

# Where We Belong: Mapping American Religious Innovation



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# Executive Summary

Across America, new spiritual communities are rising.

Drawing on ancient traditions, religious innovators are defining new ways for people to come together. Largely led by Millennials, but attracting people across geography, age, and religious affiliation, these communities mirror much of progressive church culture. They are:

1. Open
2. Experiential
3. Participatory
4. Respectfully Missional
5. Authentic
6. Counter-Cultural
7. Serving Others

While these seven themes might just as easily describe mainstream religious communities, this report and the attached list of organizations show innovators across traditions with striking unity of vision. Innovative Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Secular, Buddhist, and Spiritual-But-Not-Religious communities are embracing a similar ethos despite diversity of creed. Noteworthy is not only their thematic unity but also their emerging discoveries about where and how to gather. These communities fall into ten general types:

1. Dinner Churches
2. Service Organizations
3. Learning Journeys
4. Online Communities
5. Resources
6. Co-Living/Working Spaces
7. Small Groups
8. Church With A Twist
9. Combining Tradition and Innovation
10. Social Networks

Sociologists, theologians, and denominational leaders each respond to these changing trends with a mixture of anticipation and concern. Many church leaders, particularly, are caught in the mindset of improving what exists, rather than following the lead of innovators at the edges and supporting entirely new creations.

This report is an invitation to support a growing global movement of spiritual communities that are leading us into a new paradigm of belonging.

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# Introduction

The Fetzer Institute's vision to build spiritual foundations for a loving world is as bold as it is necessary.

This report examines some of the numerous communities that make up constituent parts of the emerging global movement toward a spiritual transformation that Fetzer has identified. These new forms of spiritual community crisscross age, geography and faith tradition, leaving many of our former labels and frameworks for religion behind. Indeed, this report argues, we are entering a new paradigm of spiritual community, and its blossoms are budding forth.

This report tells the story of why these buds of a new religious landscape are emerging across America, and how the Fetzer Institute might be able to support their flourishing.

It opens by mapping the fundamentally changed context of American religion as one that is marked by rapidly growing numbers of the non-affiliated. It argues that this generational shift is fundamentally challenging traditional forms of religious community and theology, and that we are entering a new form of belonging and believing.

Following this review of academic literature, the report explores the stories of five denominations attempting to support their ministers as they work in an altered context. Next, it turns to the stories of ten innovative communities and identifies the common structures of community and the thematic unity in their language, practices, and theology. Finally, the report suggests a way forward for Fetzer to support this emerging ecosystem, where many of the initiatives are struggling to find what they need within their faith tradition, and where there exist enormous opportunities for learning and collaboration.

The report is titled 'Where We Belong' because it is a story of hope and opportunity. The future of these particular communities is uncertain, but we believe that with Fetzer's support – material and immaterial – they will play an important role in building the loving world where we belong.

May these stories illuminate, inspire, and embolden us to support the new communities that are leading the way toward a transformed world.

Casper & Angie

# Literature Review

Fetzer's hope to support the emergence of new forms of inclusive spiritual communities that affirm spiritual freedom and effectively support life-affirming spiritual transformation,<sup>1</sup> comes at a time of significant change in the American religious landscape. If new communities and the visions they affirm are sailboats able to respond to the winds of change, their faith and denominational institutions are like ocean liners: powerful, but slow to adapt to a new course. How is the seascape changing? To what are these innovators adapting?

## The Rise of the Nones

The central fact to which all our innovators are, in some way, responding, is the rapid growth of unaffiliated Americans. Fifty-five million people now identify with no religious tradition at all, which equates to 23% of the population. The percentage climbs up above a third for those aged 18-35.<sup>2</sup> Even amongst those who remain identified with a particular tradition, the rates of orthodox belief are declining, and participation in communal ritual is down.

Mark Chaves identifies nuances and complexities in his book *American Religion*, but ends with an essential summary of the trend that states simply: "there is much continuity, and there is some decline, but no traditional religious belief or practice has increased in recent decades." Indeed, "the evidence for a decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible...[It] comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent picture."<sup>3</sup>

Though this presents serious challenges to denominations intent on maintaining traditional forms of worship and structure – particularly mainline Protestants and Catholics, though Evangelical numbers are starting to dip too – there is a nuanced reality beneath the headlines. The unaffiliated are not unreligious. Two-thirds believe in God, though the nature of this God is inconsistent and fewer than half say they are absolutely sure of God's existence. One in five prays daily and one in three says that religion is at least somewhat important in her or his life. As sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell explain, the unaffiliated are rejecting "conventional

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<sup>1</sup> Robert F. Lehman and Robert A. Boisture, "Letter to Fetzer Institute Friends," May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum, *Nones on the Rise*, October 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Chaves, "The Decline of American Religion?" *ARDA Guiding Paper Series*, 2011, accessed December 15, 2013, [www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers/Chaves.pdf](http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers/Chaves.pdf), 14.

religious affiliation, while not entirely giving up their religious feelings.”<sup>4</sup> This looks less like a process of secularization, therefore, and more like a paradigmatic shift in religious identity and practice.

Indeed, Putnam and Campbell identify the sudden increase in Nones as unlikely to represent secularization in the ordinary sense, which usually takes decades. Much more likely is a generational cultural shift. Cary Funk and Greg Smith, the authors of the “Nones On The Rise” 2012 Pew study, agree. The change “is largely driven by generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones. A third of adults under 30 have no religious affiliation (32%), compared with just one-in-ten who are 65 and older (9%). And young adults today are much more likely to be unaffiliated than previous generations were at a similar stage in their lives.”<sup>5</sup> In a qualitative study of a 100 young adults in Los Angeles, Seattle, St Louis, Chicago and New York City, Richard Flory and Donald Miller found that these young people, although outside mainstream religion, are not “the spiritual consumers of their parents’ generation, rather they are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and is meaningless without the other.”<sup>6</sup> We must, then, dismiss the idea that when this generation marries and has children, they will either be uniform atheists or simply return to a denominational fold. Crucially, many have no denomination to which to return.

Further, Flory and Miller’s study suggests that when young adults say that they are not looking for a faith community, as the Pew polling suggests, Millennials are likely to mean that they are not interested in belonging to existing institutions with a defined religious creed as a threshold. However, they are decidedly looking for spirituality and community in combination, and feel they can’t lead a meaningful life without it.

### **The Nones And The Spiritual-But-Not-Religious**

Many adults, of all ages, outside and inside religious traditions, continue to describe themselves with the now-ubiquitous label, “spiritual-but-not-religious.” However, in reality, that label is often false, as the greater distance people have from participation in a religious community, the less frequently any type of spiritual or religious activity takes place. Nancy T. Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University, conducted an extensive ethnographic study, asking participants to

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Putnam and David A. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 126.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Forum, *Nones on the Rise*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, “The Embodied Spirituality of the Post-Boomer Generations” in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 217.

document, through words and images, the spiritual substance of their everyday lives. Through journals, photographs, and interviews over time, Ammerman collected data that revealed the following: “When we look at practices instead of rhetoric, in the vast majority of our participants, religious participation and spiritual engagement occur alongside talk that intermingles the two. Similarly, a combination of religious disengagement and spiritual disinterest was the most common characteristic of the participants who insisted on making the invidious distinction.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, in the entire study, only one of the 95 participants had an active spiritual life in practice and conversation outside of a denominational community.

Sociologists David Voas and Steve Bruce would recognize this pattern, finding that not only are people “unwilling to be told what to believe, when to go to church, or how they should be labeled, but they are also less willing than ever to commit themselves to any kind of religion or spirituality, even a spirituality of the self.”<sup>8</sup> The data that we find in the Pew study and other box-ticking surveys is then brought into doubt. “Spirituality is a label for a ragbag of beliefs and practices that have slightly exotic origins, participation in which is becoming less rather than more like religious activity.”<sup>9</sup> Classic examples of this include going to yoga classes or having a reiki massage, which are cloaked in spiritual language but are much less traditionally religious than a church service. Ammerman’s key finding is that believing and belonging go hand in hand. The Nones only experience sustained spirituality when in community.

This struggle for spiritual belief and practice extends further into the very language that Nones use. “The more often they attend services and other activities, the more stories they told about individual practices beyond the religious community,” explains Ammerman.<sup>10</sup> A typical participant explained that her spirituality is real and important “but she does not have a shared language that allows her to communicate easily what it is about.”<sup>11</sup> The label of spiritual-but-not-religious is then perhaps used as an indicator of the desire for a spiritual life that is not ruled by dogma, but that does not yet actively exist.

Ammerman sees a relationship between the ability to articulate an inner life, and the very worldview that religion has traditionally offered. “When people do not have

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 50.

<sup>8</sup> David Voas, and Steve Bruce, “The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred” in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter C., Kieran & Jupp, Peter C. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

regular sites of interaction where spiritual discourse is a primary lingua franca, they are simply less likely to adopt elements of spirituality in their accounts of who they are and what they do with themselves. If they do not learn the language, it does not shape their way of being in the world. They can neither speak of – nor perhaps even see – a layer of spiritual reality alongside the mundane everyday world.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, among those who were not regular religious participants, Ammerman identified other thought-worlds that claimed their moral narratives – notably the idea of America, with strong, hardworking heroes, and the environment as a place of sanctuary and transcendence. Phyllis Tickle agrees: “Beliefs and principles that once were moral concerns with spiritual resonances have wriggled free of religion and asserted their sacred necessity as parts of life. They have...usurped the tying-together utility of religion without taking on...all its organizational encumbrances and impediments. The most obvious example of this shift is the ecology movement.”<sup>13</sup> The Pew study concurs – six-in-ten of the religiously unaffiliated say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth.<sup>14</sup> The environment and America as a civic religion allow Nones to connect to something greater than themselves, and to make meaning in the chaos of everyday life.

