire for social change and engagement with the world moves to the forefront, a priority which seems ignored by the church. Contemporary young adults who disengage with the church do so because they believe the church ignores real-world problems and fails to advocate against social and economic inequality. When Christian truths oppose scientific data and the Bible is used to justify social injustice, such

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<sup>91</sup> Randall Reed, “A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 2 (2016): 154-74.

<sup>92</sup> George Barna, *Meet Those Who “Love Jesus but Not the Church,”* March 30, 2017. <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/> (accessed November 2, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Randall Reed, “A Book for None?” 154-74.

as the exclusion of the LGBTQ community, young adults further dissociate from Christianity. In fact, one-third leave the church because of the church's negative position on homosexuality.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, many find that institutional views regarding gender roles, even in churches proposing to be egalitarian, limit leadership opportunities for women, conflicting with the ethos of contemporary society where women strive for equal treatment, recognition, and opportunities. Conservative churches, which have historically maintained a complementarian stance, are beginning to see the logic in readdressing their stance on female leadership. For example, since I began my research, Imago Dei church in Portland Oregon, who previously held an overtly complementarian stance, now has two "associate pastors" that are women; they have pulled their position paper arguing against women in church leadership from the church website, and have combined their list of deacons and elders on one page, giving the illusion that more women are included in church leadership (Imago Dei has women deacons, but not women elders).

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<sup>94</sup> Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P Jones, "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues," *Public Religion Research Institute*, February 26, 2014. <https://www.prri.org/research/2014-lgbt-survey/> (accessed November 28, 2017).

## Chapter Five: Threat or Invitation? Responding to Liminal Spirituality

Elizabeth Drescher rightly concludes that it is necessary for “both religious and non-religious people and institutions to act out of a deeper understanding of the intersecting lived religious and spiritual realities today.”<sup>95</sup> In the course of my research, I have observed faith communities engaging *nones* and *dones* well to see if they share any similarities. Among this group, I have identified a list of five best practices that these faith communities share. I have paired these with the discoveries outlined previously in this paper, to put forth a composite in this chapter of practical steps for faith communities wishing to engage the religiously disengaged. In chapter 6 these best practices are further illustrated, with specific examples from faith communities around the country.

### *Meet People Where They Are*

The local church, rather than anticipating that *nones* and *dones* will meet the church where it stands, must instead try to meet the religiously disengaged where they are—literally and figuratively. Most people are not looking for a church and have no desire to walk through the front doors of a traditional sanctuary. They are however, spending Sunday morning at farmers markets, at brunch with friends, at sporting events—professional or familial—or at home engaging with social media and new media. Events that *nones*, *dones*, and *somes* alike seek out include live music performances, sporting events, networking events related to their career, beer, food, and wine tastings, and events with a high level of hospitality, inclusion, and relevance to their personal and communal interests. Energy and resources focus on belonging, rather than on

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<sup>95</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 15.



behaving or believing.<sup>96</sup> Opportunities for connection and community beyond the traditional Sunday service are facilitated with the support of a designated staff member, volunteer, or volunteer team.

Additionally, these congregations engage difficult topics such as gender and sexuality during Sunday services and by way of dedicated workshops or forums where dialogue is encouraged.<sup>97</sup> A posture that casts the church as an institution that has all the answers will turn away those at stages in spiritual development marked with doubt and questioning. Honoring the dynamic process of spiritual formation in those disengaged with the Church and adopting a posture that communicates that we are all on this journey together creates a welcoming environment that nurtures inquiry and collaboration.

#### *Reflect Values Important to Nones & Dones*

Besides reaching outside church walls to meet people where they are literally, it is important to meet them where they are figuratively as well. Churches that are engaging *nones* and *dones* are doing this by taking a posture that emphasizes the faith community as a companion on a faith quest instead of an institution defending theological turf.<sup>98</sup> For instance, they approach the Bible in a way that encourages critical analysis rather than blind faith/belief. As noted above, the value and belief systems of *nones* and *dones* contrast with the perceived values and beliefs of the church, further widening the divide between the religiously disengaged and the religiously engaged. Yet a closer look indicates that the values and beliefs of *nones* and

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<sup>96</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* 1st ed. (New York: Harper One, 2012), 199.

<sup>97</sup> White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 165-178.

<sup>98</sup> Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 93. The authors emphasize the importance of questioning faith, God, and the church as a part of healthy spiritual formation in young adulthood.

