

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**“Hello, We’re Here!
Active Participation in Traditional Church Congregations
by Those in the Millennial Generation”**

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in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Hello, We're Here! Active Participation in Traditional Church Congregations by Those in the
Millennial Generation
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ABSTRACT

This project seeks to shed light on persons who are of the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) who are actively engaged in a traditional Christian congregation. Focusing on congregations of the United Church of Christ in Wisconsin, I used surveys and interviews to study pairs of siblings where one sibling is active in a congregation and the other is not. By analyzing the differences between siblings in life situations, personal experiences, and spiritual engagement, the wider church can achieve a better understanding of the Millennial generation and why some of them have chosen to participate in the church while others have not.

Differences between siblings found to be significant include the religious level of spouses, self-identity as a person of faith, and LGBTQ+ identity. Surprisingly, my data suggests that Millennial siblings who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to be actively involved in a church than their straight-identifying sibling. Hearing the voices of these Millennials directly provides perspective and understanding that the church is often missing in the conversations about this generation. Millennials who are participating in congregations are not doing so by accident, happenstance, or outside pressure—they are making active, intentional decisions to participate in church community because they care about the church.

This project is dedicated to Tobin and Lincoln, who give me endless love and support,
and to the members of Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
for giving me the time and encouragement
to do this work

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When I set out to study the Millennial generation's church involvement, the reports were that one-third of Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996, current age 23 to 38 years old), when asked about their religious affiliation, say that they have no religion or are "nothing in particular"¹. By midway through my research and writing, new reports showed that the numbers were even higher: 40% of Millennials now claim their religion is "nothing."² From local congregations to gatherings of clergy to seminary schools, for people who are *not* Millennials and are religious *somethings*, these statistics are a frequent topic of conversation, usually approached with a combination of lament and bewilderment. Where are all the Millennials? Why don't they care about faith? Why have they turned away from church? And how can we bring them back? These are questions I hear frequently; if not asked outright, they are often lingering just below the surface anytime the future of the church is discussed.

As myself someone who is both a Millennial and an ordained clergyperson, I have had questions like this pointed directly at me in a variety of settings. One church where I interned in seminary—serving as a student pastor when I was 23 years old—seemed to think that my presence there would be their 'saving grace' for the younger generations, that as a young person

¹ Michael Lipka, "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones'" (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>. Accessed 5/7/2019

² Gregory Smith, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

myself I would know all the answers and help them implement a (simple and easy) plan that would bring in all the “young people,” therefore rescuing the congregation from an uncertain future.

The “simple” answer is, unfortunately, that it is not that simple. Today’s young people have a variety of needs and concerns, some of which are similar to those of previous generations, and some of which are different, a reflection on the rapidly and ever-changing world in which we have been raised. Before the church can hope for a stronger relationship with younger generations, it needs to have a better understanding of young people and their lives. This project, while certainly not exhaustive, seeks to deepen the understanding between the church and Millennials and begin to work on bridging this gap. Furthermore, many of the projects that churches have implemented to attempt to “reach out” to Millennials and young people are efforts to spruce up and brighten things the church has already been doing; however, if we are looking for new results, we need new ideas and new ways of doing things.³ (This will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5). My project seeks to identify not only reasons why Millennials have left church, but also reasons why the Millennials who are in churches have chosen to stay, an angle that fewer people have investigated. My hope is that finding reasons why Millennials have and do choose church will create stronger bonds between Millennials and the church.

³ Gil Rendle, “Waiting for God’s New Thing: Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time - Or - Why Better Isn’t Good Enough,” April 2015, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/waiting_for_gods_new_thing.pdf.

Research Topic

My research is on the topic of the Millennial generation and their attitudes toward the church. From casual conversations among laypeople, to discussions by clergy at gatherings of the wider church, to academic studies in seminaries, church folk at all levels seem eager to talk about Millennials. The majority of these conversations center around Millennials who are “missing” or “absent” from churches, and rarely, if ever, does the conversation feature Millennials themselves. As someone who identifies both as a Millennial and as one who cares very much about the institution of the Church, I believe that my voice adds a valuable piece that is missing from the current dialogue. I seek to give voice not just to myself but to others like me: other Millennials who are also present and engaged in church congregations.

My research question is: **Among Millennials that are active in traditional Christian church congregations, how and why have they made the decision to be engaged in a church, when so many of their peers have made other decisions?**

Significance

This project is significant for me because, as someone who identifies as a Millennial and pastors a “traditional church”, I often feel overlooked in conversations about Millennials and how they do not want to join churches. Whether informal conversations or academic research, the majority of the conversations about Millennials are led by people who are of older generations. As I am a Millennial myself, this study will add a first-hand understanding to this ongoing conversation. I will amplify the voices of other Millennials who are already active and dedicated within congregations, a population that has largely been ignored by the church at large.

In the Church as a whole in the United States, and in particular within Mainline Protestantism, we know that churches are in decline. Membership is in decline, weekly attendance is in decline, church income is in decline. (This will be discussed in greater detail in the first section of Chapter 2). As Millennials continue to become more disengaged with the church, attending less regularly, and more people claiming ‘none’ as their religious affiliation, there is great anxiety within the church about our future. This anxiety is understandable. We who are in the church do need to reach out to “younger generations” if we want the church to continue into the future. However, this anxiety has led to too many ‘quick fix’ solutions that do not work and continue to turn Millennials off from further church involvement. In an opinion blog post titled “Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church ‘cool,’” progressive Christian writer Rachel Held Evans, herself a Millennial, writes, “In response [to millennials leaving the church], many churches have sought to lure millennials back by focusing on style points: cooler bands, hipper worship, edgier programming, impressive technology. Yet while these aren’t inherently bad ideas and might in some cases be effective, they are not the key to drawing millennials back to God in a lasting and meaningful way.... [T]rying to be cool might be making things worse.”⁴ Because older church members often do not understand the way Millennials think or what they need or are looking for in their lives, the “solutions” churches have tried in order to bring Millennials back to the church have often not worked. This project, by bringing forward the voices of Millennials themselves, can help to bridge some of the gaps in understanding between the generations within the church. Ultimately, my hope for the wider church is that knowing more about why some millennials *do* choose church can help strengthen

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, “Opinion | Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop Trying to Make Church ‘Cool,’” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2015, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html.

the churches' outreach to ones of the same generation who are absent.

Central Terms

Generational Theory

Dividing people into age cohort groups known as Generations is one way that social scientists have used to study and understand the changes that happen in society and culture over time. Typically, a generation will span between 15-20 years. Current generations alive in the United States include the “Greatest Generation” (born before 1928), the “Silent Generation” (born between 1928 and 1945), the “Baby Boomers” (born 1946-1964, this is the most clearly defined generational time span, based on the spike in the number of babies that were born following World War II), “Generation X” (born 1965-1980), “Millennials” (born 1981-1996), “Generation Z” (born 1997-?).⁵ Children born in the last few years will likely be part of the next generation, after Gen Z, which has yet to be defined. Some studies and researchers sometimes define the year range of generations slightly differently; for the purposes of my study I have used the age ranges and generation names used by the Pew Research Center, which has done extensive generational studies for many years.

When studying generations, there will always be individuals or groups that do not fit the “norm” of the rest of the generation. The Pew Research Center notes: “An age cohort spanning 15-20 years will necessarily include a diverse assortment of people — and often there are meaningful smaller cohorts within these generations. Changes in political circumstances, societal

⁵ Pew Research Center, “The Whys and Hows of Generations Research,” September 3, 2015, <https://www.people-press.org/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research/>.

mores and economic conditions over a period of 15-20 years can lead to people within a cohort having different formative experiences. Understanding these differences within a cohort is an essential component of generational analysis.”⁶ Additionally, individuals on the edges of generational ranges can often identify with the generation adjacent to them, or as something in-between—for example, the term “Xennial” has been used to describe the “microgeneration” of people between Gen X and Millennials, born in the late 1970’s to early 1980’s.⁷

Millennial/Millennial Generation

A “Millennial” is a member of the ‘Millennial’ generation. According to the Pew Research Center, a Millennial is anyone born between 1981 and 1996, which means persons who are currently 23-38 years old. As someone who is 31 years old, born in 1988, I am literally right in the middle of the Millennial generation. The generation before Millennials is often referred to as “Generation X”. The generation after millennials, while not entirely solidified due to their young age (the oldest among this generation is currently 22), is being referred to as “Generation Z.”⁸

Traditional Church Congregation

For my study, I will be seeking out Millennials who are active in a traditional church congregation. The terms “traditional church” or “traditional congregation” are not meant to refer to any particular theology, ideology, or denomination. I use the term as a way to describe what might be expected for a “typical” church structure – Sunday worship in a fairly traditional style,

⁶ Pew Research Center., “The Whys and Hows”

⁷ “Xennials,” in *Wikipedia*, October 11, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Xennials&oldid=920695454>.

⁸ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins” (Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

congregational membership, Christian education classes, a governance structure organized into committees/boards. For the scope of my study, I will be specifically looking at congregations in the state of Wisconsin that are affiliated with the United Church of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination.

Active Participation

When I say Millennials who are “active” within a congregation, another term that could be used here is “practicing.” In an article about Millennial affiliation with churches by the Barna Group, “practicing Christians” are defined as ones who “attend church at least once a month and strongly affirm that their religious faith is very important in their life.”⁹ For the purposes of this study, I looked for Millennials who meet all three of the following criteria: attend worship at least once a month; are official members of their congregation (went through a ‘joining process’ such as confirmation or re-affirmation of baptism, or however that congregation defines official membership); and are investing personal time and energy in the church *beyond* being present in worship. This “beyond” participation could mean any number of activities, including but not limited to: worship leadership such as being a liturgist or usher, teaching Sunday School, participating in adult education, holding a position on a board or committee, chaperoning or mentoring youth in the church, participating in the church’s music ministry, working on a church team that does service projects in the community, etc.

Not Active

⁹ “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church,” Millennials & Generations (Barna Group, September 17, 2013), <https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church>.

For the sibling pairs participating in my study, one sibling is actively involved (as defined above) in their congregation, while the other is “not active” within a church congregation. Being “not active” can mean one of two things: they may be people who, when asked about their religious affiliation, would identify themselves as a “*religious none*”: “saying they are atheists or agnostics, or that their religion is ‘nothing in particular’”.^[3] Alternatively, this “not active” sibling could be a person who may attend church, but not regularly, and they would say that church is not a significant part of their lives.

Religiously Apathetic

As we will discuss in later chapters, the vast majority of Millennials who identify as “religious nones” do *not* self-identify as atheists or even agnostics. While conducting the research for this project, I have come to understand that many of these Millennials are what I call “religiously apathetic,” meaning that religion and faith have no bearing on their life at all. Belief in God—belief in anything, religiously speaking—does not make a difference in their daily life, it simply does not matter to them. This can also be called apatheism, a term defined by journalist Jonathan Rauch as “a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's... apatheism is an attitude, not a belief system, and the overriding fact is that these people are relaxed about religion.”¹⁰ Being religiously apathetic, or an apatheist, is less about a *belief* in God and more about a *feeling* or *attitude* concerning belief in God – it just doesn’t matter.

¹⁰ Jonathan Rauch, “Let It Be,” *Atlantic* 291, no. 4 (May 2003): 34–34.

Methodology

This study took a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach. Through this study, I identified, surveyed, and interviewed Millennial sibling pairs in which one sibling is active in a traditional church congregation and the other is not engaged in church activity, with the intention of better understanding of how members of the Millennial Generation are making intentional decisions about what is important in their lives, including whether or not to be involved in a church community or congregation. In focusing on sibling pairs, I am eliminating extra variables. The sibling pairs I studied were raised in the same environment: in the same household, by the same parents, with the same childhood patterns of attending church or not attending church. Because those variables were held the same within the sibling pair, the differences that do exist in life experiences or decision making will appear more strikingly.

I chose to limit the scope of my project to focus on churches within the United Church of Christ in the state of Wisconsin. This smaller scope not only allows the project to be achievable within the required time, it also minimized other external factors such as religious cultural background, that could also have an effect on church participation. By selecting a more homogeneous sample pool, I was more able to focus on certain factors by eliminating other variables. I do realize that my findings may or may not apply to Millennials in other areas or in denominations outside of the United Church of Christ, or in other regions of the country. All of this leaves great opportunity to continue this research in the future with an expanded scope.

I identified potential research participants by contacting their pastors. There are 198 pastors (including myself) serving UCC congregations in the Wisconsin Conference. I spoke personally face-to-face or made phone contacts with 55 of them, representing a range of different sized congregations and different ministry settings (urban, suburban, small town, and rural) from

across the state. I asked pastors to identify members of their congregation who were ages 23-38 and active participants in their congregation, and to ask these folks if they were willing to participate in my study and if they also had a sibling who was not active in a church who would also be willing to participate. Through these contacts, I was able to identify 13 sibling pairs who took my online survey. Of those who took my survey, I did in-person or video interviews with 3 sets of siblings. I interviewed an additional 3 study participants who were ‘active’ church members and their ‘not active’ sibling who did not want to be interviewed. To analyze the responses, I compared the responses directly to their respective siblings, noting places where siblings responded similarly and places where they were different, and I organized all responses into the categories of “active” and “not active” and compared the trends that could be found within each category.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY AND LITURATURE

How did we get here?

The evolution of American Christianity in the last 50+ years

For the last decade or so, churches have been talking about Millennials, how the “young people” are “missing” from church, and how we might get them back. But the reality is, this is not just a Millennial problem. In recent time, all generations have shown a decrease in religious commitment.¹¹ Again and again, studies have shown that religious practice and identity continues to drop in this country—new data is released at a dizzying pace. Even as I write this project, more reports are released: on October 17, 2019, a Pew Research Center headline declared, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”¹² According to this most recent research, the “religiously unaffiliated”—those who would call themselves atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular,” now represent 26% of the adult U.S. population. Four-in-ten Millennials (up from the one-third reported in several previous studies) claim this religious “none” identity.¹³ In the last decade or so, these trends have received a lot of press and attention both within the church and in wider society. However, the drop in religious devotion and affiliation is not as recent as many people have tended to think.

¹¹ Alan Cooperman and Gregory A. Smith, “The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious ‘Nones’ in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>.

¹² Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

¹³ Smith.