That desire for connection is deeply problematic for Nones. On the one hand, they desire spiritual autonomy, the liberty to explore practices, and on the other, there is a deep longing for communion, with other people and their place in the cosmos. Thomas Luckmann understands this to be the product of our age, as much as any distinct personal rejection of religious belief and practice. “The individuation of consciousness and conscience occurs for historical individuals in the internalization of an already constructed world view rather than in the original creation of world views.”<sup>15</sup> We are literally born into an individualist culture so that a communal approach to life feels foreign. Ammerman’s study is littered with examples of this. For the non-affiliated, “the answer to how to live is found inside the self, not in external authority. For this population, where moral codes are fundamentally individual, the highest value of all is to be tolerant and nonjudgmental, to honor the sacred worth of the individual person.”<sup>16</sup> Further, the Nones are more likely to talk about individual rights as their moral guide, rather than focusing on externally directed ethical principles such as the Golden Rule, which was prominent among the religious participants.<sup>17</sup> This pattern is echoed in the few practices that religious and

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<sup>12</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 301.

<sup>13</sup> Phyllis A. Tickle, *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), 122-123.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Forum, *Nones on the Rise*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 249.



unaffiliated participants shared, such as reading sacred or spiritual books. “Unlike people who are a regular part of a religious community and read scripture and other sources together, the vast majority of the spiritual reading reported by these people is done alone.”<sup>18</sup> Ammerman is quick to point to the social networks through which these books spread, and a glance at the *New York Times* Bestseller list since the 1990’s will demonstrate that the spiritual and religious book market has skyrocketed. Yet, many signs indicate the defining experience of a spiritual life remains for the spiritual-but-not-religious, an individual and, likely, lonely one.

A counter-narrative comes from Courtney Bender, who went looking for spiritual-but-not-religious people in Cambridge, Mass.. She found them not on solitary nature walks but in all sorts of groups, which complicates the stereotype of them as anti-institutional loners. She describes her findings in *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*, writing that they “participated in everything from mystical discussion groups to drumming circles to yoga classes.” And her finding that spirituality “is not sui generis,” but rather learned in communities that persist over time, actually runs contrary to spiritual people’s conceptions of themselves. Here she corroborates Ammerman’s finding: “There is something in the theology of spiritual groups that actually refocuses their practitioners from thinking about how they fit into a long continuous spirituality.” Like Ammerman, Bender finds that people who call themselves spiritual are embedded in communal practices, although she expands the scope to consider communities that go beyond churches or religious denominations. “One that is very important is the arts,” she adds. “People involved in everything from painting and dance” end up discussing their conception of the divine.<sup>19</sup>

## Diversity

Disaffiliation is not the only significant trend. Peter Berger identifies another reason why denominations are struggling to stay in line with the generational shift in religious imagination. “The fundamental problem of the religious institutions is how to keep going in a milieu that no longer takes for granted their definitions of reality.”<sup>20</sup> No longer is one truth, one set of rituals and one language accepted as authoritative. Indeed, a growing number of Americans now self-identify with a multi-religious identity, largely because of the growing number of children raised with two parents

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<sup>18</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 225.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, “Examining the Growth of the ‘Spiritual but not Religious,’” *New York Times*, July 18, 2014, accessed September 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?_r=0).

<sup>20</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 156.

from different faith backgrounds.<sup>21</sup> Further, Mark Chaves also points to the “recent waves of immigration [that] contribute to religious diversity and to increased acceptance of that diversity.”<sup>22</sup> The result of this experience of diversity is that people are changing their spiritual practices. More than a third of Americans mix their spiritual practices from different faiths, including for example, how they pray.<sup>23</sup> No longer do they limit themselves to formal liturgy, but they borrow prayers from different traditions and pray in unexpected places – like the car or a yoga class.<sup>24</sup> The individualist pattern we find amongst Nones is also, then, to some extent present for those within faith community life.

### **Five Stages of Religious Change**

This is not the first major shift in the American religious landscape. Studying previous sea changes, historian William McLoughlin has adapted Anthony F. C. Wallace’s map for cultural change to a religious context and proposes this map to be used in today’s currents of change.

1. A crisis of legitimacy means that individuals cannot sustain the common set of religious understandings by which they believe they should act. The questioning of conventional doctrines and practices, leads to an uncertainty in one’s sense of identity.
2. Cultural distortion leads to individuals concluding that their problems are not due to personal failure, but institutional malfunction. They start seeking to change structures or reject them.
3. A new vision emerges. New understandings of human nature, God, spiritual practices and ethical commitments are articulated.
4. Small communities start to form to experiment and innovate with religious, political, economic and family structures in search for a new way of life. New practices give meaning and make the world different. Others are recruited to join the new path.
5. The process of institutional transformation. The movement of the religious middle ground towards the new, which makes transformation possible.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Pew Forum, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, October 2013,

<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Pew Forum, *Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths*, December 2009,

<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>.

<sup>24</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a new Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 56

<sup>25</sup> William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12ff.

Different individuals will fall in varying locations on this map, but it is clear that a significant number of Americans today are grouped around stages 3-4, with a host of new small communities experimenting with structure and practices (as we shall demonstrate herein) and a growing vision for human nature and God that no longer can be housed easily within traditional denominational structures and houses of worship. Further, what this map promises is that investing in innovators is the most successful strategy for ensuring institutional transformation. For Fetzer, supporting these new communities enables not only their direct impact on the world, but supports the future transformation of significant cultural and religious institutions.

## **A Theology for a Changing Landscape**

Against this backdrop of change, the academy has dedicated significant energy to understanding the present and predicting the future state of faith. The literature of well-loved liberal theologians would tell us this is a good moment for a radical opening of the heart. They call ours an Age of the Spirit, and sociologists point to everyday spirituality that belies the once-common narratives of secularization. While the Emerging Church movement may have crested, it was a well-documented example of emerging spiritual community in relationship to organized religion, and therefore provides helpful insight into the current dynamics between innovators and the traditions that may or may not support their endeavors. Lastly, recent studies provide helpful context for studying those projects that are too young to have been explored by the academy. In particular, the British Royal Society of Arts 2014 report, *Spiritualise: Revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges*, stands out for its thorough investigation of spirituality in practice, and for pointing toward the validity and necessity of building a spiritual foundation. Boston University's Studying Congregations<sup>26</sup> team further offers a framework through which we can better understand nontraditional communities.

Christian thinkers like Tickle, the grand dame of the Emerging Church movement, alongside Harvey Cox and Diana Butler Bass, cast ours as an age marked by the rejection of belief-based religion and the move toward an experiential faith. Cox proposes that church history can be divided into three ages: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of the Spirit. During the first period, from around the time of Jesus to 400 CE, Christianity was a way of life based upon faith in Jesus. The second period began when this dynamic sense of living in Jesus was displaced by an increasing emphasis on creeds and beliefs, until faith *in* Jesus was replaced with tenets *about* him. Cox argues that the Age of Belief lasted some fifteen centuries,

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<sup>26</sup> *Studying Congregations*, accessed September 2015, [www.studyingcongregations.org](http://www.studyingcongregations.org).

began to give way around 1900, and has now spiraled into the Age of the Spirit. In this era, belief about Jesus gives way to the primacy of an experience of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

The Age of the Spirit is nondogmatic, noninstitutional, and non-hierarchical Christianity, based on a person's connection to the "volatile expression" of God's Spirit through mystery, wonder, and awe. "Faith is resurgent," Cox claims, "while dogma is dying."<sup>28</sup> Tickle attributes the Age of the Spirit concept to Joachim of Fiore, the 12th century founder of the monastic order of San Giovanni in Fiore, who saw this third and final era of Christianity as one in which leadership in ecclesial structures would be destabilized and decentered.<sup>29</sup> As evidence for the realization of his vision, Tickle goes on to chronicle the "personal, often existentially painful, way in which people become gradually able to dislodge themselves from old paradigms of religious and spiritual life and thought as they find themselves entering new ones."<sup>30</sup> In *A New Kind of Christian*, Brian McLaren asks: "What if God is actually behind these disillusionments and disembeddings? What if God is trying to move us out of Egypt, so to speak, and into the wilderness, because it's time for the next chapter in our adventure?"<sup>31</sup>

## The Emerging Church

For the thought leaders and pastors of the Emerging Church movement, such as McLaren, Rob Bell, and Doug Pagitt, the disruptive, personal connection to spirit provides groundwork for reshaping church itself. Solomon's Porch, with its wholesale rejection of hierarchy--down to the circle of couches that replaced pews--became somewhat of a template for the ethos that has now expanded into large festivals like Wild Goose and condensed into house churches all over the country. The Emerging Church holds that the church must change if it is to speak to people meaningfully in contemporary culture. In *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging*, Scot McKnight, Kevin Corcoran, Peter Rollins, and Jason Clark describe the movement's "passion for the present," which manifests in four overlapping foci:

1. Community: A premium is placed on living life together in all its messiness. However, community can take many shapes, and emerging communities often do not resemble traditional church community with a paid staff and centralized leadership. It is a dispersed community, a patchwork of enclaves dotting the

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<sup>27</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>29</sup> Phyllis Tickle and Jon M. Sweeney, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 119.

<sup>30</sup> Tickle and Sweeney, *Age of the Spirit*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

landscape of contemporary culture. Members “live together, love together, and dream together in the rough-and-tumble of everyday life.”

2. Transformation: There is passion about transformation, both personal and structural. Emerging Church participants tend not to view themselves as finished products, as ‘saved’ or even as ‘Christian’. Instead, they speak of themselves as ‘being saved’ and ‘becoming Christian’. They tend to be political activists and socially liberal, and not to care much for who you are or what you believe. “If you’re laboring for the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised, then you’re doing God’s work, and that’s what matters here and now.”
3. Worship: Emerging Christians are innovative and imaginative in the aesthetics of worship, and they are technologically savvy. They believe God is still revealing himself in the ordinary and earthy. And their worship embodies this incarnational and tactile character. Often, there’s a “blend of ancient ritual and liturgy with cutting-edge image technology and participation.”
4. Social Engagement: “They seek to be active agents of God’s reconciling, redemptive, and restorative agenda in and for the world.” They are thus politically and socially engaged. The Emergent Church movement resonates not so much with a particular demographic, as with a particular psychographic -- namely, people in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and even seventies who share a certain cultural aesthetic and cultural sensibility. It pops up among people all across the denominational landscape: Protestant, evangelical nondenominational, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic alike.<sup>32</sup>

On the one hand, despite the ink spilled in the first dozen years of this century, it seems increasingly clear that the Emerging Church is *not* the movement that will swell, nor to which denominations will pin their hopes. On the other hand, it did develop strategies for innovative spiritual community that have been taken up by some of the leaders in this report. If anything, we tend to attribute its flagging energy, especially among the rising generation, to an unwillingness to break from the letter of Scripture, even as the language, practices, and structure around it become fluid. Controversy around Rob Bell’s theological leaps in *Love Wins*, for instance, created more community division than unity of spirit, even as he attempted to argue for the primacy of God’s love. Bell “rocked the Christian world” by using the word of the Bible to present something like universalism, to question the existence of a supernatural hell, and to problematize the atonement doctrine.<sup>33</sup> Rather than

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<sup>32</sup> Scot McKnight, Kevin Corcoran, Peter Rollins, and Jason Clark, *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), xv-xvi.