*done*s are actually compatible with the original tenets of the Christian faith, such as inclusivity, tolerance, social and economic justice, and a worldview that embraces paradox. Churches that engage well with *none*s and *done*s embody these values by being radically inclusive, demonstrating diversity in their leadership teams and therefore congregations, and are visibly active in meaningful social engagement with issues important to the religiously disengaged.<sup>99</sup>

#### *Prioritize Leadership Development (The Young-Adult Factor)*

Prioritizing leadership development amongst younger generations is an excellent way to engage young adults, ensure future leadership, and attract more young adults. A look at the age demographics that comprise *none*s and *done*s indicates that the majority falls into the Millennial and Gen-X cohorts. This is concerning for faith communities who see their future in the next (currently absent) generation. Despite the current trend of religious disengagement among young adults, some faith communities are finding success connecting with this population. Faith communities that are connecting well with younger generations listen and adapt to the young adults in their context. They intentionally make space for young adults and promote young-adult leadership development by including them in every aspect of congregational life: on elder boards, on committees, and in important decision-making processes.

Faith communities that already have a high representation of young adults are more likely to attract more young adults. Congregations without a young-adult population can successfully create a core community of young adults by adopting leadership-formation models, such as

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<sup>99</sup> Brian D McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: Convergent, 2016). These issues are also important to the religiously engaged.

ministry internships, into their organizational structure. This makes for a ready-made core which more young adults are motivated to join.<sup>100</sup>

### *Diversify Leadership*

Since diversity is a value held by the *nones* and *donees*, it follows that the faith communities engaging them well reflect a commitment to leadership that is diverse in age, race, and gender. Generally, the makeup of an organization's leadership mirrors the makeup of that organization. The leadership structure of a church, what faces are seen at the top and bottom of the staff page, and the titles given to women, sends a message about the theology of a church, their priorities, and who fills the pews on Sunday. Churches in America are slowly becoming more racially diverse and as this occurs, church leadership must rise to reflect this diversity.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, as racial reconciliation and racial diversity become more of a priority, churches will need to adapt by creating diverse leadership structures.

Gender diversity in leadership is another factor. If all of the pastors are listed at the top of the page and they are male, and the female staff are listed below as "associates," "administrative staff," or "directors," then it is likely that the church holds a complementarian stance on gender roles. Complementarian views on gender roles generally indicate that women have less of a voice in the church and that there is an underlying bedrock of conservative theology that contrasts with beliefs and values of *nones* and *donees*. As the majority of *donees* are women, this is

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<sup>100</sup> The Possibility Project in Palo Alto is an excellent example of this; see chapter 6 for more information about this vibrant faith community.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Lipka, *Many U.S. Congregations are Still Racially Segregated but Things are Changing*. Pew Research Center. December 8, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/08/many-u-s-congregations-are-still-racially-segregated-but-things-are-changing-2/> (accessed August 1, 2018).

a significant factor and many women looking for a church to attend will not consider one that does not affirm women leaders.<sup>102</sup>

### *Embody a Spirit of Creativity and Innovation*

Seasons of renewal call for creativity and innovation, characteristics akin to the Spirit of God, which as we will see in the concluding chapter is a driving force behind the shifting religious horizon. According to systems theory, stuck systems, those which are static and remain unchanged over time, lack creativity.<sup>103</sup> Faith communities concerned with diminishing church attendance must understand that nothing changes unless something changes. Efforts to “conserve” an imagined original or “true” form of Christianity are counterproductive to the very nature of the church which has evolved and taken on new forms since its inception. Embodying a spirit of creativity and innovation that welcomes risks, change, and difference is imperative for faith communities wishing to engage *nones* and *dones*.

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<sup>102</sup> George Barna, *Meet Those Who “Love Jesus but Not the Church”* March 30, 2017. <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/> (accessed November 2, 2017). Barna found that 61% of *dones*—those who once attended church but no longer do—are women.

<sup>103</sup> See Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York: Guilford Press, 2011).