Going all the way back to the turn of the 20th Century, “white mainline Protestants believed that they were on the verge of a ‘Christian Century.’” In the last hundred years of the millennium, they predicted, Christian principles would finally begin to shape national policy and world events.”¹⁴ And for the first several decades of the century, it seemed as if they were right.

In popular imagination, the 1950’s were the golden heyday of the American church. Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams, offering plates were overflowing. Even the United States government experienced this religious fervor, adding the phrase “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance, stamping “In God We Trust” onto the currency, and erecting public monuments to the Ten Commandments, all meant to be a reminder to Americans that this was a “godly nation” up against a “godless foe” in the form of the officially atheist Soviet Union.¹⁵

Within my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, the 1950’s is also seen as a ‘glory days.’ The ecumenical spirit of Christianity was at an all-time high, and out of this spirit, in combination with a strong optimism for the future of the church, the UCC was born in 1957 from the merger of what once was previously separate denominations. The UCC historical account describes the era by saying, “The first years of the church’s life began during a period of unprecedented national economic prosperity and hope, when, during the preceding decades, new church buildings had abounded to accommodate worshipers disinclined to consider denomination important.”¹⁶ This was the same year that saw the groundbreaking in the

¹⁴ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016). p 34.

¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). p 541.

¹⁶ Margaret Rowland Post, “A Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ,” in *A History of the United Church of Christ*, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.ucc.org/about-us_short-course_the-united-church-of-christ.

construction of the Interchurch Center in New York City, the building of which “represented the apex of the new Protestant enthusiasm for ecumenical unity.”¹⁷

After the close of World War II, American society experienced a “renewed appreciation for traditional values, including both patriotism and religion.”¹⁸ People were attending church both because of personal religious devotion and because of intense and growing social pressure. Church was the thing to do. “For many families now packing the pews, religious attendance was less and act of piety than an act of civic duty, like joining the PTA or Rotary, organizations whose membership rolls, not coincidentally, were also exploding in these same years.”¹⁹

Excitement was high, and most believed these trends of church growth would continue, as churches across denominations spent exorbitant amounts of money on construction (\$26 million was spent in 1945, as compared to \$305 in 1950 and \$615 in 1960, adjusted for inflation), more Bibles were being printed than ever before, and seminary enrollment grew to provide more leaders for the growing churches.²⁰

However, Robert Jones argues that the strength of the “White Christian America” was never quite as powerful or all-encompassing as it pretended to be.²¹ The growth of the 1950’s did not last, and soon many of these new construction projects sat underutilized or empty. The drastic cultural changes of the 1960’s brought with it a drastic change in the way the church was viewed by what was, at that time, the “youthful generation”—the Baby Boomers. Putnam and Campbell write,

¹⁷ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*. p 17.

¹⁸ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 83.

¹⁹ Putnam and Campbell. p 87.

²⁰ Putnam and Campbell. p 86.

²¹ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*. p 39.

The Sixties represented a perfect storm for American institutions of all sorts—political, social, sexual, and religious. In retrospect, we can discern a mélange of contributing factors: the bulge in the youngest age cohorts as the boomers moved through adolescence and into college, the combination of unprecedented affluence and the rapid expansion of higher education, “the Pill,” the abating of Cold War anxieties, Vatican II, the assassinations, the Vietnam War, Watergate, pot and LSD, the civil rights movement and the over movements that followed in its wake—the antiwar movement, the women’s liberation movement, and later the environmental and gay rights movement.²²

All of these factors that made the youth culture of the 1960’s what it was combined to create a shock to the system of churches and nearly all other institutions. Especially among the youth and young adults at the time (the generation we now call the Baby Boomers) levels of church attendance and religious identity began dropping down from the high points seen in the 50’s. Putnam and Campbell describe the changes by saying, “Catholics deserted Mass, but often continued calling themselves Catholic, whereas disaffected mainline Protestants tended to stop calling themselves Methodist or Presbyterian or whatever, so that ironically attendance levels among those who remained identified with mainline Protestant faiths did not fall much.”²³ Different churches saw the changes of the sixties happen in different ways, but across the aisle, both Catholic and Protestant churches alike were already starting to show signs of trouble.

So although the church of today seems willing to blame the current low levels of religious participation and identity solely on the Millennial generation, we can see that these changes have actually been happening for a long time: “To be sure, like their parents and grandparents, the boomers gradually became more observant as they aged. But the boomers would never catch up with the levels of observance of previous generations, and over the long run that process of generational succession put very slow, but steady, downward pressure on

²² Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 91.

²³ Putnam and Campbell. p 96.

national rates of church attendance.”²⁴ In the mid to late 1960’s, it was the Baby Boomers who were the first generation (at least in modern time) to leave the church.

After the culture shock of the 1960’s, when skepticism of institutions (especially those related to government or religion) was on the rise and religious devotion was falling, religious attitudes began to shift back again into the 70’s and 80’s. Church decline leveled off, and in some measures, began to grow again. The voices of more ‘conservative’ Americans, unhappy with the “cultural freedoms” of premarital sex, drug use, and distrust of anyone in authority that had flourished in the sixties, grew louder and more prominent. Political and religious conservatives saw a new push to attend church, rapidly growing the numbers within evangelical Protestant denominations and the newly forming nondenominational evangelical megachurches.²⁵

The rise in conservative attitudes in the 1970’s is only part of the picture of why evangelical churches grew during these two decades. These churches grew primarily through two sources: one, a high number of converts, both from other religions traditions and from the unchurched population; and two, evangelical parents have been shown to have a higher birth rate than average in the population – and they are more insistent on the importance of their children continuing in the faith.²⁶ Putnam and Campbell also offer another explanation for this growth, though it is one that is more difficult for researchers to quantify: “...the greater organizational energy and inventiveness of evangelical religious leaders in those years.”²⁷ However, this new evangelical growth in churches also would not last: “The evangelical rise ended by the early

²⁴ Putnam and Campbell. p 77.

²⁵ Putnam and Campbell. p 101-103.

²⁶ Putnam and Campbell. p 110.

²⁷ Putnam and Campbell. p 113.

1990's, and over the last two decades the number of evangelical adherents actually slumped... In twenty-first century America, expansive evangelicalism is a feature of the past, not the present.”²⁸

Through the evangelical boom of the 70's and 80's, conservatism across many levels of society – politics, morality, theological thought – grew increasingly intertwined with religion. “Organized religion achieved unprecedented prominence in public discussions. Politicians invoked God and Christ as inspiration and rationale for their actions and policies while clergy backed them up with supportive statements.”²⁹ As it gained a more prominent place around the country, conservative politics mixed with conservative religion became known as the ‘Religious Right,’ led by men such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who were both “simultaneously men of the cloth and politically astute strategists.”³⁰

Although those who agreed with this conservative religious worldview were satisfied with this movement, there were others who were unhappy. Just as the “freedom” of the sixties led to the growth of the Evangelical movement, this Evangelical growth in turn led to, once again, a turn away from religion. In the 1990's, researchers started to see an increase in those identifying as religious “nones,” rejecting identity or affiliation with any religious group, and an increase in the number of people who say they never attend church or other religious services.³¹

This rise of the “nones,” beginning in the 1990's, brings us to today, where now the total of adults, across all generations, who claim a religious identity of atheist, agnostic, or ‘nothing in

²⁸ Putnam and Campbell. p 105.

²⁹ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Explaining Why Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012,” *Sociological Science* 1 (October 2014): 423–47.

³⁰ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 119.

³¹ Putnam and Campbell. p 121-122.

particular,’ is at 26% of the population.³² Though the Millennials have the level of highest intergeneration “nones,” at 40%, this is not just a Millennial problem—the number of nones has also been growing across all adult generations, with current numbers at 25% for Generation X, 17% for Baby Boomers, and 10% of the Silent Generation.³³

Though it is sometimes assumed that atheism is on the rise, this is generally not the case. While the numbers of atheists may be up slightly, these numbers are still small in comparison to other religious groups. According to the data from the Pew Research center, currently 4% of the population self-identifies as Atheist, 5% as Agnostic, and 17% as “nothing in particular”.³⁴ The vast majority of Americans still believe in God – or at least some type of “higher power” – including even 72% of people who describe themselves as religious “nones.”³⁵

There has always been some percentage of people in the American population who we could label as “nones”, even if they would not have used that term themselves, folks who throughout the history of our country, have not attended any type of religious services and would not identify as any particular religion. However, until recently, the numbers stayed low. “Throughout most of the century, ‘none’ parents were likely to have ‘something’ children, so that intergenerationally, the category of ‘no religion’ was highly unstable” and yet stayed relatively small in numbers overall.³⁶

³² Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

³³ Smith.

³⁴ Smith.

³⁵ Pew Research Center, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?” (Pew Research Center, April 25, 2018), <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>.

³⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 139.

That being said, in the last three decades, the number of Americans with no religious identity has risen sharply. Hout and Fisher argue that this increase in disaffiliation was directly caused by the rise in religious conservative politics of the 1970's, saying "Organized religion gained influence by espousing a conservative social agenda that led liberals and young people who already had weak attachment to organized religion to drop that identification."³⁷ Putnam and Campbell identify another political and moral shift that can be seen primarily across generational lines: "Americans who reached adulthood after 1990 has markedly more liberal views on homosexuality and marijuana than the generation one a few years older than them... and those very same young people increasingly rejected organized religion."³⁸ In the 1990's and into today, young Americans have to see Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, and too politically involved.³⁹

Recently, as more parents without religious identity (members of the Baby Boomer generation) have raised their children without religion, most of these children have continued to be religious "nones" throughout their lives.^{40 41} And as the older, more religious generations are passing away and being replaced by younger, less religious ones, the change in religious identification is seen as accelerating.⁴²

³⁷ Hout and Fischer, "Explaining Why Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012."

³⁸ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 130.

³⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity-- and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2012).

⁴⁰ Hout and Fischer, "Explaining Why Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012."

⁴¹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 126.

⁴² Hout and Fischer, "Explaining Why Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012."

Some analysts have argued that this increase in the number of nones is not actually a decrease in religion, because there have always been who called themselves “Christians” but only because of social pressure, and now that it is more acceptable to be a “nothing,” they have left the religious label behind.⁴³ This is true, but is only part of the story. The percentage of Americans with “low levels of religious commitment”—measured by the Pew Research Center with a calculation that combines stating religious importance, regular attendance at worship services, daily prayer, and certainty about God’s existence—has also increased in recent years.⁴⁴ A study by Jean Twenge et al found that “in recent years, fewer Americans prayed, believed in God, took the Bible literally, attended religious services, identified as religious, affiliated with a religion, or had confidence in religious institutions.”⁴⁵

Across the decades, the one aspect about religious practice in America that has stayed constant is change. Though the 1950’s and early 1960’s are viewed with a longing gaze by some Christians, wishing we could go back in time to an era when pews (and offering plates) were fuller, this time period was in fact an anomaly in the history of American religion.

As stated above, the shift to religious “none” status was not only a Millennial experience. However, it is Millennials that represent the biggest share of this cultural shift. In the sections ahead, we will explore more deeply what is so particular about this generation, not only in regard to religious beliefs and practices, but also in other aspects of American society.

⁴³ Ed Stetzer, “Nominals to Nones: 3 Key Takeaways from Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey,” *Christianity Today*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/may/nominals-to-nones-3-key-takeaways-from-pews-religious-lands.html>.

⁴⁴ Cooperman and Smith, “The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious ‘Nones’ in the U.S.”

⁴⁵ Jean M. Twenge et al., “Declines in American Adults’ Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972-2014,” *SAGE Open* 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2016), <https://doaj.org>.

What are people saying about “Millennials”?

Over the last decade or so, countless books, newspaper and journal articles, academic studies, and blog posts (some by reputable authors, many more by random people on the internet) have sought to inform the world about the “Millennial Generation,” and what makes them tick. In social institutions, in the business world, and in the church, much has been said about how Millennials are different from previous generations.

However, Putnam and Campbell argue that we ought to be careful about labeling Millennials too soon. When we look at the habits and trends among young people, we need to be careful “to discern which aspects of behavior are what they are because the youths are young, and which aspects are what they are because of *when* they are young”.⁴⁶ Other studies have similarly argued that Millennials are not all that different from generations before them when compared to how those generations looked at that age. As we look at each of the following categories--discussing the ways Millennials are viewed in wider society, in the business world, and within the church--we will see that these debates about the truth of Millennial stereotypes and if Millennials are actually all that different from other generations will be argued in all of these arenas of life.

⁴⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 73.

Millennials in the Social World and Business World

MILLENNIALS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

Although Millennials' church participation (or lack thereof) has generated much conversation in recent years, how Millennials are engaging in other institutions and areas of life and society can similarly demonstrate their values and choices. For some observers, the Millennial generation has been known as "Generation ME," characterized by a sense of narcissism and self-importance, while other scholars point out that the self-absorbed behaviors of young people are really no different than in generations past.⁴⁷ Similarly, studies on the lasting effects of the economic recession on this generation argue against this notion of inflated self-importance (see the discussion of Millennials in the business world, below).

Another well-known characteristic of Millennials is that they are getting married later than previous generations—in fact, it is expected that a record high number of the generation will never marry.⁴⁸ Millennials are also waiting longer to have children than previous generations, and even view marriage and parenting as two separate life milestones; many Millennials are becoming single or unwed parents, and tend to be just fine with that.⁴⁹ Additionally, Millennials

⁴⁷ Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Generation Me vs. You Revisited," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2008, sec. Fashion & Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/17/fashion/17narcissism.html>; Rebecca Webber, "The Real Narcissists," *Psychology Today*, October 2016.

⁴⁸ Steven P. Martin, Nan Marie Astone, and H. Elizabeth Peters, "Fewer Marriages, More Divergence: Marriage Projections for Millennials to Age 40" (The Urban Institute, April 2014), <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/22586/413110-Fewer-Marriages-More-Divergence-Marriage-Projections-for-Millennials-to-Age-.PDF>; Kristen Bialik and Richard Fry, "Millennial Life: How Young Adulthood Today Compares with Prior Generations" (Pew Research Center, February 14, 2019), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations/>.