<sup>33</sup> Billy Hallowell, “What He Said About Hell and the Bible Rocked the Christian World. Here’s What Ex-Pastor Rob Bell Is Up to Four Years Later” in *The Blaze*, July 28, 2015, accessed September 2015, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2015/07/28/ex-pastor-who-ignited->

bothering with this tack, many of today's Christian innovators simply change the expectation. Their congregants can believe, or not believe, whatever they want, and they certainly don't need to buy into what the Bible says, as long as they don't mind participating in a community led by Christians. If anything, participants seem to appreciate the move toward a more structured, if still participatory, experience, combined with emphatic affirmations that all are invited in - doubts, questions and all.

## Looking Back To Look Forward

In fact, we found an ever-growing interest in recreating and renewing, rather than rejecting, ancient practices as sources for ritual and liturgical structure. This interest has been noticed by the academy. Mark Jordan, Professor of Christian Thought at Harvard Divinity School, notes, "The most interesting examples are often unexpected transformations of older practices. So, for example, we have the "new monasticism" or experimentation with intentional communities; the resurgence of interest in *lectio divina* and houses of study; shared intercessory or contemplative prayer now mediated by the internet; the evolution of the early AIDS ministries into more embracing practices of hospice care or accompanying the dying; and so on." In *New Monasticism and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism*, Wes Markofski describes how new-monastic evangelicals are establishing spiritual communities that are situated in the "thick of the action," wherever they can find the poor and the lost. In his view, if neo-monastic evangelicals and their allies have anything to say about the transformation of American religion and politics, it will be " a future dominated by a more communitarian and progressive representation of biblical Christianity than Americans have grown accustomed to."<sup>34</sup>

## Recruiting Millennials

What does the rest of progressive American Christianity have to say? Many of the thinkers are still caught in the ebbing tide of Emerging Church movement, trying to figure out how denominations can attract young people, and mostly concluding that they should meet them where they are. In a July 2015 article in *Patheos*, Glenn Zuber of Iona Conversations, the Presbyterian-sponsored spiritual community of Washington DC area young adults, proposed six steps for denominations to take to gain a first hand knowledge into the current cultural barriers that separate Millennials and established churches. These steps represent, concisely, the thinking and rethinking that undergirds some of the communities established by non-Millennials in this report:

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evangelical-furor-when-he-questioned-ideas-about-the-afterlife-explains-why-he-doesnt-believe-god-would-burn-people-in-hell-for-eternity.

<sup>34</sup> Wes Markofski, *New Monasticism and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 23.

1. Start new conversations about faith outside the church building and in the local coffee shop, diner, or pub.
2. Take seriously the unique life stories, concerns, and economic burdens that shape Millennials.
3. Keep in mind that Millennials want to know where the rubber hits the road.
4. Welcome all Millennials, not just the children of parishioners.
5. Be sure to explain the reason behind your cherished traditions so such traditions don't come across as rote.
6. Participate in new institutional, ecumenical, and communications networks to truly engage Millennials and their unique culture.<sup>35</sup>

### **Belonging Before Believing**

Ironically, these ideas do not quite get at the spirit of the Age of the Spirit, even as Emerging Church-leaning thinkers like Diana Butler Bass articulate it. In *Christianity After Religion*, Bass presents the idea of a great reversal, in which we must reverse the order in which traditional religious questions are asked. Instead of beginning with questions of belief, which then inform behavior, which then determine belonging, Bass proposes that the response to contemporary spiritual longing is to focus on belonging, then behaving, then believing. "And therein," she writes, "lies the difference between religion-as-institution and *religio* as a spiritually vital faith."<sup>36</sup>

*Religio*, as Bass presents it, is what is missing in the current institutional approaches to church. Building on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's seminal 1962 book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, she draws a distinction between the modern Western definition of religion and its Latin root, *religio*. Unlike religion as a system of belief, *religio* meant faith--living, subjective experience including love, veneration, devotion, awe, worship, transcendence, trust, a way of life, an attitude toward the divine or nature, or, as Smith describes, 'a particular way of seeing and feeling the world.'<sup>37</sup> "For a generation or more," she claims, "many people in the West have been reaching toward *religio*--only they call it 'spirituality' because no other English word communicates their longings--as a replacement for what needs to change."

This kind of faith has nothing to do, necessarily, with an organized or congregational experience of religion. Though it does not undercut the need for and interest in

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<sup>35</sup> Glenn Zuber, "6 Ways To Reach Millennials: The Future of Progressive Christianity," *Patheos*, July 31, 2015, accessed September 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2015/07/6-ways-to-reach-millennials-the-future-of-progressive-christianity>.

<sup>36</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 202.

<sup>37</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith quoted in Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 97.

belonging, this does call into question the methodologies of progressive Christians who would try to bring Millennials back into a church-shaped fold - even when that church meets in a pub. *Religio* that is everyday, and that transcends the line between religious and secular, starts to appear in a lot of places outside church of any kind, such as the virtual podcast community described in our study of RELEVANT media group below, the large Christian platform built on the relevance of God in every aspect of life. For similar reasons, in *Heaven's Kitchen*, Courtney Bender makes an explicit appeal to those concerned about the place of religion in modern America, entreating them "to pay close attention to the full scope of daily action and talk - in particular to the often overlooked talk and action that occur in nonreligious settings."<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, as Bass points out, people leave church not only because they find it angering and disappointing, but also because they're bored. "On Sundays, other things are more interesting--the *New York Times*, sports, shopping, Facebook, family time, working in the garden, biking, hiking, sipping lattes at the local coffee shop, meeting up at the dog park, getting the kids to the soccer game. Or just working. With tough economic times, lots of people work on Sunday mornings, the traditional time to attend to religious obligations."<sup>39</sup> In *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future*, C. Andrew Doyle writes: "We are outperformed by culture. No longer does the Church corner the market on community life, networking, social services, weddings, funerals or healthcare. Social media networks, bars, gyms, sports clubs, hospitals, friends, and even funeral homes outperform us."<sup>40</sup> Which begs the question, where is *religio* in all of that?

## **A Framework for Spirituality**

Here the RSA's 2014 *Spiritualise* report is clarifying. In general, the entire report would be valuable for Fetzer's leadership to explore, if they have not already. In particular, the RSA's framework for spirituality could be a useful tool both for understanding the innovative communities mapped here, and as a context for the Fetzer Institute's broader strategy. The report is the culmination of a two-year project called "Spirituality, Tools of the Mind and the Social Brain," which examined whether new scientific understandings of human nature might help us reconceive the nature and value of spiritual perspectives, practices, and experiences. It seeks to reimagine the spiritual with an argument in four main parts, of which part three is as follows:

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<sup>38</sup> Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), vii.

<sup>39</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew C. Doyle, *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 18.



“Spirituality struggles to differentiate itself from religion on the one hand, and wellbeing on the other. To become a viable part of public discourse, we need to map out distinctive terrain that goes beyond emotions but doesn’t collapse into ethics or aesthetics. Our inquiry led us to four main features of human existence that help with this process, and unpack what it means to say the spiritual is about our ‘ground’ and not our ‘place’:

Love - the promise of belonging  
Death - the awareness of being  
Self - the path of becoming  
Soul - the sense of beyondness”<sup>41</sup>

This framework is incorporated throughout the RSA report in order to try to develop possibilities for addressing contemporary problems, especially the crisis of urban isolation. The author Jonathan Rowson writes, “reflect on the epidemic of loneliness in big cities and you sense that love has lost its way. We are all surrounded by strangers who could so easily be friends, but we appear to lack cultural permission to not merely to ‘connect’ - the opium of cyberspace - but to deeply empathise and care.”<sup>42</sup>

## **Beyond Christianity**

This epidemic, of course, goes far beyond the boundaries drawn by religious tradition. Our survey of new communities includes initiatives toward empathy and caring from a wide variety of traditions, and scholars across traditions are grappling with the problems of this era in the academy as well. For instance, in his sweeping study of Islam, Hans Küng asks: what can Islam offer individuals to help them live in a modern democracy? He concludes that there are two things. First, in view of growing individualization, a Muslim conviction that is sensitive to the times can help people towards a right personal experience, self-discovery, self-determination and self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment does not necessarily lead to an overestimation of the self and self-centeredness but is combined with responsibility for the self and the world and responsibility for fellow human beings and society. And second, in view of growing pluralization, a Muslim conviction which is sensitive to the times can keep people from cobbling together, from the free market of religious possibilities, a private religion made up of religious, para-religious, and even pseudo-religious elements which is all too convenient and all too oriented on their own needs (‘patchwork religion’). What is binding on all believers must not be replaced with randomness, but with the expansion, enrichment, deepening of Islamic religious practice through the

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Rowson, *Spiritualise: Revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges* (London: Royal Society of Arts, 2014), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 7.

insights, symbols, ethical demands and religious practices of other religions and alternative movements.<sup>43</sup>

The intentional move toward responsibility for fellow human beings and society, and away from ‘spiritual narcissism’ as it were, is certainly evident in a number of the communities we reviewed, be they Muslim, Christian, or otherwise. In Küng’s view, the problems facing Islam in the twenty-first century are not very different from those facing Christianity, although there is “somewhat of a time lag.” These problems have four dimensions: cosmic - human beings and nature (ecology); anthropological - men and women (women); socio-political - rich and poor (social organizations); and religious - human beings and God (Christian vs interreligious).<sup>44</sup>

### **Studying Congregations**

Remarkably, these dimensions map onto the framework developed by Boston University’s Studying Congregations<sup>45</sup> team. They introduce four lenses through which to look at congregations, and which might allow us to better understand new and nontraditional communities: (i) Ecology, (ii) Culture, (iii) Resources, and (iv) Process.