## Chapter Six: Best Practices

The most innovative faith communities embody the best practices outlined in the previous chapter. They meet people where they are, prioritize leadership development, employ diverse leadership teams, reflect values important to those disengaged with the church, and embody a spirit of creativity and innovation. We now turn our attention to several notable examples of faith communities around the country who are doing this well, in order to take a closer look at how they are embodying these best practices. These faith communities range in size, denominational affiliation, setting, and geographic location, each of which is noted in the description below. They represent merely the tip of the iceberg of faith communities all around the country who are being shaped by liminal spirituality. Faith communities in every region are rising to the call to meet people where they are, prioritize diverse leadership, reflect Christian values that also resonate with the religiously disengaged, and naturally embody the spirit of creativity and innovation akin to the spirit of God as something new is ushered in with this movement away from traditional religious institutions.

### *How to Meet People Where They Are*

In Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, a small, urban, non-denominational group, aptly called **Convergence Community**, is meeting people where they are by embracing a version of church that addresses the philosophical and theological realities of *nones* and *done*s. They embrace the role of mystery in the act of faith, the role of doubt in spiritual growth and development, and cautiously reframe the idea of church itself for a population that struggles with institutionalized religion and belief-based community. Their website emphasizes this deconstructed view, stating that “Church is not a building. Church is not a day or time. Church isn’t even a belief statement.”

**Collective Church** in DeLand, Florida, meets people where they are in both literal and figurative ways. This medium-sized, suburban, United Methodist faith community hosts a Sunday Soul Brunch at a local music venue which is also a bar and restaurant. This creative endeavor is not overtly religious but meets people where they already are on Sunday mornings—enjoying brunch and time with friends. It utilizes the medium of soul music, which naturally contains Christian spiritual themes, as a means of communicating religious themes in a seemingly non-religious and therefore not-threatening way. Like Convergence Community, Collective Church embraces questions and doubts, making room for them in the community-dialogue portion of their weekly gathering, which meets on Sunday evenings. This gathering is live-streamed across the web, and members of the online community interact during the dialogue by submitting questions and comments via an online forum.

#### *How to Prioritize Leadership Development*

In Palo Alto, California, the tech center of the Silicon Valley, a Nazarene faith community, the **Possibility Project**, is demonstrating success in prioritizing leadership development, which has also succeeded in bumping up the number of young adults engaging with the aging church that hosts this young and innovative faith community. The Possibility Project is a two-year residency for post-college young adults who live together, learn together, and are mentored as they follow through with start-up-like “missions” which are funded with seed money from the Possibility Project.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Collective Church hosts yearly pastoral residencies for seminary graduates. Given the small nature of the Collective Church staff, this

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<sup>104</sup> Funding for the Possibility Project was raised by the initial sale of real estate owned by a shrinking Nazarene congregation, which eventually closed its doors. The high property value in the area created a formidable fund which will sustain the Possibility Project for many years.

provides them with additional support and fresh perspectives, while providing valuable ministry experience and formation for rising leaders.

### *How to Diversify Leadership*

**City Church**, a Reformed Church of America congregation in the urban Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco, California, employs a staff as diverse as the surrounding population. The staff expresses diversity in age, gender, and race. This church is unique to many highlighted here, as it has a board of elders and deacons, all of whom show similar commitment to a diverse leadership portfolio. Similarly, **Awakening Church** located an hour south of City Church in San Jose, California, has a staff that is diverse in gender and race. It should also be noted that Awakening's excellent leadership-development initiative for young adults, *Protégé*, is also diverse in gender and race. As an *outgrowth* of a conservative church with Baptist roots, Awakening did not originally give the title of "pastor" to women. However, this has changed in the past few years and their pastoral staff is now more balanced, with two female pastors and two male pastors.

### *How to Reflect Values Important to Nones and Dones*

The experiential and experimental **Wild Goose Festival** is the only faith-based music and arts festival in the United States. Held yearly in Hot Springs, North Carolina, this ecumenical event oozes innovation and has been growing in popularity since its inception, rapidly becoming a yearly touch point for attendees from around the country. Touting values of spirit, justice, music, and art, the Goose, as it is often called, reflects values that are important to *nones* and *dones*. Marketed as an "art, music, and story-driven transformational experience grounded in faith-inspired social justice," this yearly gathering embodies an intrinsic value for creativity,

inclusion, connection, justice, hospitality, and authenticity.<sup>105</sup> City Church described above, reflects the following values which are important to *nones* and *donees*: diversity, inclusivity, community engagement, authenticity, and LGBTQ affirming.