⁴⁹ Wendy Wang and Paul Taylor, "For Millennials, Parenthood Trumps Marriage | Pew Research Center" (Pew Research Center, March 9, 2011), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/03/09/for-millennials-parenthood-trumps-marriage/>.

households have a higher rate of poverty, are more likely to rent (as opposed to owning a home), and are more ethnically and racially diverse than previous generations.⁵⁰

As has been demonstrated by both researchers and those who wish to take a jab at the “slacking” generation, more Millennials are still living at home with their parents than other generations were at the same age.⁵¹ Compared to previous generations, Millennials are better educated than those before them, with the highest percentage of the generation holding a bachelor’s degree or higher (39% of Millennials have one, as compared to about 29% of Gen X, 25% of Baby Boomers, and 15% of the Silent Generation, when they were in the same age range).⁵² While this is generally seen as a good thing, Millennials as a whole are struggling under a collective \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt.⁵³ This debt may, at least in part, be causing the delay in independent living, homeownership, marriage, and other characteristics of the generation mentioned above.

Churches are not the only institutions struggling to retain members in recent years. Service clubs such as Rotary, Lions Club, Optimist Club, Kiwanis, and so on, have also seen membership decline at the national level, with most local clubs struggling to attract any new members in the Millennial generation.⁵⁴ Membership rates are also down among Millennials in

⁵⁰ Richard Fry, “5 Facts about Millennial Households,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 6, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/5-facts-about-millennial-households/>.

⁵¹ Richard Fry, “More Young Adults Are Living at Home, and for Longer Stretches” (Pew Research Center, May 5, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/05/its-becoming-more-common-for-young-adults-to-live-at-home-and-for-longer-stretches/>.

⁵² Bialik and Fry, “Millennial Life: How Young Adulthood Today Compares with Prior Generations.”

⁵³ Yuki Noguchi, “Heavy Student Loan Debt Forces Many Millennials To Delay Buying Homes,” *NPR*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/01/689660957/heavy-student-loan-debt-forces-many-millennials-to-delay-buying-homes>.

⁵⁴ Ben Bromley, “IN DEPTH: Shrinking Service Clubs Try to Reach Millennials,” *Wiscnews.Com*, May 10, 2019, https://www.wiscnews.com/news/local/in-depth-shrinking-service-clubs-try-to-reach-millennials/article_99763e68-f425-5253-875c-d6603a0c9dd9.html.

social organizations such as golf or country clubs.⁵⁵ Similar to what we are seeing happening in the Church, anxiety over this drop in membership is leading to groups such as the Club Management Association of America to conduct studies into the attitudes and preferences of Millennials, so that country club managers might better know how to attract them and sustain their clubs for the future.

By contrast, there are some areas of society that Millennials have a more positive view of than older generations. Compared to members of Gen X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation, more Millennials see labor unions, colleges and universities, the energy industry, and technology companies as having a positive effect on our country.⁵⁶ Interestingly, although most Millennials rate the entertainment industry, large corporations, banks and financial institutions, and the national news media as *not* having a positive effect on our country, Millennials' views on these institutions still rate more positively as compared to the other generations.⁵⁷

While Millennials are sometimes casually labeled as “lazy slackers,” the bulk of social science research refutes this and argues that, in fact, Millennials are highly engaged in society, only in a different way in than previous generations. In a massive 10-year study titled “The Millennial Impact Project,” researchers at the Case Foundation sought to learn how Millennials think about civic involvement and how they engage in social causes. Through this research, they

⁵⁵ Frank Vain, “The Changing World of Country Clubs - CMAA,” Club Management Association of America, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://www.cmaa.org/template.aspx?id=42684>; Club Managers Association of America and The Center for Generational Kinetics, “UNCOVERING GENERATIONAL ATTITUDES ABOUT CLUB MEMBERSHIPS A Landmark National Study That Dives Into Millennials and Each Generation of Potential Club Members in the U.S.,” 2016, https://cmaa.org/uploadedFiles/Research/Millennial_Insights/Millennial-Insights-Research-White-Paper.pdf.

⁵⁶ Hannah Fingerhut, “Millennials’ Views of News Media, Religious Organizations Grow More Negative,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), January 4, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/04/millennials-views-of-news-media-religious-organizations-grow-more-negative/>.

⁵⁷ Fingerhut.

argue that Millennials “want to improve the world every day and believe they can do it...

Millennials not only want to give and serve – they have a

passionate desire to do so, and they aren’t interested in spending their time and talents on

shallow involvement.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, they list ten traits that characterize Millennials’ approach

to becoming involved in social causes – “Millennials: see all of their assets as equal, are

everyday changemakers, and believe in the power of activism. Millennials care about: social

issues rather than institutions, using their collective voice, and supporting others and the greater

good more than ineffective partisan politicking. Millennials engage with causes: through a range

of sectors and industries, by employing innovative approaches, and through actions both big and

small. Millennials are influenced: largely by their peers.”⁵⁹

MILLENNIALS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

One supposed characteristic about members of the Millennial Generation is that they

have very short attention spans. Writing for *Business News Daily*, Nicole Fallon argues,

“Millennials don't seem to like staying in one place for too long. We skip songs on a playlist

halfway through, we absent-mindedly switch back and forth between apps and browser tabs, and

we can never decide which of our multiple mobile devices we want to use at any given time.

[Millennials’] notoriously short attention span has even transferred over to the workplace, where

it's not uncommon for a 20-something to have worked for three or four different employers just

⁵⁸ Derrick Feldmann and et al., “10 Years Looking Back: Understanding How Millennials Engage with Causes and Social Issues,” The Millennial Impact Report (The Case Foundation, 2019), <http://www.themillennialimpact.com/sites/default/files/images/2018/MIR-10-Years-Looking-Back.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Feldmann and et al.

in the last few years.”⁶⁰ A Millennial herself, Fallon agrees with society’s general view of characterizing Millennials as being indecisive, impatient, and non-committal. However, other studies have shown that this may be a false view of the generation. Richard Fry, a researcher with the Pew Research Center, shows that according to the numbers, Millennials with college educations “...have *longer* track records with their employers than Generation X workers did in 2000 when they were the same age as today’s Millennials.”⁶¹ Many studies note that Millennials are more highly educated than any generation previously,⁶² and Fry argues that this increase in education is, at least in part, a reason why some Millennials are staying in the same jobs for longer.

In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Sarah Green Carmichael refutes the popularly held belief that Millennials are entitled and less hard-working than previous generations.⁶³ According to the U.S. Travel Association’s “Project: Time Off”, those in the Millennial generation are more likely than other generations to fit into the definition of what the study labels as “Work Martyrs,” those who find it difficult and even guilt-inducing to take vacation time from work, because they think of themselves in the following terms: “No one else at my company can do the work while I’m away,” “I want to show complete dedication to my company and job,” “I don’t want others to think I am replaceable,” and “I feel guilty for using

⁶⁰ Nicole Fallon, “Solving the Mystery of Gen Y Job Hoppers,” *Business News Daily*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/7012-millennial-job-hopping.html>.

⁶¹ Richard Fry, “Millennials Don’t Switch Jobs Any More than Gen Xers Did,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 19, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/19/millennials-arent-job-hopping-any-faster-than-generation-x-did/>.

⁶² Bialik and Fry, “Millennial Life: How Young Adulthood Today Compares with Prior Generations.”

⁶³ Sarah Green Carmichael, “Millennials Are Actually Workaholics, According to Research,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 17, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/08/millennials-are-actually-workaholics-according-to-research>.

my paid time off.”⁶⁴ The authors of the “Project: Time Off” study suggest that these feelings are stronger in Millennials than in other generations because these younger workers came of age started working just after the Great Recession: “Coming of age during an economic downturn has consequences. When Millennials landed jobs, they brought with them a strong desire to prove themselves, intensified by the often long and painful search that preceded their first day.”⁶⁵ Even after being in the workforce for years, these initial experiences of looking for a job amid a time of economic crisis continues to affect the way Millennials behave and think as employees.

Despite wide-held beliefs across age groups that the Millennials were the hardest hit by the recession, Millennials themselves remain largely optimistic about their future earning potential and, in the future, being able to afford the life they would like to live.⁶⁶ Researcher Emily Bianchi further argues that students who earned an advanced degree and entered the workforce during a recession (which is largely true of the Millennial generation) are more satisfied with their jobs ⁶⁷ and *less* likely to exhibit characteristics of self-centeredness and individualism.⁶⁸ These studies directly speak against the popular narratives of Millennials being overly individualistic and narcissistic.

⁶⁴ U.S. Travel Association, “The Work Martyr’s Cautionary Tale: How the Millennial Experience Will Define America’s Vacation Culture,” Text, Time Off and Vacation Usage, March 7, 2019, <https://www.ustravel.org/toolkit/time-and-vacation-usage>.

⁶⁵ U.S. Travel Association.

⁶⁶ Pew Research Center, “Young, Underemployed and Optimistic: Coming of Age, Slowly, in a Tough Economy,” Social & Demographic Trends, Feb 2012, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/09/young-underemployed-and-optimistic/>.

⁶⁷ Emily C. Bianchi, “The Bright Side of Bad Times: The Affective Advantages of Entering the Workforce in a Recession,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 587–623, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839213509590>.

⁶⁸ Emily C. Bianchi, “American Individualism Rises and Falls with the Economy: Cross-Temporal Evidence That Individualism Declines When the Economy Falters,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, no. 4 (2016): 567–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000114>.

In the major report titled “The Emerging Millennial Wealth Gap,” researcher Reid Cramer argues that the primary factor that defines the Millennial generation is “likely to be their shared sense of economic insecurity, born from coming of age in the wake of the Great Recession.”⁶⁹ This study found that compared to young adults of the same age in 1989 (Baby Boomers), typical Millennials today hold 41% less wealth. Both income and wealth are lower for Millennials than previous generations. These trends are even more concerning racial minorities: “wealth gains made by Black and Hispanic families over the preceding decades were largely wiped out [by the Great Recession] and have been slow to recover, which has amplified historic inequities and created new sources of inequality.”⁷⁰ When combined with the fact that the Millennial generation has more racial diversity than previous generations, this racial wealth gap is of serious concern.

Millennials in the World of Religion, Faith, and Spirituality

MILLENNIALS IN THE CHURCH WORLD

In the book *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones discusses the major decline in church membership that has been happening over the last decades.⁷¹ This membership decline has sparked concern in churches across the spectrum of denominations. While there are many variables in the current social dynamics of our country that are leading to an increase in anxiety for many people, “...it is the disappearance of White Christian America that is driving

⁶⁹ Reid Cramer et al., “The Emerging Millennial Wealth Gap: Divergent Trajectories, Weak Balance Sheets, and Implications for Social Policy,” The Millennials Initiative (New America, October 29, 2019), <https://www.newamerica.org/millennials/reports/emerging-millennial-wealth-gap/>.

⁷⁰ Cramer et al.

⁷¹ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 48.

their strong, sometimes apocalyptic reactions”.⁷² As church membership and weekly attendance numbers continue to decline, church members and leaders alike are, to put it simply, freaking out.⁷³

Although previous generations have also been leaving the church and contributed to the overall membership decline, much of the focus is on Millennials. It is not just that Millennials are attending church less frequently or gradually slipping away, more and more Millennials are forsaking any religious identity. As Michael Lipka explains, “A high percentage of younger members of the Millennial generation – those who have entered adulthood in just the last several year—are religious ‘nones’ (saying they are atheists or agnostics, or that their religion is ‘nothing in particular’). At the same time, an *increasing* share of older Millennials also identify as ‘nones,’ with more members of that group rejecting religious labels in recent years.”⁷⁴

As discussed above, many different explanations are given for why Millennials are leaving the church and instead claiming this “none” status. Putnam and Campbell argue that one of the biggest reasons for this generation being turned off by religion is because they saw religions institutions as being too focused on conservative politics, especially around conversations of homosexuality and other issues of sexual morality. This led to many of the young people in this age range leaving the church.⁷⁵

Research by the Barna Group shows other reasons why Millennials are not attending church. In a survey asking Millennials why they find church unimportant, the top responses

⁷² Jones, 49.

⁷³ Fingerhut, “Millennials’ Views of News Media, Religious Organizations Grow More Negative.”

⁷⁴ Lipka, “Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of ‘Nones.’”

⁷⁵ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 81.

included: "...because they can find God elsewhere (39%)... because church is not personally relevant to them (35%) ... [because they] find church boring (31%) and [because] it feels like God is missing from church (20%). Only 8% say they don't attend because church is 'out of date,' undercutting the notion that all churches need to do for Millennials is to make worship 'cooler.'"⁷⁶ This same study revealed further complaints against the church: about a third of Millennials stated that they have a negative view of church because of "moral failures in church leadership (35%)," and the overwhelming majority of these young adults who do not attend church see Christians themselves as "judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), anti-homosexual (91%) and insensitive to others (70%)."⁷⁷

Findings on Millennials and religion have shifted and changed over the last several years. Earlier in the research on Millennials and religion, it appeared that even though they were not attending church regularly, they nevertheless "remain[ed] fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and practices," with Millennial's beliefs about the afterlife, heaven and hell, and miracles, looking very much like the beliefs of older generations, according to a Pew Research Center study published in 2010.⁷⁸ This same study found that, in comparing Millennials to other generations when they were the same age, about the same number of today's young people pray every day than in previous generations. However, another more recent study found that in just a few years' time, "markedly fewer Americans participated in religious activities or embraced religious beliefs... In recent years, fewer Americans prayed, believed in God, took the Bible literally, attended religious services, identified as religious, affiliated with a religion, or had

⁷⁶ Barna Group, "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," Making Space for Millennials, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>.

⁷⁷ Barna Group.

⁷⁸ Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, "Religion Among the Millennials | Pew Research Center" (Pew Research Center, February 17, 2010), <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

confidence in religious institutions.”⁷⁹ Interestingly, the analysis of this study found that “the decline in religious commitment was primarily due to time period rather than generation/birth cohort”, meaning the decline in religiosity was not only for Millennials but was found across other generations as well.

THE RELIGIOUSLY APATHETIC

As was mentioned earlier, the most recent report from the Pew Research Center shows that now 40% of Millennials claim no religious affiliation.⁸⁰ There is a common misconception that many Millennials are therefore atheists and agnostics. However, only a small percentage self-identify in this way: the same study from Pew found 8% of Millennials identify as atheists, 9% as agnostics; a much larger 24% as “nothing in particular” to arrive at the total of 40% of Millennials who are unaffiliated with religion. So if not atheist or agnostic, what are these other 24% of Millennials? While some might fall into a category like “Spiritual But Not Religious,” I have come to believe that many of them are instead religiously apathetic, or “apatheists,” meaning that religion, faith, or belief in God makes no difference in their lives – it just does not matter to them.