First, instead of seeing each community as a bounded monolith, “congregations are actually complex ecologies. As in nature, these ecosystems are comprised of many interrelated parts including the congregations neighborhood, region, denomination, networks and other institutions.” This speaks particularly to the networked nature of many of the initiatives in this report. All have some connection to a tradition; some are formally associated with a denomination, others are not. Some are deeply embedded into a locale, others are active within a virtual network. The openness of these communities is one of their defining characteristics. We understand these groups best when we see the ecology of relationships.

A second characteristic of these communities is the radical shift in the culture of authority. The culture of participation and co-creation ensures that though there are clear leaders, their leadership is about lifting up and enabling others. These communities are not about a charismatic figurehead, nor about consumption of prefabricated content. Whether orthodox liturgy or new forms of creative endeavour, participation is a central tenet of culture. Ammerman further articulates how culture matters. “Every faith community has artifacts, heroes and rituals. Culture comprises the predictable patterns of who does what, and the habitual strategies for telling the

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Küng, *Can We Save the Catholic Church?* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 651-652.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 652.

<sup>45</sup> *Studying Congregations*, [studyingcongregations.org](http://studyingcongregations.org).

world about the things held most dear. These predictable patterns can be classified into (i) Activities - what the congregation does together, (ii) Artifacts - what the congregation makes together, (iii) Accounts - stories the congregation tells together.”

Perhaps the largest distinction between new and traditional communities is how their resources are balanced. “Resources are all the strengths and gifts a congregation has on hand. Whether concrete or abstract, the various resources available to a congregation uniquely shape and help to orchestrate its daily life. These resources can be countable, such as money, endowments, staff, buildings, members/attendees - or abstract and relational, such as shared life experiences, connections to other institutions, or the strength of commitments.” Overwhelmingly, new communities brim with abstract resources but struggle financially. Many scrape by with help from denominational headquarters or by combining not-for-profit endeavors with a for-profit social enterprise. One of the greatest barriers for growth is the difficulty of mobilizing abstract resources to become concrete financial, spacial and staff resources.

Relatedly, the fourth lens of process reveals significant remaining questions in many of the communities we’ve studied. Ammerman explains the function of process: “Whether intentional or accidental, codified or tacitly understood, every congregation has processes in place. It’s the way the group makes decisions, deals with its problems, and plans for the future. This includes program development, training, worship planning, budget preparation, governing boards etc.” Many of the communities are shaping and reshaping their programs, budgets and governance as they respond to feedback and mature. Process is loose, nimble and often lacking in proven resilience, but there is a strong trend toward mixing idealism with practicality, and harnessing new technology toward that end.

## Media Matters

Though the academy is yet to delve into the stories of these religious innovators substantively, the popular press has been tracking their progress consistently. Mark Oppenheimer's *New York Times* "Belief" column often profiles religious innovators like Methodist Pastor Zach Kerzee, who started a Dinner Church in Grafton, MA,<sup>46</sup> and Anita Diamant, founder of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters in Newton, MA. Indeed, stories of new communities abound in the popular press. *The Chicago Sun Times* featured Mishkan Chicago, a new Jewish community, and Root and Branch, a Disciples of Christ Dinner Church.<sup>47</sup> The Huffington Post, too, has profiled St Lydia's, a Lutheran Dinner Church, and The Common Place Church, a coffee shop in Lock Haven, PA that hosts evangelical worship primarily for local college students. Sadly, analysis of how this innovative community fits into a broader context is often lacking, and reporting is limited to a novelty story.

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, "Young Methodists Plant Churches With Environmental Gospel" *New York Times*. September 4, 2015, accessed September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/us/young-methodists-plant-churches-with-environmental-gospel.html>.

<sup>47</sup> "Chicago spiritual communities think outside the box" in *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 13, 2014, accessed September 2015, <http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/7/71/148495/chicago-spiritual-communities-think-outside-the-box>.

# Does Technology Change Things?

A handful of studies have examined the use of new media in ministry. Most notably, the Christian Theological Seminary's New Media Project studied six innovative congregations in 2011 to find out how digital communications were used and how they impacted community structure and even theology.<sup>48</sup> The Social Science Research Council, too, has featured writing on the subject,<sup>49</sup> such as its study of Darkwood Brew, a digital content creator that is produced in Nebraska and used in congregations across the country.

Of the six case studies, Kathryn Reklis of Fordham University writes:

“One of the most common pitfalls—and the one I’ve seen most frequently in my work with Christian communities for the New Media Project—is assuming that digital technologies are ‘merely’ tools to be used for good or ill, depending on the intentions of the users. On this model, whether or not a pastor gets on Facebook, for example, is considered a question of time management or effective reach—Facebook is seen as merely another platform, akin to a church newsletter or email list, from which to reach the congregation with the authorized message. In reality, Facebook often changes the congregation’s perception of pastoral authority, opening much more profound questions about the meaning and practice of ordination, lay participation in theological interpretation, and the dissolution of the private/public personas of clergy.

Likewise, a community’s theological practices will influence the way they approach digital culture. Take, for example, the practice of concluding each Darkwood Brew program with the rite of communion. Anyone physically present in the recording space shares bread and wine. Anyone watching via live stream or re-broadcast is encouraged to grab whatever elements are at hand and join in (bread and wine, certainly, or Oreos and milk as one live streamer confessed). The pastor prays over the act, authorizing it in some way even for those not physically present, and it is clear that Countryside Community Church considers this ‘real communion.’ But to call it such assumes many deep theological premises: the physical elements (of bread, wine, Oreo, or milk) are not significant in and of themselves; the intentions of the receiver matter more than those of the pastor, etc. Many of these assumptions would be rejected by other Christian denominations that place more emphasis on the

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<sup>48</sup> *New Media Project at Christian Theological Seminary*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies>.

<sup>49</sup> Kathryn Reklis, “Give me that digital religion,” *The Immanent Frame*, March 3, 2015, accessed September 2015, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2015/03/03/give-me-that-digital-religion>.

physical substance of sacramental rites or on the physical presence of the clergy in authorizing those rites.”<sup>50</sup>

New technologies open communities beyond their physical boundaries and further challenge the notion of what delineates a community of belonging, as we will explore in the case of Buddhist Geeks and RELEVANT Magazine in the vignettes herein.

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<sup>50</sup> Reklis, “Give me that digital religion.”

## Unanswered Questions

Clearly, new forms of spiritual community are emerging in response to a shifting religious landscape. But how do these communities take shape and organize? How are they being supported by denominations, and how are they, in turn, supporting collective transformation?

This is where the academic literature falls short. There have been no ethnographic studies of the types of new spiritual communities that this report documents, and certainly none that address communities across faith lines. Indeed, when searching the *Journal of American Academy of Religion* there was not a single article on innovation and community, let alone the impact of participating in a congregation of this kind. The same is true for the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* and other leading sociological and religious journals. It seems the questions Fetzer is asking are not only ahead of many congregations, but ahead of the academy also! To understand more about how the communities are being supported and the challenges they face, we instead turn to a number of qualitative interviews with, and blogs and thought-leadership pieces by, denominational staff and community leaders themselves. We share these vignettes with a strongly worded note of caution that these are simply a collection of conversations – nothing more. Significant new scholarship is necessary before firm conclusions can be made. There is promise of new scholarship in the years to come, thankfully (such as Cody Musselman’s research at Yale), but for now, we must work with what we have.

# A View From Within: Denominational Perspectives

## Unitarian Universalist Association

Carey McDonald, Outreach Director for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), is keenly aware of the needs of new ministries. “We’re working on providing healthcare and access to building loans for our covenanting communities, as well as exploring how we can work together to fundraise toward their financial sustainability”, says McDonald. ‘Covenanting Communities’ is the newly-created category for communities associated with the UUA, alongside traditional congregations. This allows newer ministries such as The Sanctuary Boston and co-living communities run by the Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives a more dedicated support system, as well as honoring their faith commitment to be within a covenanted relationship with the denomination.

The UUA is enthusiastic about new communities forming. “We’re also bringing experts together at our Emerging Ministries Lab during General Assembly to share resources with UU’s who have a bold idea that they want to explore.” McDonald is clear that there is still much work to be done, “One of the unexpected challenges has been the generational barriers felt by older UU’s who are put off by the focus on young adults in many new communities. We want to make sure that everyone is welcome because we so value inter-generational community.” Broadly, the UUA is one of the most engaged denominational headquarters in supporting new ministries, and crucially, in following the lead of innovators as to what they need.

## United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church knows it has to change. “We think church is more than a place to go. We think church can happen anywhere,” proclaims rethinkchurch.org,<sup>51</sup> a UMC initiative. Not only does the denomination seek to help improve existing efforts, but Gil Rendle, Senior Consultant with the Texas Methodist Foundation, is clear about the difference between improving what exists and supporting something totally new. “Institutions think that they have to do what they’re doing, but better. But this is not about improving, it’s about creating.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Rethink Church*, accessed September 2015, [www.rethinkchurch.org](http://www.rethinkchurch.org).

<sup>52</sup> Gil Rendle, *Waiting for God’s New Thing: Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time – or – Why Better isn’t Good Enough* (Austin, TX: Texas Methodist Foundation, 2015), 3.



Rendle has labelled this time a “disruptive moment,”<sup>53</sup> much like Thomas Kuhn’s famous definition of the dawn of a new paradigm. Kuhn argues that when the new paradigm is birthed, the old does not disappear straight away – hence the important continuing work of existing congregational models.<sup>54</sup> Rendle explains, “Because we are in a punctuated equilibrium where what is familiar is dually experienced with the new, the current reality is that the mainline church is now tasked with ministry in two quite different ecologies, at the same time. One is the known work of congregational life. The other is in a more foreign and unfamiliar mission field beyond the natural draw of the established congregation. The paradox is that leaders are expected to make disciples in both ecologies, even though one “species” (the affiliated) does not relate with ease and comfort with the other “species” (the unaffiliated), and vice-versa.”<sup>55</sup>

Rendle further points to the financial impetus for change. “When both expressions of ministry, to the affiliated and the unaffiliated, have insufficient economic models, it is time to rethink the way in which we require congregations/faith communities to use human, dollar, missional and facility resources. When facing into a time in which the fundamental conditions of ministry are changing, problem solving must be replaced by adaptive thinking.”<sup>56</sup>

In 2008, UMC responded with Path 1, an effort “to train and equip 1000 church planters who will start 650 churches within four years, forming nine million new disciples of Christ within 30 years.”<sup>57</sup> It’s an online resource hub offering coaching, best practices, and theological foundations for new church planters. There’s also a national gathering in October 2015 in Florida for leaders to learn from one another and expert speakers.