### *How to Embody a Spirit of Creativity and Innovation*

Perhaps the most important characteristic that all these faith communities share is a spirit of creativity and innovation. This characteristic gives them the flexibility to internalize the other best practices listed above and to allow the creative spirit of God to find expression in new ways through their communal creativity. At **Westwinds Community Church**, in Jackson, Michigan, creativity is the *modus operandi*. The “vision” statement on their website identifies their commitment to creativity and innovation: “To bring Christ to the spiritually curious, those disenfranchised with organized religion, the thinkers, and the creatives.”<sup>106</sup> They express an experiential interactive worship style that is noted nationally. Creative endeavors are not relegated to paid staff alone. The congregation leads creative and innovative initiatives that the staff supports, such as a recently published book and an album of scripture-based, spoken-word pieces.

**The Liturgists**, who I have referred to before in this paper, are another shining example of creativity and innovation. With roots as a humble podcast, The Liturgists have developed a considerable global following. They aim to “produce clarity and insight by looking at essential topics through the lenses of art, faith, and science—which has helped millions start the journey to growth and recovery following spiritual estrangement.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> <http://wildgoosefestival.org/>

<sup>106</sup> <http://westwinds.org/>

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.theliturgists.com/>



## *Where to Begin*

Faith communities interested in engaging with the religiously disengaged often are uncertain of where to start. Here is a list of helpful suggestions, based on the best practices of faith communities who are engaging *nones* and *donees* well.

### What to start:

- Begin a leadership-development initiative that will infuse your faith community with young lives and new ideas, and create a legacy of young entrepreneurial ministry leaders, while attracting other young adults to your community and fulfilling the need for post-college professional development and mentoring among this demographic.
- Meet people where they are literally by hosting tailor-made events that address the needs and concerns of *nones*, *donees*, and *somes* in your context. Connections with the religiously disengaged will need to happen in places people already want to be, like a local brewery, wine bar, farmer's market, or community garden.
- Establish creative partnerships with faith communities who are having success connecting with *nones* and *donees*. Critical mass builds momentum, and faith communities can pool resources to host quarterly events such as a) a theology brunch b) one-day, outside-the-box retreat, by invitation only at a unique location.
- Focus marketing and communication initiatives on those who are not already engaged with your faith community.

### What to stop:

- Reinforcing perceptions that keep *nones* and *donees* from engaging your faith community. Avoid all messages and behaviors that might feed the stereotype that Christians are judgmental, hypocritical, and insensitive to others; for example, that if

someone consumes alcohol and marijuana or has same-sex attraction, they are not welcome in your faith community.

- Rather than being anti-homosexual, grow into messages that show love and acceptance for everyone.
- Stop giving the impression that one has to be a Republican to be welcome in your faith community, or that one's politics are more important than one's faith.

## Chapter Seven: Age of the Spirit

If indeed we are in the throes of the “Age of the Spirit,” as Harvey Cox suggests, then the role of the Holy Spirit relative to religious disengagement/liminal spirituality, and the ensuing creative and innovative response by faith communities around the country, must be considered. As the center of Christianity shifts from North America and Europe to the Global South, a more “Spirit-filled” expression of the faith is apparent. Pentecostals and charismatics contribute significantly to the growth of Christianity around the world, “comprising 5 percent of Christians in 1970; today one of four Christians is Pentecostal or Charismatic. Or think of it this way: one out of 12 people alive today has a Pentecostal form of Christian faith.”<sup>108</sup> With this in mind, let us consider the Holy Spirit as the creative force, pulling a new form of faith into existence through the shifting religious horizon.

Theopoet L. Callid Keefe-Perry notes the importance of creativity for vibrant faith and for the flourishing of religion and religious expression. He points out that in the book, *Creative Fidelity*, Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel “links creativity intrinsically to fidelity.”<sup>109</sup> He goes on to explain, “The best way to be faithful to a religious tradition is to be creative—continually renewing and revitalizing one’s commitments rather than relying on fixed or stale bonds.”<sup>110</sup> A dearth of creativity, then, can lead to religious stagnation, because “non-creative religious traditions lead to fundamentalism, irrationalism, and dogmatism—upon which the

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<sup>108</sup> Wes Granberg-Michaelson, *Think Christianity is Dying? No, Christianity is Shifting Dramatically*. May 20, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.36d5772da6cc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.36d5772da6cc) (accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>109</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014). ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/georgefox/detail.action?docID=4534614>, xvii.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., xvii.

sources of war and conflict feed.”<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, “healthy religious traditions are attributable to the richness of creativity. Creative religious traditions lead to peace, healing, newfound wisdom-they draw on the sources of love and beauty.”<sup>112</sup> The lack of creativity in traditional Christian institutions can undoubtedly account for the widespread religious disengagement so prevalent today, and increased creativity is an antidote.