Opinions are split as to whether or not this religious apathy is good thing in the world. Journalist Jonathan Rauch points out that “...even true-believing godliness today often has an apatheistic flavor,” meaning that many of today’s Christians (especially in the mainline) or others of religious faith may have a personal relationship with God, but are not so concerned

⁷⁹ Twenge et al., “Declines in American Adults’ Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972-2014.”

⁸⁰ Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

about what anyone else's faith (or lack of faith) might look like.⁸¹ Rauch sees this as a great achievement for our society:

I believe that the rise of apatheism is to be celebrated as nothing less than a major civilizational advance. Religion, as the events of September 11 and after have so brutally underscored, remains the most divisive and volatile of social forces. To be in the grip of religious zeal is the natural state of human beings, or at least of a great many human beings; that is how much of the species seems to be wired. Apatheism, therefore, should not be assumed to represent a lazy recumbency, like my collapse into a soft chair after a long day. Just the opposite: it is the product of a determined cultural effort to discipline the religious mindset, and often of an equally determined personal effort to master the spiritual passions. It is not a lapse. It is an achievement.⁸²

For Rauch, religion—or perhaps humans' natural tendency toward religious passion—is to blame for much of the violence and divisiveness in our current society. A movement away from this passion and violence and towards apatheism is seen as a positive progression for our world.

Yet not everyone agrees with this assessment on the benefits of societal apatheism. In an online article for *Public Discourse*, authors Paul Rowan Brian and Ben Sixsmith argue that apatheism presents a very serious threat to the strength of Christian faithfulness. They write,

If you want to find the real wolf steering sheep away from the flock, look not to fedora-bedecked atheists, but to your average apatheist. While new atheism has undoubtedly been disastrous for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious communities, leading countless men and women into nonbelief, the question of God's existence was at least considered relevant for the new atheists. Today, however, the greatest threat to Christianity is found not in the arguments of the atheist but in the assumptions of the apathetic. The danger is not a hostile reception of belief in God but an incurious indifference to the idea.⁸³

Similarly, Pastor Kyle Beshears, of Mars Hill Church in Mobile, Alabama, cautions that in our world today, apatheism “presents a stronger challenge for evangelism than does religious

⁸¹ Rauch, “Let It Be.”

⁸² Rauch.

⁸³ Paul Rowan Brian and Ben Sixsmith, “Apatheism Is More Damaging to Christianity Than Atheism and Antitheism,” *Public Discourse* (blog), August 13, 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/08/21919/>.

pluralism, agnosticism, and atheism.”⁸⁴ This is because, at least for Christians with an inclination towards evangelism, faithful Christians and the religiously apathetic lack common ground, making it much harder to engage in religious conversation that might have the potential to convert new believers. Beshears writes, “At a minimum, atheism (and agnosticism for that matter) share a mutual interest with theism—the philosophical question over God’s existence—that acts as a platform for talking about spirituality...The apatheist, though, finds no value in such concern or interest, thus denying Christians access to common ground upon which they might build a case for the gospel.”⁸⁵ If an Apatheist has no interest in talking about religion at all, Christian evangelists have no ground to stand on. As the numbers of religiously devoted people continue to fall, and the number of “none”, religiously apathetic, or secular people continue to rise, it may be continually harder to turn the tide in the other direction.

With all of this, it is no wonder that church members and leaders are anxious about Millennials. However, it is not all bad news. One study from the Barna Group found that 20% of Millennials *do* say that going to church is important. This study suggests that how a young adult experienced church as a youth impacts their current involvement: “Young adults who remain active in local churches after high school have substantially different experiences compared to young adults who leave the church. They tend to have a wider range of positive life during their high school years inputs,”⁸⁶ especially including the experiences of having adults as mentors or close friends and events that allowed them to better understand themselves and the world. By surveying young adults who have stayed active with church and those who have dropped out and

⁸⁴ Beshears, Kyle, “Athens without a Statue to the Unknown God,” *Themelios* 44, no. 3 (2019): 517–29.

⁸⁵ Kyle Beshears, “Apatheism: Engaging The Western Pantheon Of Spiritual Indifference” (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), <https://hcommons.org/deposits/objects/hc:11094/datastreams/CONTENT/content>.

⁸⁶ “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church.”

asked them about their experiences as a youth, this study lists several factors that influence continued church involvement: having close relationships with adults in the church, understanding how to use their faith and their own gifts to impact the world around them, being involved in service projects in their community, and being able to connect to their faith in a personal and relevant way.⁸⁷ There *are* Millennials who are active Christians, and who care deeply about the church—this idea became the basis for my research. By seeking out these active Millennials, listening to their voices, and learning from their faith, the church can learn much about itself and how to not only survive but grow in today’s world.

When Millennials were first being studied in the early 2000’s, many of them were still very young. As Millennials have now entered more fully into adulthood (again, this generation is between 23-38 years old currently), and as Millennials continue to age in the future, more research needs to be done to see if what was previously thought about Millennials and religious practices and beliefs holds true or changes over time.

MILLENNIALS EXPLORING FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY OUTSIDE OF ORGANIZED RELIGION

While many Millennials are not engaging with “traditional” or institutional churches, it is not true that Millennials are anti-religious or not interested in spiritual matters. Similar to what was seen in many of the above categories, Millennials are engaging in areas of faith and spirituality, but doing so in ways that are different from older generations.

⁸⁷ “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church.”

Researchers Richard Flory and Donald Miller argue that Millennials “are actively seeking religious experience in different ways from their parents’ generation, from reinvigorating ancient symbols and rituals within their own religious traditions to borrowing from other traditions, and even creating their own rituals and symbols in the service of an embodied spiritual experience.”⁸⁸ They label the religion of this younger generation as “expressive communalism,” in which spiritual experience and fulfillment are sought in community and through various expressive forms of spirituality, both private and public.”⁸⁹ Millennials are seeking religious (or at least religious-like) experiences, but they are finding them in ways that are largely different from previous generations.

In a report titled “How We Gather,” researchers out of Harvard Divinity School name six characteristics that Millennials are looking for in these spiritual-like experiences: community (“valuing and fostering deep relationship that center on service to others”), personal transformation (“making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one’s own body, mind and spirit”), social transformation (“pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good”), purpose finding (“clarifying, articulating, and acting on one’s personal mission in life”), creativity (“allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play”), and accountability (“holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals”).⁹⁰ Although many of these characteristics can be found in religious communities as well, it seems that Millennials are finding them mostly in secular places, from intense workout

⁸⁸ Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, “Expressive Communalism: The Embodied Spirituality of the Post-Boomer Generations,” *Congregations* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 31–35.

⁸⁹ Flory and Miller.

⁹⁰ Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, “How We Gather,” 2015, <https://casperterkuile.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/how-we-gather.pdf>.

communities like CrossFit⁹¹ to opportunities to build meaningful relationships through sharing a meal like The Dinner Party.⁹²

Additionally, many Millennials who are engaging with traditional religion are doing so in very non-traditional ways. For example, the “Nuns & Nones” movement seeks to connect Catholic women religious (nuns) – over 90% of the nuns in the U.S. are over 60 years old – with Millennials religious “nones” to build meaningful local relationships that can create change in communities.^{93 94} While “traditional” churches tend to have worship time and meal time and separate experiences, dinner churches (and similar non-Christian movements, like “Pop-Up Shabbat”) blend mealtime, worship, and fellowship together all at once.⁹⁵ A similar blending happens between service, worship, and fellowship, in projects such as “Laundry Love.”^{96 97} Even if not involved in “traditional churches,” many Millennials still have a longing for finding the “something more” that makes our lives meaningful and worthwhile. “Whether you call it the profound, the transcendent, or even God, young American thirsts for that which forms the ground of our being. In everyday language, we mean what matters most: our love for family and friends, our guiding values and our sense of connection to the natural world and all that is bigger

⁹¹ “CrossFit.Com,” accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.crossfit.com/>.

⁹² “The Dinner Party,” The Dinner Party, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.thedinnerparty.org>.

⁹³ Emily McFarlan Miller, “Nuns and Nones Helps Millennials Find Surprise Soul Mates,” *The Christian Century*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/nuns-and-nones-helps-millennials-find-surprise-soul-mates>.

⁹⁴ “About,” Nuns & Nones, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.nunsandnones.org/about>.

⁹⁵ Emily McFarlan Miller, “Dinner Church Movement Sets the Table for Food, Faith, and Friendships,” *Word&Way* (blog), September 1, 2019, <https://wordandway.org/2019/09/01/dinner-church-movement-sets-the-table-for-food-faith-and-friendships/>.

⁹⁶ Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, “Something More,” 2016, https://sacred.design/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SomethingMore_F_Digital_Update.pdf.

⁹⁷ “About,” *Laundry Project* (blog), accessed November 12, 2019, <https://laundrybycurrent.org/about-lp/>.

than ourselves.”⁹⁸

What factors are known make a difference in church involvement? Why are some people religious while others are not?

It is generally understood that people become more religious as they age. Putnam and Campbell compare this trend to slowly rising up a “religious escalator” throughout life. “Most people’s religious views and habits are formed fairly early in life. All of us tend to evolve in fairly predictable ways as we age.... Most people become somewhat more observant religiously as they move through their thirties, marry, have children, and settle down.... However, people born and raised in different eras get on the escalator [of growing in faith] at different levels.”⁹⁹ This means that if a generation or individual has a lower religious level on which they are starting, they will likely never rise as high as someone who started on a higher level at the beginning. While some people seem to be holding on to the hope that this may yet prove true for Millennials—that they too will become “more religious” as they age—the data on Millennial trends points to this not being the case.¹⁰⁰ The most recent data shows *fewer* Millennials religiously engaged, not more, as they have aged.¹⁰¹

Taking a moment to look beyond just the Millennial generation, there have been many different studies that attempt to explain why some individuals seem to be more naturally religious than others. Some such studies look at personality traits. In one study titled “Basic

⁹⁸ ter Kuile and Thurston, “Something More.”

⁹⁹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 72.

¹⁰⁰ David Masci, “Why Millennials Are Less Religious than Older Americans,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), January 8, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/>.

¹⁰¹ Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

Religious Beliefs and Personality Traits,” researchers found a significant positive correlation between religious beliefs and the personality traits of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, with a negative correlation between religious beliefs and neuroticism.¹⁰² A similar study, “Personality and the Psychology of Religion,” demonstrated connections between levels of religiosity and the personality traits of extroversion, neuroticism and psychoticism.¹⁰³ While these and similar studies do not show *causality*—we do not know if an individual’s personality traits *lead* someone to be more religious, or if being religious *shapes* one’s personality -- understanding the links between personality traits and religious beliefs or practices can give another dimension in attempting to understand why some Millennials are religious while others are not.

There are also studies that compare the self-reported religiosity level among siblings within the same family. In a 2003 study on young adult (under age 30) sets of 3 siblings in Belgium, Saroglou and Fiasse found that middle-born children tend to be less religious than the oldest and youngest sibling, between which there was no discernable difference in religiosity.¹⁰⁴ However, I found no studies that make these sibling or familial comparisons specifically with the Millennial generation. I also found no studies that ask these siblings more narrative or qualitative questions about their experiences in churches or why or how they make decisions about religious involvement.

¹⁰² Gholamreza Khoyneshad, Ali Reza Rajaei, and Ahmad Sarvarazemy, “Basic Religious Beliefs and Personality Traits,” *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry* 7, no. 2 (2012): 82–86.

¹⁰³ Michael W. Eysenck, “Personality and the Psychology of Religion,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 1, no. 1 (1998): 11–19.

¹⁰⁴ Vassilis Saroglou and Laure Fiasse, “Birth Order, Personality, and Religion: A Study among Young Adults from a Three-Sibling Family,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 35, no. 1 (July 2003): 19–29.

Studies show that both race and gender affect religious devotion. Measured by many different factors, women are more religious and more religiously practicing than men.^{105 106} African Americans and Hispanic Americans, both men and women, are more religious than Caucasian Americans.¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, African Americans and Hispanic Americans also see a drop in religious affiliation from Millennials as compared to older generations, however, Black Millennials and Hispanic Millennials are overall more religious than their white counterparts, reflecting the same dynamics as older generations.^{108 109}

One of the more straightforward factors that has a hand in determining a person's religious affiliation later in life is if that person attended religious services as a child.¹¹⁰ Adults who were raised with no religion are more likely to have no religious affiliation as adults; as mentioned above, the correlation has become stronger in recent years: "Compared with earlier cohorts raised with no religion, more recent cohorts have had more secular upbringings and tend to be more secular, liberal, and wary of organized religion as adults. They are also more likely to have a religiously unaffiliated spouse, if they marry at all."¹¹¹

As Putnam and Campbell argue,

¹⁰⁵ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 233.

¹⁰⁶ Pew Research Center, "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World," March 22, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>.

¹⁰⁷ David Masci, Besheer Mohamed, and Gregory A. Smith, "Black Americans More Likely to Be Christian, Protestant than US Adults Overall," April 23, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/23/black-americans-are-more-likely-than-overall-public-to-be-christian-protestant/>.

¹⁰⁸ Jeff Diamant and Besheer Mohamed, "Black Millennials Are More Religious than Other Millennials," *Pew Research Center* (blog), July 20, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/20/black-millennials-are-more-religious-than-other-millennials/>.

¹⁰⁹ Jessica Martinez and Michael Lipka, "Hispanic Millennials Are Less Religious than Older U.S. Hispanics," *Pew Research Center* (blog), May 8, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/08/hispanic-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-u-s-hispanics/>.

¹¹⁰ Emma Green, "Keeping the Faith," *Atlantic*, November 2014.