There’s a difference in tone from the denomination’s attempt to develop nine million new disciples of Christ and the the work of Methodist ministers who are planting new communities such as Valley and Mountain – a spiritual community in Seattle, WA that combines dinner church, creative small groups and social justice work. These communities use much more invitational language and are aware of the baggage that a Methodist label brings. The New York Times explains how when Valley and Mountain leased a space after spending time in people’s homes and outdoors, “they turned it into the Collaboratory, a co-working space housing 28 organizations, including nonprofits and small businesses. One nonprofit runs a soup kitchen three

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<sup>53</sup> Rendle, *Waiting for God’s New Thing*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1970.

<sup>55</sup> Rendle, *Waiting for God’s New Thing*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> “About New Church Starts,” *United Methodist Church*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/about/about-new-church-starts>.

days a week, while others help with family reunification, housing assistance and other social services.”<sup>58</sup> This distinction between a denomination wanting to claim new communities and their members versus the openness of the communities themselves is a consistent tension at play among not only the UMC, but all denominations surveyed in this study.

## **The Episcopal Church**

The Episcopal Church’s engagement with the desire for innovative communities was to allot \$2 million for the work of establishing Mission Enterprise Zones. These innovation zones are defined as a “geographic area, as a group of congregations or as an entire diocese committed to mission and evangelism that engages under-represented groups, including youth and young adults, people of color, poor and working-class people, people with a high-school diploma or less, and/or people with little or no church background or involvement.”<sup>59</sup> Missional initiatives may not include public worship at all, but gather people together to make a difference in their local area - a sign of the Episcopal Church’s willingness to engage the unknown.

Thomas Brackett, who leads New Church Starts & Missional Initiatives at the Episcopal Church, explains, “Some of these networks are challenging traditional church practices by placing greater value on discerning the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity. Some of these networks have chosen to work in more traditional settings while keeping fresh stories of hope and faith at the center of their life together.”<sup>60</sup> Among the 27 awardees, were two joint Episcopal/Lutheran initiatives, an indicator of the willingness to work across denominational barriers together.

Support goes beyond finances alone. “A significant [part] of our focus is on training leaders to be aware of evidence of the Holy Spirit at work outside the walls of the church - to learn the practices of ‘hosting conversations that matter,’ cultivating the safe space to try on risky new leadership behaviors, [and] the courage to say “Yes!” to all that God is birthing in our times.”

The support for innovators is kaleidoscopic and depends largely on individual dioceses. Jake Bell, manager of digital marketing and advertising for the Episcopal Church, argues that the denomination is still learning how best to support new communities like The Abbey – a coffee shop/worshipping community in Birmingham, AL. “Denominations are old organizations and we haven’t historically had a Research

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<sup>58</sup> Oppenheimer, “Young Methodists Plant Churches.”

<sup>59</sup> “Resolution A073,” *The General Convention of the Episcopal Church*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions?by=number&id=a073>.

<sup>60</sup> “New Church Starts and Missional Initiatives,” The Episcopal Church, accessed September 2015, <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/new-church-starts-and-missional-initiatives>.

and Development Lab where we're used to throwing millions of dollars to see what works."<sup>61</sup>

Bell argues that there are fundamental challenges for a new Episcopal community compared to a new branch of Soul Cycle, for example. "Something like St Lydia's Dinner Church is not easily scalable. A traditional church with a pulpit, altar and pews, can grow more easily. A dinner church, however, is built around the personality of the original group. Going to church is not like going to the movies, or a football game. It's like going to someone's house for dinner – that's a much higher bar, culturally. Whereas a movie is just buying a ticket and sitting down, with dinner there's a formality, an intimacy, not wanting to offend the host, asking yourself whether to bring something. Inviting someone to come to regular church is hard enough, so there's a really high barrier of entry for new communities like St Lydia's."<sup>62</sup>

It may be tempting to look to a strong web presence to make this step easier, but only 34% of Millennials are actively exploring worship communities online, compared to 56% of Christian Millennials.<sup>63</sup> The problem is bigger than simply making web resources more attractive. Nonetheless, Bell sees a good example of improving online marketing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After years of anti-Mormon websites dominating web searches, LDS invested in compelling content and a strong digital strategy, including websites such as [www.millennialmormons.com](http://www.millennialmormons.com) to attract younger searchers. "It's not about suing your detractors, it's about beating them with good content", explains Bell. No doubt, a compelling message, brand and content are necessary for new visitors to deem innovative communities worthy of a visit.

### **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

In the same year as the Episcopal Church, 2012, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) launched its own bold initiative, 1001 Worshipping Communities,<sup>64</sup> to help the denomination make the shift from an inward-focused, membership-maintenance model of church to an outward, creative, and disciple-making model of church.

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<sup>61</sup> Phone interview by Casper ter Kuile on August 19, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Phone interview by Casper ter Kuile on August 19, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> "How technology is changing Millennials," *Barna Group*, 2013, accessed September 2015, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/640-how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith#.Ve4cPGDDVBU>.

<sup>64</sup> "1001 Worshipping Communities," Presbyterian Mission Agency, accessed September 2015, <http://www.onethousandone.org>.

One of the recipients of a two-year support package of funding, coaching and other resources<sup>65</sup> was Not So Churchy,<sup>66</sup> an intimate worshipping community outside the structures of the traditional church, in New York City. Despite these positive steps towards more support, Mieke Vandersall, founding pastor of Not So Churchy articulated the difficulty facing new church communities.

“Church planters and nonprofit workers are fed...on the myth (or even lie) of financial sustainability. When seeking funding we are so often asked, in one way or another, what we are doing to become sustainable, although the definition of sustainability is rarely clarified.”

“If we are talking about self-sustainability, meaning that our congregants or services pay for themselves, I struggle, on a theological level, with this being a goal at all. We are called to live in community and to share with and support each other so that we can all live into our particular vocations. We believe we are part of one church, one world, one community, one body of Christ. None of us is supposed to go it alone. And if we are talking about achieving sustainability through the sharing and redistribution of resources, we are a long way from having that conversation in open, healthy, and honest ways.”

According to The Center for Progressive Renewal report on financial viability,<sup>67</sup> new congregations need up to eight to 10 years of activity before reaching financial sustainability. New ministries are too quickly dismissed by staff across denominations after three to five years as being unmanageable. “Communities comprised of younger people with fewer financial resources will take [even] more time to become financially viable”, argues the report, and the same is true for communities built among lower-income populations.

Vandersall points to the enormous resources embedded within buildings and the missed opportunity in not sharing the wealth. Start-up communities miss out, she argues, on five key resources:

1. A gathering place.
2. Rental income.
3. Endowments.
4. Established, long-term donors, and bequests from those who pass away.

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<sup>65</sup> “Mission Program Grants,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), accessed September 2015, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bzgch04BtNAjMzFvX0FBV1dObHc/view>.

<sup>66</sup> *Not So Churchy*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.notsochurchy.org>.

<sup>67</sup> “New Ministries in the Mainline,” *The Center for Progressive Renewal*, accessed September 2015, <http://progressiverenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/New-Church-Highlights-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

## 5. The potential sale of buildings.

For Vandersall, the ultimate goal is a marked shift in culture towards sharing so that many communities can flourish in service of their faith. Vandersall's struggle articulates a common experience for new community leaders - that they are expected to measure up to traditional metrics that simply don't make sense in a new context, that they are isolated among their colleagues in traditional settings, and that the innovative communities not only challenge the practices, but also theologies, of established denominational hierarchies.

### **The United Church of Christ**

The United Church of Christ (UCC), with roughly 5,000 congregations in the United States has been at the sharp end of denominational decline. The Ohio Conference of the UCC has responded by creating an Innovation Lab,<sup>68</sup> whose goal is not to improve what has been, but to "dream about what is next. The lab has been designed as a holy experiment in which innovation is celebrated."<sup>69</sup> The first task of the Innovation Lab is to curate a platform to share, connect and inspire through a blog and social media. The second is to host gatherings where people can come together and do creative and daring things.

Aware that new forms of community are springing up, newly-elected General Minister of the UCC, John Dorhauer is clear about the need for a different strategy. "A whole new way of discovering the life of faith is emerging without the permission of or training required by the established church...Those engaged in this faith exploration aren't asking for permission."<sup>70</sup> Dorhauer doesn't expect that emerging communities will supplant established churches so much as that the new will develop alongside the old for a long time, echoing Kuhn's scholarship cited above. Change, however, is inevitable. He foresees "mergers, partnerships, and downsizing as denominations realize over time that they are attracting fewer and fewer customers to the marketplace they currently occupy."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *The Innovation Lab*, accessed September 2015, <http://www.the-innovation-lab.org>.

<sup>69</sup> Jeff Woodard, "The Innovation Lab launches at Synod to lift up creativity, experimentation," *United Church of Christ*, accessed September 2015, [http://www.ucc.org/news\\_general\\_synod\\_innovation\\_lab\\_launches\\_to\\_lift\\_up\\_creativity\\_experimentation\\_06292015](http://www.ucc.org/news_general_synod_innovation_lab_launches_to_lift_up_creativity_experimentation_06292015).

<sup>70</sup> John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> "Racial justice will be top priority for new prez of the United Church of Christ," *Religion Dispatches*, August 20, 2015, accessed September 2015, <http://religiondispatches.org/racial-justice-will-be-top-priority-for-new-prez-of-the-united-church-of-christ/>.

Nonetheless, Nicole Lamarche found enough interest to plant the Silicon Valley Progressive Faith Community in San Jose, California. Church planting meant leaving behind the stability of pension payments, health insurance and her salary. It was a crash course in organizational development and building a robust financial strategy - much of which her denomination had been unable to support her in.