### *Emergence*

The term, “emergent” or “emerging,” was tied, perhaps prematurely, to early indicators of what was seen as a new movement within the Christian church, gaining momentum in the U.S. in the early 2000s, though it did not come to full fruition as some had expected, and has lost popularity of late. Even so, the term “emergent” is apropos for these indicators, given the scientific application of the concept, and is in some ways still a fitting definition for the process of religious change that is still unfolding.

Emergence is a complex paradigm for understanding science, consciousness, and religion. It is more of a philosophical or metaphysical hypothesis than a theological doctrine or scientific datum.<sup>113</sup> Among other things, emergence has been used by physicists to explain convection cells, by psychologists to explain consciousness, by economists and investment advisors to explain stock-market behavior, and by organizational theorists to explain informal “networks” in large companies.<sup>114</sup> Emergence is a way of understanding and conceptualizing the

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<sup>111</sup> Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, xvii.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>114</sup> Peter Corning, “The Re-emergence of Emergence, and the Causal Role of Synergy in Emergent Evolution.” *Synthese* 185, no. 2 (2012): 295-317.

world and, as we will see, has theological implications when viewed in light of pneumatological posits of the Holy Spirit as a creative force.

### *Holy Spirit as Creative Force*

The creative force identified with God in the Jewish scriptures as *ruach* and in the Christian scriptures as *pneuma* is revealed in the Bible as a universal motivating force pulling creation into greater and greater levels of complexity and orienting us towards the future. In the Jewish scripture, God's Spirit or *ruach* is the life force of created things. In the New Testament, God's Spirit or *pneuma* is the life force of resurrection which, starting from Easter, makes everything eternally alive.

Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg imagined the Holy Spirit as a "field of force." The biblical idea of the Spirit as life-principle comes to the fore in Pannenberg's pneumatology against the background understanding that "life is essentially ecstatic" and the Holy Spirit is the environmental network or "field" in which and from which creatures are nurtured and live.<sup>115</sup> By virtue of the fact that they are alive, creatures participate in God through the Spirit and the Spirit is the 'force' that lifts creatures above their environments and orients them toward the future.<sup>116</sup> The Spirit of God, then, is the source of transforming energy among all creatures: initiating novelty and newness, instigating change, transforming what is dead into new stretches of life.

As mover and encourager of what tends toward stasis, the Holy Spirit animates human creativity and joy in the struggle. If we wonder precisely which moment or events mediate God's Spirit, the answer can only be that potentially *all* experience. God's *ruach* or *pneuma* is the life

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<sup>115</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ted Peters, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*. 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1993), 131.

<sup>116</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002, 118.

force immanent in all the living: in body, ecology, politics, personal and impersonal experience. If the Holy Spirit is God's creative force at work in the universe, and the activity of emergence is a byproduct of complexity and creativity, then liminal spirituality and religious change, which are characterized by complexity and creativity, are naturally part of God's creative process. Viewed this way, the current global Age of the Spirit, along with the rising numbers of "religiously unaffiliated" and the ensuing "liminal spirituality," is not a season of death but of rebirth.

We are staring down the barrel of something familiar and novel at the same time, not a religious comeback. The Spirit of God is creative, and so naturally the Age of the Spirit is one of generative creativity and innovation. If the Holy Spirit is the "force" that lifts creatures out of their environment and orients them toward the future, creation itself lives in the complexity of ever-richer communal relationships. Jürgen Moltmann notes in *The Spirit of Life* that "parts come together to produce new communities—that is, new complex unities with new communication structures and their organizational principles. As the unities become more complex, the capacity for communication grows, and with the capacity for communication, the capacity for transformation increases too."<sup>117</sup> Traditional Christianity in the United States is coming apart, and as religious disengagement and the ensuing liminal spirituality of *nones* and *donees* continue to impact the religious horizon, the creative Spirit of God will undoubtedly create a renewed expression of faith that will usher in a new era of Christianity.

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<sup>117</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*. 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 225-226.

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