¹¹¹ Stephen Merino, "Irreligious Socialization? The Adult Religious Preferences of Individuals Raised with No Religion," *Secularism & Nonreligion* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

The most important factor predicting religious retention is whether a person's family or origin was religiously homogeneous and observant, or not. Children of [religiously] mixed marriages are much more likely to leave the faith within which they were raised, regardless of whether we assign that family's faith to the father or the mother or to whichever faith the child was raised in. Moreover, children of mixed marriages are more likely to become nones or to attend religious services rarely, even if they become nominally affiliated with a religion. Conversely, people who were involved as children in religious activities, such as Sunday school, are significantly less likely to leave their parents' faith as adults.¹¹²

For anyone worried about the future of the church, this is even more reason to worry about "future generations", as, with general society having less and less religious upbringing or experiences, it may become harder and harder to bring "unchurched" people through our doors.

¹¹² Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*. p 142.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH

My story (and why this research matters to me)

I started seminary in 2010, having just turned 22. I went straight from undergrad into seminary, the only member of my new seminary cohort to do so. Previously, in high school and college, I was most often surrounded by my peers. Once I started seminary, I was nearly always the youngest person in any room.

My second year of seminary, I worked an internship in a church located in a metropolitan area about an hour away from the school. One Sunday after worship, I was talking to a lay leader who, seemingly out of nowhere, asked what was for them burning questions: *Where are all the young people in church these days? Why don't they care about church? What do we do get them back?* I was 23 years old and their student pastor. It became immediately clear to me in that moment that this church member expected me to be able to solve this church's "problem" of missing young people. The trouble was, I had no idea how to do that.

In the church world, my age has always been one of the primary characteristics to define who I am. Not necessarily my skills, not my interests, only my "youth". I have now been in ordained for almost 7 years. The church that I serve has a strong ministry with children and youth, and with young adults in their 20's and 30's. Within my own church context, I no longer feel "young". Yet, every time I attend meetings with other clergy or wider church gatherings, I am still one of the youngest people present.

I have long been aware that I, personally, am not “normal” for my generation when it comes to church and religion. I started regularly attending Sunday morning worship as a senior in high school. After being out late with friends on Saturday night, I would be the only one in my peer group to get up the next morning for church. Even among my family, I have always been a little of the ‘black sheep’ when it comes to religious attendance and importance in my life. I am the oldest of 5 children in a blended family. After joining a church when I was 11 (my siblings were ages 6, 7, 9, and 9), we attended church somewhat regularly, probably about once a month. But once we all got through confirmation in 8th grade, they all stopped attending—our parents included—while I continued to be involved in church.

In conducting this research, I asked one of my sisters what she remembers about church as a child. My sister, Alyson, attended Sunday School as a child, same as I did (arguably, she attended more than I did as she was younger when we began attending church). Alyson says she remembers little about Sunday School except a general feeling of confusion: “We didn’t go every week, so I didn’t ever know what was happening. I remember being confused because they were following a weekly program and we only went every other week. It was like I missed last week’s story, so I have no idea what you’re talking about.”¹¹³ Religion or faith was never reinforced at home – we didn’t talk about God or faith, we never prayed together. The drive for us to attend church seemed to come from nowhere – we never used to go to church, but then, Alyson said, “...all of a sudden it was like we had to go. Looking back, I link it to our dad and stepmom getting married. But it felt very sudden and very random that church became so important to them. I remember thinking about it when I got older and wanting to ask [our

¹¹³ Quotes from my sister in this section come from a conversation I had with her in December 2019, as we discussed this project.

parents], when did you get so religious? Because you never did this before. They would go through these random spurts where they were going to church really regularly for a while and then not ever go again.”

She went through Confirmation in 8th grade and got confirmed, because she said, “It was like that was what was we were told we had to do. After Confirmation, we could choose for ourselves if we wanted to go or not. But first we had to be confirmed.... I remember sitting there in the church, preparing for the Confirmation service, and feeling awkward because I knew I was never coming back to church again.” Alyson said that she doesn’t feel like she had faith as a child but then she grew out of it—it is more like she never had any faith to begin with. “I don’t think [my faith] changed too much because we didn’t ever put that much importance on it, [church] was just a place we had to go to every once in a while. I feel like because we were never really raised super religious, it was just like an obligation we had to do. And not even [that it was an obligation] from dad, more like this [going to church] is what people do so we have to do it to.”

Now, Alyson could count on one hand the number of times she has been to a church service in the last 10 years—and they have all been either weddings, funerals, or events in direct support of me, such as my ordination or my son’s baptism. When I asked her what her religious affiliation is now, she responded simply “not religious”. “I don’t consider myself an Atheist or Agnostic,” she said. “It’s like if you have a survey to fill out and it asks for your religion, atheism is still one of the options under the category of religion. It’s different, of course, but it’s still a type of belief system that I would call a religion. But I don’t want any of that. ‘Religion’ doesn’t fit me at all.” I have come to understand, through this project, that my sister is an example of what is common now for most of that 40% of Millennials who say their religion is

“none” or “nothing in particular.”¹¹⁴ Only a small percentage of this group self-identifies as atheist or Agnostic. The larger majority simply have no religion—what I have come to understand as “religiously apathetic.” Religion has no bearing on their life. It means nothing to them. My sister lives this out pretty perfectly.

“I can understand the community aspect of church,” my sister said. “The church has the same value as we [our family] have, as I have. But I don’t believe in the church part. And why would I go if I don’t believe any of it?” She jokingly added, “I don’t mind church, except for the whole *church* part.”

My sister tells me that there are people who, after getting to know her and understanding that she is not religious, find out that she has a sister who is a pastor (and that we have a close relationship!). They then ask her, “Well, what went wrong with you??” Alyson responds by saying, “Excuse me, but my sister is the weird one in the family, not me!” And she is right. I am the only one in the family who has had a regular and ongoing dedication to the Church.

A large part of the inspiration for this project was reflecting back on my own life: How did I end up in the position I am in, as a church pastor? I can tell stories along the way of people and churches and situations that influenced me and changed me to become the person I am today. But why me? Why not other friends and peers from my high school youth group? Why not my brothers and sisters? Why did I stick with faith (or perhaps, why did faith stick with me) when so many others in my generation did not? Even by looking at myself, I could not answer these questions.

¹¹⁴ Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

However, as I heard more and more people within church look around and wonder where all the “young people” had gone, I started to realize something else too—I am not the only one. The most recent research out of the Pew Research Center shows that the strong majority of Millennials—64%—attend religious rarely (a few times a year or less) or never.¹¹⁵ But that’s only one side of the story. 35% of Millennials attend religious services once a month or more—with 22% attending every week!¹¹⁶ There *are* Millennials attending church. I am one. I have friends who are. The church that I serve has a strong presence of Millennials who are not only attending but also actively involved.

Pulling these pieces together is what led me to my research question for this project:

Among Millennials that are active in traditional congregations, how and why have they made the decision to be engaged in a church, when so many of their peers have made other decisions?

And so, I began contacting other churches within my context—the United Church of Christ in Wisconsin—to ask that they help me connect with Millennials involved in their church, Millennials who also had a sibling that was not active in a church community. Through my contacts at other churches, I began communications with 13 sibling pairs (6 pairs from my own congregation, 7 from other UCC churches in WI) who would take my online survey. Of these 13 sibling pairs, 7 pairs fully completed the survey. For the remaining 6 pairs, only the sibling who was active in church submitted survey answers. After the online surveys, I completed 6

¹¹⁵ Smith.

¹¹⁶ Smith.

interviews. Three of the interviews included both the active-in-church sibling and the non-church sibling. The other three interviews were with only the active sibling.

Background information on the sibling sets is discussed below. The pairs are listed in a random order, with the first name in each pair the sibling that is active in church. All names have been changed.¹¹⁷ I do not list ages specifically with each participant, but the ages of all individuals in this study ranged from 26 to 36 years old. When the survey asked questions about religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, the responses were not multiple choice but instead offered a black space for participants to fill in their own responses. All participants in the study self-identified their race/ethnicity as White or Caucasian. One of the first potential opportunities to expand this study wider would include seeking out participants of more varied racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Survey Results - Comparing Siblings

1. Elizabeth and her younger brother Christopher grew up in a suburban Midwestern town (outside of Wisconsin). They were raised in a Lutheran church, attending every Sunday. Elizabeth is married with two children; Christopher is single. Both identify as straight. They both live in suburban towns now, Elizabeth in Wisconsin and Christopher several states away in the south western US. Both Elizabeth and Christopher work as teachers. Christopher considers his religious views as Atheist/Agnostic. He never attends church

¹¹⁷ To use names that were both anonymous and realistic, I looked up the “most popular baby names” for the Millennial generation. All names used here are from the top 20 girls or boys names list for people born from 1982 to 2004.

Nameberry, “The 100 Most Popular Names for Millennials—Is Yours on the List?,” Motherly, February 23, 2018, <https://www.mother.ly/life/the-100-most-popular-millennial-names-is-yours-on-the-list>.

now, and rates both church and faith in God as 1 out of 5 in importance in his life.

Elizabeth is an active member at her UCC church, attending every Sunday and teaching Sunday School. For her, church has a 5 out of 5 importance in her life, faith in God is a 4 out of 5. Both Elizabeth and Christopher completed the survey and participated in an interview with me.

2. Rachel and her older brother Andrew grew up in a rural area in Wisconsin. They were raised Catholic, attending church about every other week. Both Rachel and Andrew are married or in a committed relationship; neither have children. Rachel identifies as bisexual; Andrew identifies as straight. Andrew identifies himself as Christian, specifically as a “Non-denominational/Lutheran”. He lives in a small town in the same county in which he grew up and works as an inside salesman. He attends church a few times a year, and rates both church and faith in God as a 2 out of 5 in importance in his life. Rachel works as an adult educator and is an active member at her UCC church, attending worship every week in addition to volunteering with children and youth programming and events. For her, church has a 5 out of 5 importance in her life, faith in God is a 4 out of 5. Rachel completed the survey and participated in an interview with me; Andrew completed the survey but chose not to be interviewed.
3. Jessica and her younger brother David grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. They were raised as Catholic, attending church a few times a year. Jessica identifies as straight and is married with two children. She lives in the town where she grew up and works as a dental hygienist. She is an active member at her UCC church, attending services 2-3 times a month in addition to teaching Sunday School and being on a church committee. She rates both church and faith in God as 5 out of 5 importance in her life. Jessica

completed the survey and participated in an interview with me; David did not participate in the study.

4. Sarah and her sister Megan are identical twins. They grew up in a small town in Wisconsin, and both still live in the same town. They were raised Catholic, attending church once or twice a month. Sarah identifies as gay; Megan as straight; both are married and each have one child. Sarah works as a teacher. Megan works as a police officer. Megan identifies as a Catholic and attends church a few times a year. She rates both church and faith in God as 3 out of 5 importance in her life. Sarah is an active member at her UCC church, attending services 2-3 times a month in addition to volunteering with Sunday School and serving on a committee. She rates both church and faith in God as 4 out of 5 importance in her life. Both Sarah and Megan completed the survey and participated in an interview with me.
5. Taylor and her younger brother Matthew grew up in a suburban Midwestern town (outside of Wisconsin). They were raised in a progressive, non-denominational, community church, attending every Sunday. Both identify as straight. Taylor is married and pregnant with her first child; Matthew is single with no children. Matthew now lives in a suburban town in a different Midwestern state and he works as a CPA. He identifies his religious affiliation as “none”, never attends church, and rates both church and faith in God as 1 out of 5 in importance in his life. Taylor lives in a small town in Wisconsin works as an informal educator at a non-profit. She is an active member at her UCC church, attending worship 2-3 times a month in addition to singing in the choir, helping with maintenance on the church website, and serving on committees. She rates church and faith in God as 4 out of 5 importance in her life. Taylor completed the survey and

participated in an interview with me; Matthew completed the survey but chose not to be interviewed.

6. Kayla and her older sister Ashley grew up moving a lot as children, before their family settled in a rural area in a Midwestern state (outside of Wisconsin). They were raised attending church regularly in a variety of different churches, depending on what church was present in the community in which they lived. Some of the churches they attended included Unitarian Universalist, Progressive Mennonite, Lutheran, and Methodist. (Ashley commented that their churches “varied wildly.”) Kayla identifies as lesbian; Ashley identifies as omnisexual. Both are in committed relationships; neither have children. Religiously, Ashley identifies as Pagan. She rates church as 1 out of 5 importance in her life, but faith in God is 4 out of 5. She attends church a few times a year (only when she is “there in support of family or friends”). Ashley works as an SEO (“Search Engine Optimization”) researcher, writer, and grocery store clerk. Kayla is an active member at her UCC church, attending services every week in addition to participating with music ministry, volunteering with youth, and serving on committees. Kayla works as a welder/manufacturer. Kayla rates church and faith in God as 5 out of 5 in importance in her life. Both Kayla and Ashley completed the survey and participated in an interview.
7. Danielle and her older brother Ryan grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. They were raised attending church every week at a Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation. Danielle still lives in the same town where they grew up; Ryan lives in an urban city in another state. Both Danielle and Ryan identify as straight and are married. Danielle has three children; Ryan has none. Religiously, Ryan identifies as Lutheran, but never attends

church services. Ryan works as a pharmacist. He rates the importance of church in his life as 1 out of 5 and faith in God as 2 out of 5. Danielle works as a resource specialist for a local non-profit. She is an active member at her UCC church, attending 2-3 times a month in addition to singing in the choir and serving as a board member. She rates church as 4 out of 5 in importance in her life, and faith in God as 5 out of 5. Both Danielle and Ryan completed the survey but did not do an interview.

8. Hannah and her younger sister Emily grew up in an urban city in Wisconsin. They were raised attending a United Church of Christ congregation almost every Sunday. Hannah still lives in the same city as where she was raised. She identifies as straight and is married with two children. Hannah works as a manager. She is an active member of her UCC church (a different congregation than the one in which she was raised) where she attends 2-3 times a month, in addition to being involved with the vocal choir and handbell choir, and volunteering with children's ministry. She rates both church and faith in God as 5 out of 5 in importance in her life. Hannah completed the survey; Emily did not participate in the study.
9. Michael and his older brother Andrew grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. They were raised attending a United Church of Christ church every week - their mother was the pastor! Michael identifies as straight and is married with no children. He still lives in the same town where they grew up. Michael works as a manager at a restaurant. He is an active member at his UCC church where he attends 2-3 times a month, in addition to serving as an usher. Michael rates church as 4 out of 5 importance in his life and faith in God as 5 out of 5. Michael completed the survey; Andrew did not participate in the study.