“Those of us who are attempting to create relevant faith communities for this time are doing research and development on behalf of the wider Church. It is not glamorous. The work can be lonely. The leader(s) must develop thick skin to accept critical feedback, draw on a deep well of spiritual maturity and Divine love, inspire radical generosity, all while building a capacity to navigate and make decisions in the presence of extreme uncertainty. We see trends that others can easily miss.”<sup>72</sup> Lamarche shared five lessons learned from her ‘research and development’ in building a modern-day UCC-grounded spiritual community.

1. Religious communities that don’t matter will die. The congregations that are woven into the life of the communities in which they are located will survive this time of radical transformation and those that continue to see their mission solely as caring for those who show up to a building will eventually shrivel.
2. This is a time for collaboration, which means coming together around shared values. Why not share a building with another religious tradition? Why not join the work of social change in the community with groups already leading? We don’t need to always have our own space, our own cause, our own agenda, only our logo on the sign. It is our religious egos that have prevented a convergence in places where it longs to happen.
3. The offering plate will not save us. Many congregations can put off making dramatic changes because of the generosity of previous generations, but it is clear that this model no longer serves us as it once did... Perhaps it will be social entrepreneurship and innovative partnerships that generate revenue for ministries that matter.
4. Regular participation in religious community is not every week...We thought that offering something monthly would increase the odds that people will show up, because it is just once. But in fact the opposite is true. Because even the most committed do not attend weekly activities, we need to offer more chances to connect...For those who have no bodily knowledge of [going to church every week], showing up on occasion is regular commitment.
5. All good things take time... Planting anything new or starting something new requires a group of people who care enough to try things that do not work and then keep on trying. You can’t get to the top of the mountain without walking

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<sup>72</sup> Nicole Lamarche. “Five Things I’ve Learned from Religious R&D,” *Medium*, May 12, 2015, accessed September 2015, <https://medium.com/the-narthex/five-things-i-ve-learned-from-religious-r-d-70f08973ef35>.

through the valley. In order to launch new initiatives or creatively engage new ministry, spend less time coming up with the perfect plans and get busy testing out what people think, who shows up and what can be easily improved. Fail your way to something good.

# Mapping the DNA of the Innovators

Across the spiritual communities studied, seven key themes appear time and again. These are the strands of the cultural DNA that embody what makes these groups – disparate in practice, tradition and geography – a whole bigger than the sum of its parts.

1. **Open:** You are welcome wherever you are in your journey, whatever identities you hold.
2. **Experiential:** Your experience of truth supersedes doctrine.
3. **Participatory:** You co-create, rather than consume, this community.
4. **Respectfully Missional:** We're clear about who we are and hope you'll join us.
5. **Authentic:** We want all of you – what you're proud of and what you're not proud of.
6. **Counter-Cultural:** What we do here goes against dominant consumer culture because other things matter more.
7. **Serving Others:** We can only be our true selves when we are serving others.

Further, many of these communities consistently encounter three dualities that community leaders need to navigate.

1. First, each of the communities lives across **two times**. To some extent they are both reaching out into today's cultural landscape while anchoring themselves in traditions and practices from hundreds or thousands of years ago.
2. Second, the communities live across **two places**, or grounds of being – one secular and one sacred. Broadly, this necessitates speaking to the values and norms of a consumer society in order to be understood, but simultaneously offering a different centre of gravity, the “something more” that relocates the center of gravity.
3. Third, the communities live across **two stories**. On the one hand, a story of declining religious influence and the failure of institutional religion, and on the other the clear desire for meaning making and community that is fuelling the growth of innovative spiritual communities.

A critical reader might suggest that each of these themes and dichotomies are consistent with traditional forms of religious community – and indeed, at their best, this has always been what progressive religion consists of. What makes these communities distinctly different is that they are structured differently – either how or where they are taking place.



# Types of Innovation

We have grouped the ninety or so cases into ten types, which work across faith and denominational lines. Naturally, the categorization is a necessarily simplification and some stretch across multiple categories.

For reference, Carol Howard Merritt has a comparable list of types in her *Christian Century* article on new models of church, including Food Church, Internet Church and communities that harken back to ancient practices.<sup>73</sup>

11. **Dinner Churches**: gathering around a meal for reflection, inspiration and conversation.
12. **Service Organizations**: focused on social action.
13. **Learning Journeys**: a time-bound program of spiritual growth and leadership development
14. **Online Communities**: often for participants who would struggle to find a local group aligned as strongly to their particular practice or identity
15. **Resources**: media, practical support and storytelling organizations.
16. **Co-Living/Working Spaces**: using space in innovative ways to bring people together.
17. **Small Groups**: focusing on spiritual growth and vulnerability
18. **Church With A Twist**: worship services in unusual spaces or formats
19. **Combining Tradition and Innovation**: taking the best of liturgy and tradition and living it in new ways
20. **Social Networks**: a looser network of relationships with a common goal

The boundaries drawn to create these ten types exclude a host of other organizations which firmly overlap with many of the themes we identify in this report. For example,

- **Retreat centers** such as Ghost Ranch in New Mexico and the large network of retreat centers hosting 10-day Vipassana retreats
- **Informal social network groups** such as private Facebook groups
- **Conferences, festivals and concerts** such as Wild Goose Festival and Movies and Meaning
- **Blog platforms** such as Patheos.org
- **Dating sites** such as JDate, eHarmony, Boundless and Ishqr

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<sup>73</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, "Ten Church Models for a New Generation," *The Christian Century*, November 2011, accessed September 2015, <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2011-11/ten-church-models-new-generation>.

# Ten Vignettes

To bring to life these themes, types and dualities, we share ten vignettes. Each with its own successes and challenges, relationship to tradition and scale of impact.

## **RELEVANT Media Group**

**Tradition:** Evangelical

**Type:** Resource

**Themes:** Respectfully Missional, Open

Cameron Strang founded *RELEVANT* Media Group in 2000 when he was 24 because he could not find a Christian platform that spoke to his peer group, and, as he puts it, “Sunday morning was not fulfilling.” The company has never been affiliated with a denomination and remains independent, even as it continues to grow. Today *RELEVANT* reaches well over 2 million twenty- and thirtysomething Christians a month through a print and iPad magazine, daily web content, videos, live studio recordings, and a weekly podcast.

Strang describes a generational disconnect between “the church we grew up in and the faith we wanted to play out.” He and his readers find God alive and speaking in all aspects of life, even those that are nominally secular. From the beginning, the inclusiveness of the group’s content—ranging from spiritual growth to career, relationships, and popular culture—distanced it from other Christian media and denominational gatherings, which condemned or excluded *RELEVANT*. Cameron views the lack of support as a blessing, in that independence allows the company to remain nimble and innovate. But it has been hard.

At this point, while still open to the possibility of partnering with a missional Christian organization, Strang wants *RELEVANT* to continue at a speed boat pace amidst denominations that, like cruise ships, are inevitably slow-moving. Tellingly, many of the young Christians who follow *RELEVANT* content do not belong to a congregation. This raises questions about if and how this online audience might become a community.

The *RELEVANT* podcast is a potent example. Since 2005, the group has been producing a weekly podcast that resembles a late night talk show, featuring bands and guests. The show has developed a loyal fan base and now gets up to half a million downloads per week. For the tenth anniversary, *RELEVANT* invited an audience to sign up online and come in for a live recording. As Strang describes it, the team was floored that around 800 people came, flying in from all over the country and the world for the 2-hour episode.

Even more striking than the turnout, was the way people described their relationship to the podcast: “You guys are my church, my weekly connection with other Christians who see the world as I do.” “I got hurt in my church and I didn’t walk away from God because of your podcast.” “I started listening in high school and now I’m a doctor. I’ve moved to different cities and different jobs, but this has been a stable part of my life.”

The *RELEVANT* team has talked about having events for a long time. Now, given the evident, unmet yearning for community, they are talking about it even more. When we spoke with Strang, he had had six different meetings about event models in the last week.

## **Pop-Up Shabbat**

**Tradition:** Jewish

**Type:** Dinner Church

**Themes:** Open, Experiential, Participatory

Pop-Up Shabbat is a pop-up restaurant inspired by Jewish culture and tradition in Brooklyn, NY. Each gathering lasts 3-4 hours and includes “slightly socially engineered mingling, family-style dining, music (yes, sometimes dancing), and a bit of Shabbat tradition.” Numbers are capped at around 40 to maintain a homey vibe, and partnerships with local institutions such as Brooklyn Brewery and Fleischman’s butchery assure a delicious menu.

Different nights feature different themes - from the traditionally Jewish Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), to the traditionally Millennial 90’s hip hop. Non-Jews are welcome, in fact two of the co-founding team are goys! Tickets are purchased in advance, furthering financial sustainability and providing an added incentive to maintain the commitment of coming.

Founder Danya Cheskis-Gold has grown away from her Orthodox Jewish upbringing, but was looking to maintain a relationship with her tradition. She explains, “I joined the board of a Jewish non-profit and I tried out hippie synagogues in Park Slope and matchmaking ones on the Upper West Side. But I loved my potluck Shabbat dinners the most. Friends, food, fun.” Though Pop-Up Shabbat is clearly Jewish, it doesn’t draw a boundary on participation or belonging. Cheskis-Gold was so focused on openness that she was surprised by the desire to connect to tradition. On the first gathering, she had simply planned delicious food on a Friday night with some conversation about rest and renewal, a broad Shabbat theme. Instead, she says, “half-way through the dinner, someone asked when we were going to bless the candles and the wine and everyone joined in to demand a blessing! I hadn’t expected that at all, but it’s now a staple of every meal.”

Finding a model for dinner churches to become financially sustainable is a consistent challenge. Some like St Lydia's, also in Brooklyn, have developed a co-working space alongside the dinner church. Cheskis-Gold and her team have a different solution, building on the Silicon Valley model of developing three 'C's: an engaged Community, high quality Content and Commercial products. Alongside Pop-Up Shabbat, which builds community, she's launched a community newsletter The Ish, a bi-weekly Jew-ish digest of things to do, eat, read, give or get, and people to meet. This provides the quality content. She's now working on a commercial offer to complete her strategy.