10. Stephanie and her younger brother Nicholas grew up in a rural area in Wisconsin. They were raised Catholic but attended worship very infrequently. Stephanie identifies as straight and is married with two children. She still lives in the same town where she grew up. Stephanie works as a teacher. She is an active member at her UCC church where she attends 2-3 times a month in addition to teaching Sunday School and volunteering with other children's activities. She rates church and faith in God as 5 out of 5 importance in her life. Stephanie completed the survey; Nicholas did not participate in the study.
11. Lauren and her older brother Daniel grew up in a rural area in Wisconsin. They were raised attending a United Church of Christ church almost every Sunday. Both Lauren and Daniel identify as straight, are married, and have no children. Lauren now lives in a small town in Wisconsin; Daniel lives in a suburban town in another state. Daniel identifies his religious affiliation as "none." He works as a high school teacher. He rates church as 2 out of 5 in importance in his life and faith in God as 1 out of 5. Lauren works in business administration. She is an active member at her UCC congregation, where she attends once a month in addition to volunteering to travel and work on mission trips and serving as a Confirmation mentor. She rates both church and faith in God as 4 out of 5 in importance in her life. Both Lauren and Daniel completed the survey, neither participated in an interview.
12. Samantha and her older brother Justin grew up in a rural area of Wisconsin. They were raised at a Missouri Synod Lutheran church that they attended every Sunday. Samantha identifies as straight and is married with two children. She lives in the same town where she grew up. She works as an information support specialist. She is an active member at her UCC congregation, attending 2-3 times a month and volunteering with Sunday

School. She rates church as 4 out of 5 in importance and faith in God as 5 out of 5.

Samantha completed the survey; Justin did not participate in the study.

13. Melissa and her younger sister Jennifer grew up in a small town in Wisconsin. They were raised at a UCC church, attending every Sunday. Melissa identifies as straight and is married with one child. She lives in the same town she grew up in and works as a landscaper. Melissa is an active member at her UCC church, attending 2-3 times a month in addition to teaching Sunday School and playing on the church softball team. She rates church as 3 out of 5 in importance in her life and faith in God as 4 out of 5. Melissa completed the survey; Jennifer did not participate in the study.

What study participants said about being a Millennial

Part of my hope for this project was that it would allow an opportunity for churches to hear Millennials in their own words, rather than what is being said *about* them. In total, I received 20 survey responses. Below I have included the responses to two of the questions from the survey. Many of the responses can be seen as in direct conversation with some of the Millennial stereotypes discussed previously in Chapter 2. Some of the study participants' words reinforce the stereotypes; some of their words speak against what other people often say about Millennials. It should be noted as well that many of the participants stated the difficulty of being asked to speak to the experiences of an entire generation. Interestingly, the responses to these questions were strikingly similar when comparing the responses from those who were active in church and those who were not active in a church. (A full list of all questions asked in the survey can be found in the appendix.)

Question: What does it mean to you to be a Millennial?

Siblings who were active in a UCC church said...	Siblings who were not active in a church said...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A part of a group of the same aged people • I often find myself the only millennial in many rooms. It's challenging to speak to an entire generations' experiences. • I feel that we have a terrible reputation as a whole, but there are many things that are very different for our generation that older generations don't understand, such as insanely high student loan debt and high housing costs. • To be technology savvy, progressive, and open. • To me, it means that people automatically think that I have a bad work ethic and can't be counted on to be there when I'm supposed to be. • I don't really associate with being a millennial. I think of the more recent generations as being more self-focused opposed to others. • That I am a 30-something. • I'm on the older edges of being a millennial, so I never felt like I was one. I feel like I have to defend myself from the self-centered stereotype that Millennials tend to have. Millennials and technology seem to go hand in hand, and I am pretty tech savvy in my profession. • It doesn't really mean anything to me. • Not much • Don't really define myself by my generational name. I feel I am outside the stereotypical norm of my generation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't put much stock in generational titles. • I'm an X-ennial. I grew up Analog and as a teenager was tossed into the Digital world. The constant connectivity via the internet and social networks, the depressed wages and inability to get a living wage and sufficient health care seem to be the markers of the Millennial generation. • Not all that significant for me, I never felt like I fit the mold of a millennial. • What does it mean to me? Nothing. What are my experiences? High rent, high debt, jobs are scarce, everyone is condescending to our generation, lots of blame on our generation, other generations call us sensitive but it's ironic because it seems that everyone is overall sensitive to ideas they disagree with. It seems there are a lot more negative associations towards millennials than positive. • Nothing, it's just a generational title every generation has a 'good' people and 'bad' people. • Labels don't mean much to me.

Question: What are the characteristics of our generation?

Siblings who were active in a UCC church said...	Siblings who were not active in a church said...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User-focused. Experience-driven. • I feel there is a bit less stability with our generation. People don't stay in jobs as long. • Our generation wants things quickly, many have a high education, late to have children, late to get married, sometimes self centered, and outspoken. • I see our generation as the bridge between the "hard work, sweat on your brow, work from sun up til sun down" generation and the "fully automated, always linked in, next step to holographic computer" generation. We're tech savvy, but there's still a lot of us that know the value of being outside and getting in a hard days work. • Self-focused. Better balance on work/life. Technological. • Tech-savvy, need for recognition, change jobs frequently, waiting to get married/have children, achievement orientated, like to travel/move • Independent thinkers that are unafraid to question and/or challenge the ways "it has always been" • I tend to mostly think of the negative stereotypes - self-centered, absorbed/obsessed with social media, and that everything should just be handed to them. I do think some positives is that we are innovative without necessarily fitting a traditional educational path. • I think the millennials have many different characteristics. Some are known as lazy and not hard-working but I know millennials that are very active, go-getting and hard working. • Determined • Stereotype- childish, lazy, and fed on a silver spoon. My own thought- able to communicate, adapt, and understand all generations while working hard to balance the old with the new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student loans, tech savvy, short attention span • Fed up with the world's BS, just trying to make it through day by day. Most of us trying to raise healthy families and have the experiences that are so important to nourishing our souls and spirits. The older generations brought us to the teetering brink of a societal and cultural wasteland, while blaming us for everything wrong and bad, with the younger generation lacking the ability to care after getting their first glimpses at what is actually going on. • Technology, lazy, etc • Our generation like our society as a whole? Selfish, fact ignoring, impatient, finger pointing, environment killing. I think we live in a dangerous time where people are starting to work less with "their neighbor" and quick to ignore them. There is a lot of needless pain and suffering in the world, but people choose to ignore it because it doesn't directly impact them. I describe myself as an optimistic pessimist and surround myself with good people, yet I don't see our generation doing their part to ensure the success of the processing generation. • Depends, some people take pride in the things they do, and others don't • I think it is hard to characterize an entire generation of people in a culturally diverse country accurately. Maybe that is one of our characteristics; more nuanced and diverse? Here are some generalizations I've come across that seem legitimate, but even they are not true for every one of the age: Social media pioneers/tech savvy. More interested in experiences than possessions. Deeply affected by the great recession.

At first glance, the two categories of participants for my study—Millennials who are actively involved in a church and Millennials who are not actively involved in a church—do not appear all that different. That is to say, if I presented a list of all participants that included basic demographic information (such as: age, gender, sexual orientation, gender, birth position in the family, marital status, level of education, occupation, etc.), you would not be able to parse out the members of the active in church group vs. the non-active in church group. So what does account for the difference in church participation? This will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Comparing siblings - What might account for the differences?

Positive Memories of Church

When I started my investigation about why some Millennials choose to participate in church when others chose not to, I had several early hypotheses that turned out to be mostly insignificant. One such hypothesis was that *the siblings who are now active in church would have more positive church memories as children*, especially including having a significant relationship with adults in the church of their upbringing, and bonding with a faith mentor within their family. However, what I found in the interview conversations with research participants was that even some of the not active in church siblings had this type of experience as children.

Ashley (not church active, sister to Kayla, listed as pair #6 in the previous chapter) had fond memories of a church summer camp, and an adult volunteer who became a significant role model in her life. Ashley said, “[The church we grew up in] had a summer school/Bible school that I got to go to, and we did a ton of arts and crafts. One of the ladies there was just incredible. She really made an imprint on me at that point. And she was always so passionate about church, and about helping people, and about helping the kids discover their faith, and that really impacted me.” As a child, Ashley said, she almost never wanted to go to church initially, but then she was always glad she did. She said, “As a kid, church wasn’t something I wanted to do, I’d rather stay in my bed, but once I got there, I’d have fun. It was always an open and accepting

place, where they'd talk to us like we were human, they didn't talk down to us and they encouraged us to look at things and question and think. And we got to do fun arts and crafts and it was just such a positive experience."

Christopher (not church active, brother to Elizabeth, listed as pair #1 in the previous chapter) still points to his religiously faithful grandfather as a major role model in his life. As a child, his grandfather was his "... biggest influence [in faith]." Their grandfather would dependably come to their house on Sunday mornings to pick them up and bring them to church. After the children attended Sunday School, their grandfather would be waiting for them in the hallway with a quarter that they would use to get a cookie during the fellowship time. Both Christopher and Elizabeth name this as their most significant memories of church as children. Even now as an adult – and one who identifies himself as an "agnostic/atheist", Christopher says that if he is in a situation that he is unsure about, he often wonders to himself how his grandfather would handle it. His grandfather has always been a very significant figure in Christopher's life. He said, "And even still, with our grandfather, it's hard to not be around him and be influenced in that way because [faith in God is] such a huge part of his life. And I would love to ask him more questions about it and what he actually thinks. It's almost like Grandpa believes this stuff, of course, I want to be like him."

Both Megan (not church active, twin sister to Sarah, listed as pair #4 in the previous chapter) and her sister spoke very highly of experiences that they had as teens in their Catholic church. They participated in a youth group program that was not only fun for them, it also provided a sense of community and growth (which we will see below as aspects of church life that are critical to Millennial involvement in church). About this youth group, Megan said, "It was the most positive experience that they provided for us. It was community driven, we went on

retreats, the music was great, we actually wanted to attend services, there were discussion groups that we participated in.”

Negative Memories of Church

Another hypothesis that I held as I began this research was that *the non-church-active siblings would have significant negative memories from church experiences as children and youth*. And while it is true that these siblings with whom I spoke did have some negative memories of church as children, I also found that many of the siblings who remained active in church also had significant negative experiences in churches or church-related groups.

Although Sarah and her sister Megan did have a positive experience as teenagers, Sarah’s earliest memories of church are, as she put it, “traumatic.” She distinctly remembers coming into the church for their early sessions of Confession/Reconciliation, back in first or second grade. She said, “I vividly remember standing in the line at church, having to go in, thinking this was an awful idea, whoever conjured up this one. I really don’t remember the actual process of it, I just remember before, being there and being nervous about it. A torturous thing.”

Rachel (sister to Andrew, listed as pair #2 in the previous chapter) remembers being bored in church and religious classes as a child, not understanding what was happening. Although she attended religious education classes regularly as a child, she does not remember learning much in them. She said, “Our religious ed classes were more goofing off because of the people in it; no one seemed to ever take it seriously or really know about the topic either.” In worship, she remembers spending a lot of time not paying attention, but instead just looking at the walls or the stained-glass windows. Neither education nor worship were conducted in ways

that were engaging, informative, or formative for her as a young child. She said, “They explained it, but we were young and not paying attention or goofing off, and so it didn’t stick.”

Jessica (listed as pair #3 in the previous chapter) is an active member of her church now, but had very negative church experiences both as a youth and an adult. Her childhood memories of church involve mostly how her mother was treated by the church community. She said, “I think [faith in God and going to church] was very important to my mom, but she was criticized completely because she had been divorced. And I remember her coming home crying because the church did not accept her anymore because she was a divorced person. And, oh my gosh, I’m just remembering this in this moment—that is one of the things that put me off about church. Like, how dare that church not love my mom and accept my mom... I didn’t want to be a part of anything that didn’t love my mom and didn’t accept my mom. Because it wasn’t her fault.... Even though they didn’t accept her completely, she still kept trying, because it was a part of her traditions, it was a part of her bringing up. She always tried to be a part of the church because it was always important to her. But I don’t remember going very often. I think we didn’t actually go very often because I think the way she felt when she was there.” Despite this experience, Jessica and her mother continued to attend worship at the Catholic church until Jessica was a teenager, at which point she had a specific experience that turned her even farther away from the church. She said, “I remember they put a transparency up [on display in the front of the sanctuary], saying how I should vote based on gay marriage. And they were telling me to vote against it... I started getting up to walk out, because that was against any moral compass I have. I feel it right here [in my heart]. Who are they to tell me how I feel? They can educate me, they can teach me the Bible - I feel what I feel. How dare they tell people they can’t love one another. I just felt so sick over it. I still get so sick over it. My mom’s like, ‘You can’t get up in the

middle of church, blah blah blah.’ And then I resented her for that, for making me stay there. And that was like the last straw. I’m like, I’m never going to church ever again. Never.”

Some years later, as an adult, Jessica did go to a church again. She got married, and church was important to her husband, so she gave it another try (the influence of spouses on religious involvement is discussed in much greater detail below). Before they found the United Church of Christ congregation of which they are now members, Jessica, along with her husband, briefly attended a WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) church. Jessica’s stepson was attending a school through the church and so they would attend in support of him when he participated in presentations during the service. Jessica described their experience at this church by saying, “[That church] did not incorporate women really at all, and I felt like we were completely shunned as a visitor in that church. So that was a bad experience. We could not accept communion. And I just felt like even other people in the parish would look at us, not say hi or be friendly. And we could have been potentially members.”

Both groups of Millennials in my study – the ones who are active members of church and their siblings who are not – had significant adult role models of faith when they were children *and* both positive and negative experiences in church as children and youth. So what does account for the differences in church involvement as adults?

The Influence of Spouses

The most significant factor that I found in conducting this study was *the influences of a spouse*. If a Millennial was raised in church, even nominally, and then married someone who had

interest in church, they are more likely to now attend together. If they married someone who was not interested in church, more than likely they are both now *not* active in church.