## **The Neighborhood Halaqa**

**Tradition:** Muslim

**Type:** Small Group Spiritual Growth

**Themes:** Participatory, Authentic, Counter Cultural

The Neighborhood Halaqa in Washington D.C. hosts a weekly circle for peer-facilitated spiritual and personal reflection. Traditionally, a halaqa involves teacher-led theological study, but the Neighborhood Halaqa is clear about rotating facilitators and avoiding a formal teaching relationship. Attracting 'un-mosqued' Muslims and those at the margins of mosque community life, The Neighborhood Halaqa focuses conversation on the lived experience of Islam rather than doctrinal teachings.

Each gathering starts with a reading from the Qur'an and a check-in, an opportunity "to be raw with ourselves and one another, creating a basis for care and trust." In a city that emphasises a job title, this focus on authenticity creates a profoundly counter-cultural atmosphere that keeps participants coming back. Leader Nada Zohdy explains, "I live in a neighborhood where I see people in the grocery store and know about their families, their struggles - but have no idea what they do for work. That never happens in DC!" A discussion topic follows the check-in, with self-selected issues ranging from Islamic concepts and practices, to the role of women in the community and Islamic prophetic traditions.

The bond has become strong. "I came to understand the meaning of real community in a way I'd never come across before in my life - and I'd spent my childhood attending various mosques", Zohdy explains. In a culture where young Muslims particularly struggle with feeling judged or policed for their different forms, or lack, of Islamic practice, mutual respect in the community is key. The recognition that diversity of individual faith enriches the group leads to "a community grounded in love for God, creation and one another".

Despite an intentional choice not to affiliate with a mosque or Muslim community organization, “there’s a real surge in attendance during Ramadan”, explains Zohdy, “and we’ve had people from LA, Chicago and abroad want to set up similar groups”. A second group is now active in DC and a third operating in Cambridge, MA. “I think it’s growing because it is so relevant to modernity while remaining authentic to tradition.”

A consistent challenge for the leadership team is the transitional nature of participation, particularly as members move in and out of DC, together with the efforts to train new facilitators and leaders. Maintaining a balance between integrity and inclusivity is also difficult. “I worry that we might end up neither here nor there, without an authoritative scholar. We’re looking for ways to bring in more accountability, so we can be clear about how we’re growing together and challenging ourselves to go beyond the cultural and spiritual status quo.”

## **Gather The Jews**

**Tradition:** Jewish

**Type:** Social Network

**Themes:** Authentic, Open

Gather the Jews is a hyper local network of news and events facilitating Jewish life in Washington, D.C. Set up as a newsletter among friends in 2010, it was largely dismissed by mainstream Jewish institutions until it grew to regularly have 400+ participants show up at community events. Gather The Jews is now a staple of community life.

Open to Jews across denominational affiliation, as well as those whose Jewish identity is cultural only, the website hosts a job board, housing board, full events calendar, list of local Rabbis and organizations as well as information on kosher dining.

Things have changed as the community has attracted resources from established foundations. Co-founder Aaron Wolff argued that a key ingredient for the success of the network in the early stages was *not* hosting institutional Shabbat dinners, but inviting network members to host one another. Nowadays, Gather The Jews has grown to not only host a weekly Shabbat dinner but also has two staff and a community Rabbi. A clear transition from friendship network has grown into an institutionalized organization bringing with it new challenges and opportunities.

Some things have remained, however. “What really helped us grow is that we made every person feel like they had value in the community and that they had a purpose with us. We celebrate a different individual each week in a Guy/Girl of the Week post,

not only to lift them up but also to celebrate the diversity of Jews in D.C.” explains Wolff.

Rather than designing a slick new interface, the team have kept the outdated and kitschy website as a tribute to the authenticity of the network. “People are committed and invested in making something greater than themselves. Being part of the creative process is central for our community”, says Wolff. “I love knowing that people are organizing ride shares and swapping business startup advice through this community. That’s what community life looks like!”

Scaling the project to other cities has been a real challenge, however. So much depended on the rich and varied social network of the founders, that simply replicating the network – even with significant resources – has proven difficult.

## **House for All Sinners and Saints**

**Tradition:** Lutheran

**Type:** Tradition/Innovation

**Themes:** Counter Cultural, Authentic, Respectfully Missional

At House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS), innovating with integrity starts with deep roots in tradition. Nadia Bolz-Weber, House’s tattooed, profanity-loving, recovering alcoholic, former stand-up comic, Lutheran pastor, has become somewhat of a celebrity for her particular brand of church and the language she uses to describe it (“Pretty much just like a Rolling Stones concert... uh, we mean, nothing at all like a Rolling Stones concert”). Yet the combination of ancient and new at her church is part of a larger move toward grounding tradition in innovation, which can be found from the Episcopal Bushwick Abbey, a queer-friendly community grounded in faith, art, justice, scripture, and holy communion, to Because Jewish, a project striving to create “experiences that speak to people living in today’s world using the language, lessons and music of the past.”

Located in Denver, CO, House for All Sinners and Saints follows the ancient liturgy and sings the old hymns of the church, and also always includes poetry and a time called “Open Space,” which is for prayer and engaging the Gospel. The ethos is “anti-excellence/pro-participation,” meaning that the liturgy is led by the people who show up. The pastors offer the Eucharistic prayer and typically the sermon; the other parts of the liturgy are led by people from where they are sitting. Based on the principle of co-creation over passive participation, even the music is made by the community, who sing a cappella except for 4 or 5 yearly bluegrass services.

HFASS is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Bolz-Weber has been thoroughly supported by the Bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod, who she

calls “extraordinary.” Beyond that, however, the congregation is “not even close” to uniformly Lutheran. The assistant pastor is Episcopalian and perhaps a quarter of the 250 regular attendees identify as Lutheran; the rest are post-Evangelicals, Methodists, agnostics, Reformed, Episcopalian, and unaffiliated. Married couples, young families, Baby Boomers and a few people in their 70s, mix with the majority population that is between the ages of 22 and 42 and single.

The combination of unapologetic Christianity and radical openness is another feature that HFASS shares with other churches of this type, and it depends on the grounding in tradition. “Pastor Nadia is Lutheran enough for all of us,” the website reads, and she invites everyone, of any persuasion, to participate in Lutheran practices if they so choose. She writes, “I have this hunch that people really find Jesus compelling, and they see what Christianity really could be. But what they see instead, so often, is an institution that tries to protect itself and promote itself. I think they want to have a place where they can speak the actual truth about themselves in the world and they don’t have to pretend.”

## **Laundry Love**

**Tradition:** Ecumenical/Interfaith

**Type:** Service

**Themes:** Serving Others, Open, Respectfully Missional

On the Laundry Love website, there is nothing about God, Jesus, church, religion, or spirituality. It even rejects the language of service, at least if that means a project done “to” or “for” someone, rather than an expression of living “with” them. But a potent quote on the homepage speaks to the vision behind the movement: “Laundry Love is modern day foot washing.”

Like other initiatives of this type, on the one hand, Laundry Love is doing nothing new; caring for the poor is basic to religions across time and traditions. On the other hand, they are doing something with new tools for a new context, and their work is needed in a new way. Laundry Love is a ministry that raises money to pay for detergent, dryer sheets, and quarters for machines, and engages groups of volunteers to assist in doing people’s laundry. The idea began in an Episcopal congregation in Ventura, California, in response to the logistical problem and financial hardship of washing clothes, among those living below the poverty line. Now the practice has spread to more than 70 churches, mosques, synagogues, and other groups of people who have partnered with local laundromats all over the country.

Two features stand out about Laundry Love. First, it takes place in the neutral space of a laundromat, which erodes the societal, economic, cultural, and religious divides that separate people. One outpost in Huntington Beach has started a monthly church

in the laundromat (using “laundry as liturgy”), which features a free meal and free clothes along with music, art, conversation, reflection, and ever-deepening relationships. Second, it uses digital tools to help bring people together locally, by providing online resources that can be contextualized for every neighborhood. As a result, the project has reached almost half a million people in a dozen years, with not only clean clothes but also human connection. For America in the era of shrinking congregations, Laundry Love’s support for local community relationships is at least as significant its material support for those in need.

These features are seen to varying degrees in other service-oriented initiatives like Monday Night Mission, Five & Two Food Truck, and Church Under the Bridge. All three emphasize the importance of meeting people where they are, providing them nourishment, and bringing them together outside of a church building. They also rely on the internet to facilitate, support, and promote their hyper-local efforts. Foot washing has always required personal contact; in the virtual age, that has become more radical, and more likely to be organized and celebrated on social media.

## **Buddhist Geeks**

**Tradition:** Buddhist

**Type:** Online Community

**Themes:** Experiential, Counter Cultural

Buddhist Geeks is an online community of Buddhist practitioners exploring the intersection of a 2,500 year old lineage together with the reality of rapidly evolving modern technology in a global culture. WIRED magazine describes the big questions the community asks as, “How can social media support meditation practice?” “How can design thinking change the way ancient wisdom is taught and passed on?” and “Can video games lead to enlightenment?”<sup>74</sup>

Vincent Horn and Ryan Oelke founded Buddhist Geeks in 2006 after studying at Naropa University in Boulder, CO and grew the first offer, a podcast, to over 100,000 listeners every month by 2009. The first attempt to build a community around the podcast had mixed results. Hundreds came from across the country and farther afield to the first in-person gathering, and meet-ups kept growing. But, explains Horn, “We went too far in the direction of being self-organized and ended up too decentralized.” That meant that Horn and his team had “built a community we didn’t always want to be part of and couldn’t lead” which led to some concrete difficulties.

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<sup>74</sup> “The Smart List 2012: 50 People who will change the world,” *WIRED*, January 24, 2012, accessed September 2015, <http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2012/02/features/the-smart-list>.



“Because of the lack of leadership we never got off the ground financially. We were in the land of the living dead! That’s where our mentor and business advisor really made the difference. Without that support and coaching, we wouldn’t have made it through the dip.”

Horn and his team struggled to find others building similar communities so there wasn’t much of a roadmap for how to develop. “I would have loved peers to compare notes with,” he says. “The for-profit sector has various incubators to help you connect with collaborators, grow the organization and decide what kind of investment to take - we would have loved something like that.”

Today, Buddhist Geeks is a vibrant community that, alongside the podcast, offers online meditation spaces, one-to-one teaching, an in-person retreat, an annual conference and at-home Life Retreats, which builds a small group of peers to grow in their practice together. Community members will often post on the Facebook group that they’re going to meditate in the next ten minutes and link to a Google Hangout link, where others will join them simply to sit together - connected across space and time.