The clearest example I saw of this in my research was the case of Sarah and Megan. Perhaps because they are not just sisters but also identical twins, they had many similar experiences in church as children and teenagers and remembered many of the same aspects of both attending church themselves and also how their parents felt about and expressed their faith. As adults, Sarah and Megan still have similar understandings of faith, spirituality, and the role it plays in each of their lives. And yet, Sarah is very involved in her church, and Megan—while she does consider herself a member of her Catholic parish and attends occasionally—will freely admit that she is not involved in anything at the church and she has few, if any, significant relationships with other church members. For these two sisters, the difference in what might be accountable for their disparity in church involvement is their spouses. Megan's husband has little interest in attending church, while Sarah's wife has always been very driven towards church involvement.

This is what Megan said about her husband's faith (emphasis added by me):

When I met him [in high school], I almost had to convince him to attend [Catholic youth group events] with me.... We now have similar views and beliefs, in that we agree with some things that the church says, and we disagree with other points. We want faith and religion to be part of our life, however he's never [interested] — it's like pulling teeth to get him to go to Mass. He dresses like he's going to go, but then he doesn't. **As a couple, because it's so hard to get him to go, then it's hard for me to go, so we end up planning other things on the weekends.** It's also hard because we have always been weekend workers, we've never worked a regular Monday through Friday work shift... we've been so busy. **We have other things to do in life that we then have prioritized over going to Mass on Sundays. It's challenging to get him to be interested in going to church.** We've had the conversation: should we be going to a different church, that we'd feel more involved in and that we would actually want to go to? We've had that conversation, and yet we have yet to pick another church.... He's not a spiritual type of person, he doesn't really pray on his own or talk to God about things. When we do go [to

church services], he's there because he's supporting me in it.... He doesn't have the desire to go to church, he almost always chooses other things. He's just not interested.

This is what Sarah said about her wife's faith:

In our family, [my wife] is the arrow who points us to religion. Not to spirituality... Quite frankly, I think I'm more theological than her, and research based, and interested in the Biblical history behind it all, I'm always asking questions [of our pastor]... She doesn't come up with stuff like that. But the community of church and the religion itself, that's really what drives her and she cares a lot about that. And so I care a lot about that, because of her.

For these two sisters, it is clear that their spouses' feelings about faith and involvement in church has had a large impact on their own practice of faith.

Returning to Jessica's story, with the negative experiences she had in churches, it is likely she would not have returned to one on her own. However, when she married her husband, he was the one who kept her willing to give church another chance. Jessica explained her initial return to church involvement by saying,

When I got married.... [the pastor] must have been talking to [my husband], and [my husband] has always been a big part of church. [The pastor] had made a comment, 'If you are here, [Jessica] ought to be there too!' It made me think a little. I have never had any thought to be a part of anything in the church. I was [previously] like ok, I'll show up, and I'm going to leave [without getting really involved] [Going to church] is no question with my husband]. It's habitual, it's what he's known, it's what he's always known. And I suppose he's kind of helped push me when I've had days of not wanting to go, he's been like 'you can do this.'

For Jessica, there were a number of factors coming together, including encouragement from friends who were active in church, and especially a feeling that she had, in the church she is involved with now, finally found a church community that is welcoming, loving, and encouraging. She loves the work she is able to do there, especially with the children of the

church. But it was through the support of her husband and his faith that brought her back to a community of faith.

Other church-going Millennials that I interviewed for this project spoke of the faith of their spouse as perhaps not the primary reason they became involved in church, but as an encouraging and supportive factor in their own church attendance and participation. For example, Kayla (sister of Ashley, pair #6) spoke about how going to church was not just her decision, it was a decision that she and her fiancée made together. They both were raised in a church as children, and although there had been good and bad experiences for both of them, they knew they wanted to find a church where they could attend together.

For Millennials who were raised attending church, marrying someone who has an interest in religion, faith, and church community can have a large impact on their continued participation in church. On the other hand, there are always exceptions. Anecdotally, I can bring to mind a number of people whom I have known in churches throughout the years who have attended church while their spouse stays home, totally uninterested. In my study, an example of this was Taylor (sister to Matthew, listed as pair #5 in the previous chapter). When describing her husband's faith, Taylor said,

My husband was raised Catholic, went to a K through 8 Catholic school, had a very negative experience in that environment... He wasn't necessarily suited for the rigor or the structure that was expected. So he formed a very negative perception of Christianity and religion as a whole. Then upon meeting me, we had to figure out what that looks like for us to have different opinions, and where's the consensus on that, and how does that look while we're expanding our family.... So we started to figure out, he likes to hear me sing, so he comes [to worship services] when I'm singing. He likes a good potluck, so anytime there's a church potluck, he'll come. He's not a member of the congregation, there was never an expectation [from me] that we needed to do it as a family unit.

Taylor was able to keep her personal commitment to faith and her relationship to her non-church spouse because she was intentional about communicating with him about it. “It took some trust to get to that point,” she added. Understanding that church was not something they would do together, Taylor prioritized it for herself. They have different routines on Sunday mornings, and they are both ok with that. “When I go to church and have choir practice, and the service, and I’m hanging out after and I’m doing my thing, he’s doing his thing, the thing that he needs to unwind for the week, which is usually grocery shopping and cooking and watching a sports things.... Whatever he needs to do on that Sunday, that is his choice and his time, and he knows that I need this choice, that I designate this choice for this time in my life.” The situation became more complicated though once they started planning on having children together. Taylor said,

But then when we started to plan starting a family, for me it was very important that he trust my judgement enough in any group of people that I would choose to involve our children in, whether that’s a play group or a school or a church community, that he trust my judgement enough that I would want our child actively engaged in this component until they can make the decision that it’s not for them, if and when that happens. And it was funny because he said, “But they can’t just say it just because they want to sleep in; that’s not an excuse”.

Because Taylor and her husband have both been clear about their priorities and desire (or lack thereof) to be involved in a church community, Taylor has continued her involvement in church, despite her husband’s disinterest.

Tradition

For Millennials, there is sometimes a sense of *tradition* tied to their involvement in church. They think to themselves, going to church is what we did as kids, so I’m going to keep doing it for myself/my kids. But for Millennials, this idea of tradition is usually not a sense of pressure from parents or other external factors tied to that tradition; it is a self-motivated

tradition. They remember benefiting themselves as a child, so they want their children to benefit from church involvement too. For example, Elizabeth talked about concerns for her children as one of the primary factors why she is involved in church:

I think religion plays a role for me now because I want my kids to have an opportunity to find morals in a place that I did. I don't think church was the only place where I found that, but I think it was one [piece] of a pie that helped fill in some morals for me. If nothing else, hopefully it can become another place where my kids feel comfortable, where they can be themselves and feel like people appreciate them and like them. I feel like in church a lot, that's a very positive place. School can be hard, family can sometimes be hard, church you might not always like, but in general you're going to find people [at church] who are nice and caring, and so far I feel like that's what it is for them [my kids] too. I feel like I want to get more involved now because I have a family and I've been at this church for a little bit, so it's important for me to give back.... For me, part of the reason why I want my kids going to church is because I don't want to be the only person trying to teach them to be a good person, and church helps with that.

When church members of older generations talk about Millennials, I often hear that Millennials' decisions to wait longer to have children, have fewer children, or choose not to have children at all as reasons why Millennials are disinterested in church involvement. While it is hard to say if this is a cause of the disinterest in church, I do feel that the conversations are related. In my study, I do not feel that I have enough data to voice anything definitive about the link between children and church involvement. In my study, there were people who were not involved in church who did have children, there were also those not in church who did not have children. However, all of the siblings involved in church either had children, were expecting a child, or were planning on having children in the future. None of the church-involved Millennials I spoke to were ones who were uninterested in having children. This possible connection between desire to have children or not and the desire to be involved in church or not could be one avenue for future research.

Personal Identity and Personality

Another factor of Millennial church involvement is that Millennials who are active in church stake a piece of their *personal identity* on that involvement. In interviews, when I asked them to define themselves, they almost always included something along the lines of “Christian,” “person of faith,” or even “child of God” as a personal descriptor. It is built into who they are and how they see themselves in the world. If a Millennial has a strong sense of self-identity when it comes to church – this is who I am or this is who I want to be—this can over power some of the other factors that might distract from being involved in church (for instance, disinterested spouses, the “busy-ness” of jobs or children, or bad past experiences in church). Churches are often places that encourage us to think about life’s “big questions”: Who are we? How did we get here? Is there more to this world than what appears on the surface? What will happen to us after we die? The Millennials who were involved in churches were interested in addressing those questions, in thinking about them and struggling with them and responding to them from within the place of faith in God. The Millennials who were not involved in church were, for the most part, disinterested in engaging with these big questions. These questions did not matter to them or have any effect on their daily lives.

Both Jessica and Elizabeth talked about a “nagging feeling” that pushed them to be involved more with church. When they were initially asked to volunteer at their church, part of them did not really want to become more involved, because they were already so busy with other parts of life and did not want to make an ongoing commitment. But something inside them just kept pushing, kept nagging at them until they said yes and agreed to volunteer with Sunday School or serve on a committee. But where does this sense of personal identity, the drive to wrestle with the “big questions,” or this internal nagging come from? One possibility would be

that perhaps, like other aspects of a person's personality or certain abilities or skills, some people innately have a personality for interest in church and faith and other people do not. Like other skills and interests, it can be encouraged but outside forces, but perhaps some people are simply averse to the type of community, involvement, belonging, or world understanding that churches offer.

Taylor, talking about the differences between her and her brother, Matthew, and Matthew's disinterest in the questions of faith, said,

My brother's brain is structured very much like my dad's in that my dad was a math and science teacher; he is very analytic but also very emotional. My brother got all of that, but without the emotional piece of it. He sees things in black and white, it's right or wrong, yes or no... And there's so much grey in religion and spirituality, and in people. And if you're involved in a church, religion and spirituality and people are just what it is. Those cannot be black and white. We weren't raised in a situation in which religion was black and white, we were raised in a situation in which religion was grey. And [my brother] took that idea of question it, question it, question it, [that we were encouraged to have as children] and he questioned it enough that he was like this isn't for me. There's too much grey here..... In conversations with him now that we're older there's not a negative thing, just that he doesn't believe in it, he doesn't need to believe in it to live the life he wants to live. I respect that decision in him.... I thrive in the grey. It's fun and it's challenging and it's messy -- and that's not who he is, very similarly it's not who my husband is.

For Matthew, the traits of his personality are such that he is uninterested in the "grey," the sense of unknown and mystery, that is involved in faith and religion.

Similarly, Christopher talked about growing up and not needing to hold on to a sense of faith. He said,

As a kid, [faith] was one of those things that I didn't question it. You're told and so it's like ok. The only thing for me, for as long as I can remember, I didn't believe in those stories you tell kids - Santa, the Easter Bunny, stuff like that. For as long as I can remember, I thought, "This is asinine, there's no way that this guy goes down the chimney to every house, there's no way!" So that with the story of Jesus, it was a similar thing, like you're telling me this guy turned water into wine and walked on water?? I accepted it, but I think the main reason why I accepted it or

just choose to believe in it was the fact that the only thing I'm scared of in life is death. Religion gives you this sense of "Hey, there's an afterlife, so don't worry." As a kid, whenever I would get high anxiety for a week of just thinking about death, it was like yeah, but don't worry, there's something afterwards. So that was really its role for me as a kid.... Then in college.... I started to think, do I even believe in any of this? The answer was no, so how could I say I was a Christian? It was a freeing moment for me, because it was like I didn't have to pretend, I didn't have to act like this is right. I'm a social studies teacher, I learn about other religions and teach about them, so how am I to say that this one's right? I would rather say I'm agnostic, because it's simple for me to say, "Is there something? I dunno, I guess I'll find out. Could there be nothing? That as well." ... I chose to let it go and it was a freeing moment where I didn't have to be pretend anything.

For Christopher, even as a child, he was always doubtful about the teachings of faith, always suspicious about religion. That was always who he was. As he got older, the change for him was not so much about losing or even "outgrowing" his faith, but rather having the self-confidence to admit that he is not, and never really was, a person of faith.

Based on the sibling pairs I interviewed, there does seem to be a difference in personality between the church goers and the non-church goers. But which way does the causality happen? Are people with certain personality traits naturally more likely to be interested in church? Or does participation in church shape certain personality traits?

The research that I did in this study seems to suggest that it is the personal traits shaping the church participation. That is to say, each sibling in the pair was raised together attending church (though the specifics of what that looked like varied from family to family, within any given sibling pair church attendance was held constant). If church attendance affected personality, both siblings should have ended up in the same place as adults. But because the siblings within a pair have different personalities—and have made different choices about church attendance—this would suggest that it is the personality traits causing the church participation.

Faith and Sexual Orientation

For me, another factor of church involvement to come out of my research that was both the most interesting and the most surprising, is a connection between Millennial church involvement and **identity as an LGBTQ+ person**. It has been shown that overall, LGBTQ adults are much *less* religious than the general public: a 2013 report from the Pew Research Center showed that almost half (48%) of LGBTQ adults have no religious affiliation.¹¹⁸ The reasons behind this are understandable. The same study reports that 29% of LGBT people say they have been made to feel unwelcome in a place of worship and view the majority of religious institutions, and churches across denominations, as unfriendly toward them.¹¹⁹ Although attitudes towards LGBTQ people have become much more accepting in the past few decades (and even in the 7 years since this Pew Center study was published), there remains still a portion of the population – especially in religious circles – who are outspokenly against same-sex relationships. The Pew report states, “[A] significant share of the public believes that homosexuality should be discouraged and that same-sex marriage should not be legal. Much of this resistance is rooted in deeply held religious attitudes, such as the belief that engaging in homosexual behavior is a sin.”¹²⁰

That being said, my research suggests that for Millennials (at least those who have found the right combination of circumstances, such as a supportive family and at least knowing of the existence of more progressive, accepting churches) the opposite may be true. In my study, when Millennials siblings were raised together in church and one sibling came to identify as LGBTQ,

¹¹⁸ Paul Taylor and et al., “A Survey of LGBT Americans” (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.

¹¹⁹ Taylor and et al.

¹²⁰ Taylor and et al.

that sibling is more likely to be involved in church as an adult than their straight-identifying sibling. Why is this happening, especially when it contradicts the published data?