With a new leadership team, Emily and Vincent Horn, there has been a stronger focus on engaging female Buddhist geeks (including changing the logo to feature a woman) and there’s a strong focus on Big Tent Buddhism, honoring various lineages, traditions and systems of practice. Horn explains, “Though there’s a clear lineage of training for both of us, we’re very much about remixing and hacking traditions.” With 110 paying community members, Buddhist Geeks has found a financially sustainable model and is training new leaders to become facilitators and teachers.

## **Living School for Action and Contemplation**

**Tradition:** Catholic

**Type:** Learning Journey

**Themes:** Experiential, Counter-Cultural, Open

“Do you long for wisdom elders and companions to share your spiritual journey?” asks the Living School as an invitation into a two-year program of spiritual growth, theological education and community building. Founded by the Center for Action and Contemplation in 2013, the Living School combines reading, contemplative practice and course work with online discussions and four in-person gatherings over two years with Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and other faculty in New Mexico.

The Living School has high barriers to entry; a rigorous application process and a tuition cost of more than \$3500.

More than half the participants are over 50 years old and most come either from Catholic or mainline Protestant backgrounds. With a program built around the great mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich, many participants find greater spiritual nourishment in the Living School than in their home church. One typical testimonial reads, "People are hungry for authentic experience of God, but the church has not delivered." As Rohr has long been at the edges of his Catholic tradition, he embodies the bridge between ancient mystics and a contemporary context. For others who have left the church, the Living School gives a way back into their original faith tradition from which they've been estranged. One participant reflects, "I have language I can use again, and a tradition I can embrace."

As a Franciscan, Rohr is continuing a monastic legacy of study and practice outside the academy. "It's not a seminary or university, not a program for personal enrichment although a little of all those," he explains. "It's a monastery without walls." This model both honors the Catholic tradition and allows for innovation - something less visible in the American Catholic community whose numbers have largely been upheld by Catholic immigrants over the last few decades.

With a cap of 180 students enrolled in each year, and more wanting to join, the challenge is not finding participants, but ensuring that the transformations they experience reverberate out into the world. Another difficulty is the central role played by Rohr on the faculty team. As a widely read author and beloved speaker, his following is immensely loyal and supportive, but as he ages the team is having to explore how to diversify the faculty. Two other core faculty demonstrate the Living School's openness to perspectives beyond Rohr's own Franciscan lineage. Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopalian and James Finley is a former Trappist monk.

## **Life Together**

**Tradition:** Episcopal

**Type:** Co-Living/Co-Working

**Themes:** Authentic, Serving Others, Experiential

Life Together is a community of spiritual activists committed to both personal and social transformation. The goal is church renewal. Life Together envisions the church as "a school of love" that is "not defined by what it believes but by how it loves." Started in 1999 as The Micah Project by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts to develop the leadership of Episcopal seminarians, it has become the most consistently successful training ground for future priests in the diocese.

Headed by Arrington Chambliss, the project has grown and morphed, now hosting 27 fellows spread across various service organizations in the greater Boston area including Youth Jobs Coalition, Healthcare for All and the Irish Immigrant Center.

Fellows receive practical skills in communal living - nonviolent communication, covenant formation, using the enneagram; prophetic ministry - community organizing, leadership skills; and contemplative spiritual practices - particularly prayer.

Participants come from three broad groups: postulants discerning ordination, young adults interested in social justice community organizing, and recently graduated college students seeking experience before choosing a career. All participate in monthly trainings from experts on strategy, leadership and justice, and a session of monthly spiritual direction is required to be part of the community. Free counselling and weekly external prayer partners to help resolve community conflicts ensure participants can thrive in sometimes challenging situations.

By designing a model that serves local parishes and organizations through the fellows' work, and through active and consistent support from the Bishop, Life Together has flourished to become a staple of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Indeed, other dioceses are reaching out with a growing interest to implement similar projects. Nonetheless, difficulties remain. A small subsidiary house in southern Massachusetts has struggled to flourish and church funding streams for the future may be at risk with more overt political organizing.

Yet as seminaries struggle to redesign curricula to meet the changing needs of twenty-first century seminarians, and as local organizations - both Episcopal and secular - benefit from the hours worked and new ideas from Fellows, Life Together seems well-placed to form both as a community of growth and belonging as well as a missional service corps for the coming decades.

## **Sunday Assembly**

**Tradition:** Secular

**Type:** Church With A Twist

**Themes:** Open, Respectfully missional, Serving Others

Sunday Assembly garnered widespread media attention when they set up their first atheist church in London, England in 2013. Hundreds of people gathered to "live better, help often and wonder more" by singing along to well-loved pop songs, listen to an interesting talk and stay around for tea and cake. Replicating a traditional Anglican worship service, but taking out the god part, founders Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones sought to create a community for those who liked the idea of church, but didn't believe in anything particular.

Partly because of the international media interest, Jones and Evans quickly sought to allow others to replicate their model, which now had circa 500 people attending every

month. There are now nearly 30 Sunday Assemblies across the United States, including in Tulsa, OK and Bloomington, IN though participation varies widely.

Sunday Assembly's success has rested on its positive language and, it seems, distance from the New Atheist movement. An early congregation in New York City split when Sunday Assembly wasn't atheist enough to satisfy some of the team. Jones explains, "New York was a real learning experience for us! Within their team they had a difference of opinion about what they wanted Sunday Assembly to be. Some people wanted a celebration of atheism and the others wanted a celebration of life. The latter is what Sunday Assembly is and so the group divided. The remaining team still run SA NYC and those that wanted to celebrate Atheism now run the Godless Revival, which is more in tune with what they wanted to do."

Both founders are comedians, so production values for the larger congregations are high and humor is used throughout. However, leading moments of introspective reflection are often less polished. Another difficulty has been raising money and maintaining a consistent high quality across such a large number of affiliates who have started in such a short amount of time. The recent continental gatherings for organizers has aimed to connect and train new leaders.

Jones has purposefully looked to evangelical models like Rick Warren's Saddleback Church to seek guidance on how to build the organization. After the service, many participants gather into small groups (so-called 'smoups') or volunteer in the local community. There are also book groups, choirs and peer-to-peer support networks.

As it has grown, Sunday Assembly has become much broader theologically. Though it is clear about having no doctrine, no deity and no sacred texts, it positions itself as "radically inclusive. Everyone is welcome, regardless of beliefs - this is a place of love that is open and accepting." Indeed, it actively distances itself from the atheist label. "We say in the Charter that we don't do supernatural but we won't tell you you're wrong if you do."

# Recommendations

Fetzer's vision for a broad-scale, spiritually grounded transformation from an ego-centered consciousness of separation and fear to a consciousness of oneness and love is a bold and exciting one. This research illustrates one set of organizations that form natural allies in this work. We see a number of opportunities to mobilize Fetzer's resources to strengthen and scale the impact of this growing global movement.

## Sharing this new narrative

If, as Stanley Hauerwas argues, the church is a “story-formed community,”<sup>75</sup> many people within the realm of religious institutions are stuck in the narrative of failure and a desperate effort to ‘re-conquer’ the territory lost to the rising number of non-affiliated Americans. Sharing a new counter-narrative in a report of hope, innovation and opportunity is a crucial step to shift their attention towards supporting these leaders instead of holding them at the margins. We propose:

- Significantly editing this document into a 24-page public-facing pamphlet with photographs and printing it for wide distribution within faith organizations and denominations in order to share a new narrative for the future of religious community. We have an enormous opportunity to do so at the Texas Methodist Foundation conference on religious innovation from December 1-3 where we are keynote speakers.
- Having sent out hundreds of hard copies of *How We Gather*, we have a strong distribution list of thought leaders that we can send this publication to. Fetzer's own list of influencers would also make worthy recipients of this.

## Going deeper

This research project focused on the literature review of innovative religious communities and included vignettes of practitioners' stories. It also includes some notes from brief conversations with, and blogs by, denominational staff. We propose:

- Going deeper into the stories of those leaders whose work seems most replicable and useful to learn from as formal case studies. A shorter paper would collate the experiences of the innovators and also systematically map how different denominations and faith groups are supporting innovators, as well as mapping some of the secular leadership development opportunities such as EchoingGreen and Ashoka. This would help Fetzer identify any unique opportunities to add value to these diverse and inspiring groups.

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<sup>75</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

### **Gathering the religious innovators**

In November, we'll be gathering 40+ community innovators at Harvard Divinity School, who were featured in *How We Gather*. The response to our invitation has been overwhelming and it is clear that there is a deep hunger to learn from one another, seek opportunities to collaborate, and to be in partnership as colleagues and friends in this work of transformation. From anecdotal evidence the support for religious innovators is equally lacking in this regard. We propose:

- A three-day gathering in mid-March for 50 leaders of innovative religious communities across tradition, format, and stage of maturity in Kalamazoo, MI. We would also invite a handful of older, experienced community leaders across traditions who will serve as mentors and guides. The program would be mostly peer-led, allowing for the sharing of the stories of learning, challenge and success. We've learned that this cohort of leaders does not want extensive lectures from the stage, instead a time to be open and vulnerable with one another and to learn from each other.

### **Gathering a new field: A global movement**

As Fetzer has already identified, those organizations building on the "something more" are not to be found in religious circles only. As we documented in *How We Gather*, there is a tremendous range of organizations working on personal and social transformation that fall outside of the bounds of religion serving the 55 million Americans who are unaffiliated who are part of a growing global movement.

Though this would need to be carefully managed, there is an enormous opportunity to gather together not only the religious innovators and, separately, the secular community innovators - but to bring them *together* in a broader conversation about cultural, economic and political transformation. Imagine: CrossFit leaders talking to Lutheran dinner churches talking to the US Department for Arts and Culture talking to Meetup.com. What incredible partnerships and learning might emerge?

- We'd hesitate to organize this before the religious innovators gathering, as the depth and trust of relationships in this work is key. We'd therefore propose a gathering in the early fall of 2016 in Kalamazoo, MI.
- Fetzer has a history of convening this type of gathering and is well positioned to host.

# Appendix A

Please find attached the spreadsheet with nearly 100 religious innovators, categorized according to type.

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## About Us

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