I have found that this sense of self-identity as a Christian or Child of God, or the desire of belonging to a church community, is linked, at least for some, to an identity as an LGBTQ person. For Millennials who grew up in church and came to understand themselves as LGBTQ, these two identities (Christian and LGBTQ) likely often clashed and caused some level of conflict or discomfort within themselves because of the church's historic stance against LGBTQ people. This internal conflict forced them to find a way to reconcile these two pieces of their identity within themselves. I hypothesize that for LGBTQ Millennials who were raised in church, this internal struggle pushed them to a place of either rejecting religion/religious community all together, or fighting to embrace it. This sense of forced choice means that now, as adults, they are less likely to fall into the "religiously apathetic" position of so many non-religious Millennials. For the folks I interviewed, this internal struggle between faith and personal identity led to a stronger desire to name themselves as a Christian and to find a Christian community that would be a place of acceptance for them. Because of this internal struggle, their identity as a person of faith mattered to them more than others who could choose to be more casual about faith, religion, or spirituality.

As a teenager in the Catholic Church, Sarah realized that she was gay. The teachings of her faith led her to struggle internally, believing she was going to hell. However, through that struggle, her faith became stronger. These are her words:

While I was a teenager in the Catholic Church, I knew that I was gay. It drastically changed my perspective on myself while I was in high school, because they church was telling me that I was going to hell. So for many years as a teenager, I was like, I can't be gay—I've got to do everything I can to not be gay, because I'm going to go to hell, and I don't want to go to hell! So I went through that phase, and then

basically got to college and said, you know what, I do not believe that God could possibly send me to hell, when someone could kill someone and then go into a reconciliation booth and apologize, and they're not going to go to hell, but I'm gonna go to hell because I love someone else! So I came to that realization, and whether that's just a manifestation in my head, or whether it's a real thing, I don't know, but I decide that.... So from there, in college, I said, let's see what else is out there in different religion forms. And I got involved in some other more "free" Christian groups, and I thought they were too free - going from Catholic to these super free churches really blew my mind, and I didn't like how free it was. There is something comforting in the rules in the Catholic religion - you always know what to expect. But even these "free" Christian groups were still not accepting of LGBT groups. So it still wasn't a good fit. Free does not mean accepting, that's for sure. So from there, what really really changed things for me was probably [meeting my wife] the most. From there, I probably would have stopped being a religious person, and I would have just done what I call being spiritual. But [my wife] desperately wanted a church, to have a church to belong to... it was probably because of her that we even found [our current congregation] or became a part of a religion, because she wanted that.

Kayla similarly struggled to reconcile her faith with her sexuality. Although she had been raised as a child in a more progressive and accepting church, as a teen, her understanding of faith had become much more conservative. After coming out as gay as a young adult, she struggled to figure out how that could fit with her faith. Kayla spent several years away from church, before her self-understanding as a person of faith and desire to be part of a church community brought her back. She said,

In high school, it was like this is the Bible, this is what the Bible says, and that's God's word. And then it changed [when I went to the] Bible College, because I had more knowledge to back it up, and I had a better understanding of what things are actually saying, rather than just taking it at face value... Coming out at 21 really changed my perspective of Christianity. I had come to terms with me and my life in relation to my relationship with God – and then just a ton of crap kept happening, and I didn't have a church to go to either, because I'd moved to very rural Michigan. The chance of finding a church that's ok with a lesbian [felt] very slim. So I think that helped me grow as a person as well, and so now I've been slowly coming back and trying to restore my relationship with God. I guess as far as Christianity, I was pretty conservative in high school, then going through the years, I have knowledge to go with it, but also I've been able to form my own opinions. I feel like I'm a surfer dude of Christianity now – I'm not conservative anymore, but I'm not completely liberal either, so I'm kinda in the middle and I'm ok with where I'm at... In high school I was active in church, and even then I liked

the sense of community, and helping to organize Christmas eve services and stuff that that, it was something I really enjoyed. So after almost 10 years [of not being in church], I wondered if [fiancée and I] could find a church around here because that would be cool. So I asked her about it, because I knew she used to go to church, and she agreed that it would be cool, so I started to research churches, and she did too.

Eventually, after putting in a considerable amount of effort trying to research churches in order to find one where they would be accepted, through a friendly neighbor, Kayla and her fiancée found the church (an Open and Affirming congregation in the United Church of Christ) where they are now active members.

The final example of this from my study is Rachel, who identifies as bisexual and describes herself as a Child of God. Raised Catholic, in college she participated in Cru (formerly known as “Campus Crusade for Christ,” a conservative and evangelical Christian organization for college students), but struggled knowing that, because of her sexuality, she could never fully be herself as part of that community. It was this internal struggle that later strengthened her to proudly claim both of these pieces of her identity. These are her words:

I had a friend [in college] that was involved with Cru and she said why don’t you come check this out, lots of fun, gave her whole spiel. She invited me to come, and I jumped in and went with it. I enjoyed the first nights, so then I continued going. Then I joined their Bible study there, it was a women’s Bible study, so I met a good number of other women who were part of Cru. I built a connection there, and it was nice to have that community. But at that time, I wasn’t out, and so it was difficult to figure it out because I knew I was hiding a piece of me from the whole world. So I was a part of [that community], but I knew I wasn’t completely myself because I couldn’t be at that time, so I couldn’t get the full experience.... [Later, my partner] and I were looking for a church because we had a discussion, we both grew up going to church, but we wanted to be more involved. We weren’t sure how to do that with being an LGBT+ couple. Somehow, we magically found [the pastor of the church we now belong to] who told us, “Yeah, we have others who attend our church who are a part of the LGBT community.” So we kinda just gave it a shot, though being nervous as could be. We took a jump, took a risk, and tried it out and since day one, we kinda just got hooked. We really enjoyed the friendliness of the people there and the positivity and it was just really welcoming. And it’s continued ever since we’ve been a part of it. It was a pretty easy decision that we knew we wanted to become members of the church because we felt so

welcome there and felt so cared about, and that's what we needed.... [After becoming members, I was asked to] give my testimony at church... I was nervous as heck the whole time. But being able to share that and then feeling so welcomed, and still loved after.... It was just such a wonderful experience being able to share that and not be shamed because of who we are or who I am. It was like I could feel comfortable around these people and I don't have to hide myself. It let me know, God's looking out for me and he's here for me, and he's making me stronger though all this. It's been one of the most powerful things that's really stuck with me. Here I could be [my full self] and people are like its ok, share your story, we've got you and we're here for you, you can do it and we'll still love you no matter what.

For Sarah, Kayla, and Rachel, their internal struggle to reconcile their childhood faith with their sexuality pushed them to deepen their faith as adults. They chose to claim their faith and their sexuality as part of their identity, and search for a church where they would be fully accepted as part of the community. Their siblings, on the other hand, without this inner struggle, did not internalize faith as a part of their identity, eventually deciding to leave the church or fade away from faith.

Another example of bad experiences

Although I mentioned earlier that there are cases of Millennials overcoming the bad church experiences of their childhood to remain active in church as adults, it does seem that for some of the non-church siblings in my study, they had a **bad experience of church turned them away for good**. The clearest example of this is Ashley (older sister to Kayla), who told me this about her experience as a teen and young adult:

As I got older, I started encountering the more negative aspects of Christianity... I was a very adaptable person [having moved around a lot as a kid], so I'm very good with people and very good with adapting to new situations. I would start doing whatever the people around me were doing, and within a few weeks, most people around me didn't know that I was a stranger. So I started going to youth group. We went to one called "Powerhouse" – it's all the music and lights and fancy speeches and frickin' people speaking in tongues. My dad called them a bunch of loonies. And at first it was a lot of fun, but then I started paying attention

and I thought, this is kind of weird. It was a little cult-like. And then the youth group at the [next church we attended], people started telling me like “meditation will let in the devil,” my yin yang symbol was an evil symbol, just the most bizarre, to me, absolute bizarre. Then they were showing us videos about how evolution was fake and showing human remains next to dinosaur remains, and all this faux science stuff.... And then I started encountering more and more Christians who are just hateful and judgmental, just incredibly full of... negativity. And at church or outside of church, they were always convinced that they were 100% in the right, 100% factual on everything, and that’s not how life is. And even at that age, I knew something was off here. And they would never have a discussion, they would just tell you something. You know how many times I’ve been called a devil’s whore, or that I’m going to hell – it definitely started affecting my view. Especially when our parents taught us to question things, people don’t always know what they are talking about, look into it. But the more I started to push back [against church people and their beliefs], the more I started to say, this isn’t for me, and I started looking at other paths. At this point in my life, unfortunately, I will specify if I know someone who is a *good* Christian, because that is not the norm. A good Christian is someone who lives by the words of Jesus and is open and wants to help people and lives a good code. And a lot of Christians just think it means you get to point the finger at people and call them names. Then I saw what Bible College and church did to [my sister Kayla] - she started becoming a lot more conservative, a lot more narrow minded. She’d come home and say, “women should not be above men, women should not teach men,” this is what they were teaching her. And I was like “huh??” So much closed mindedness, so much hate and negativity, it drove me away. And I realized I could live by my own ethical and moral code without a book telling me what to do, and I don’t need a bunch of hopped-up judgmental people telling me that I’m going to hell. I screw up sometimes, but I do my best to be good, to do good things and help other people. If I’m going to hell because I don’t pray to a certain God or don’t bend the knee in a certain way, then I guess I’m going to hell, because I’m not going to live by those rules.

For Ashley, a series of bad experiences turned her off from church for good. Even though she admits now that she has occasionally attended Kayla’s church in support of her sister, feels comfortable there and likes the community, she feels like her sister’s church is the exception to what churches are about, and she has no interest in becoming a part of one.

Survey results: Why are you involved/not involved in church?

In addition to the interviews, in the survey portion of my research, I asked participants why they were or were not involved in a church. Reflecting many of the aspects we have already discussed, these are their words:

Question: List reasons why you are involved in your church OR reasons why you are NOT involved in church.

Siblings who were active in a UCC church said they are involved because....	Siblings who were not active in a church said they are not involved in because.....
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am involved in church because I feel a part of an amazing group of people who love God. I feel loved, supported and wanted at church. I have never once felt judged in any way. • I grew up with a sense of community + place associated with the church I attended, and when I moved to my current community I wanted to put down similar roots. My involvement has grown because of the amazing people I meet that are a part of the congregation and/or friends of the church + because of the support I receive through my connection to this particular community of faith. • I love the community. And how welcoming it is. • It helps me to feel like I belong, I feel like I am contributing to a greater good, and I like the people. • I am involved in my church because I love the community and fellowship with my family in Christ. Going to church, even during the week, always makes my day better. Being involved at my church helps me to grow as a person and a Christian, often when I don't even realize I need to. • 1. Desire better faith 2. Love doing music 3. Community & relationships • faith development, friendships, spiritual • 1. So my children will know and grow in their faith/relationship with God 2. My church is open and affirming of all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation 3. My church family is a close-knit group of like-minded individuals 4. To further grow my faith and relationship with God • My children (at least my oldest) have attended church school and/or use the nursery, so I felt compelled to give back. They also asked for volunteers. I wanted to become more of a part of the church community, and being a teacher already, I thought teaching church school would be a natural way to do so. I really like the church, so it feels rewarding to get to know more people. • The community is supportive, caring and helpful. Welcoming to the LGBTQ + community even though they are not ONA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitments, work commitments, interest • I stopped believing in God, it did not remain a priority in my life • I'm not Christian. I go to church to support my sister, or in other locations, to support family or friends. • Lack of time, disagreement in beliefs, kinda boring sometimes, and there do not seem to be many opportunities to get involved that I would be interested in • 1. I don't believe there is a higher being or God, and even if there is I don't believe any religion is close to knowing anything about God. 2. I think church is like government. Good to help organize society and try to influence good behaviors, but bad because a lot of religions/churches abuse their powers 3. I think many churches are hypocritical in the sense that they will follow the Bible verbatim on certain issues that follow their ideologies/agenda, but will be loose on other parts of the Bible if it is inconvenient to them 4. As a child I was taught what to believe and think when it comes to religion. As I grew up and started to critically think for myself, I just couldn't buy into religion. 5. I never cared for the church community. It seems that a lot of people show up and put on their best personality, but then are a totally different person outside of church. This isn't true for all people, but even still. I like sarcastic/crass personalities and it seems that isn't found in a church - or at

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I love teaching but wouldn't be able to do it as my actual job so I teach Sunday school. Plus I think it's important that all kids learn about God and religion so that they can make the choice of continuing their faith as they get older. • 1. I feel at home and welcomed 2. Pastor help myself and my family in times of need when we had never attended this church. • Love, Faith, Respect, purpose 	<p>least that is extremely frowned upon there.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't have interest to attend • Moved away from home church, have not been interested in joining another. No longer religious.
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For Millennials, there is no “outside” pressure to attend church. As was discussed in Chapter 2, one of the reasons why church attendance in this country was so high in the 1950’s was because it was *expected* that everyone go to church. Society as a whole put a great amount of importance on being a church member. If anyone did choose to leave church, there were (or at least could be) consequences within the social, business, and familiar realms of life. However, for Millennials (and most other generations now too), there are no practical consequences for not being part of a church. People can choose freely. Furthermore, for Millennials, there are sometimes social consequences *for* being in church, having to give up time that might be spent working, with friends, at children’s sporting activities, and so many other things that now happen on Sunday mornings. Millennials, especially those who are in committed relationships and have young children, have so many demands on their time.

Both within my study and in the wider church, the Millennials who are engaged in church are there because they want to be there. Millennials who are participating in congregations are not doing so by accident, happenstance, or outside pressure - they are making active, intentional decisions to participate in church community because they care about the church. They are actively choosing this as how they want to live their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The World has changed, and is still changing

There's no denying that the world we live in is different now than ever before. We seem to be "after" so many other eras: our society is described as postmodern, postcolonial, post-Christian. We have technology right at our fingertips greater than the world has ever known. Our economy is globalized, and our world is more interconnected than ever before. Our environment is in crisis. With the whole scope of human history behind us, all of this change has occurred within the last hundred years or less. And yet, so much of the practice of the church is largely unchanged over that same period of time.

For some, this stability found within churches has been immensely beneficial to them. The church has provided a place of comfort, a known value in what feels like an unknown and unstable world. They depend on the church to be a constant presence in their lives. But the hard truth is, churches overall are shrinking and closing. From 2008 to 2018, the United Church of Christ witnessed a net loss of 438 congregations and 286,825 church members.¹²¹ This situation is far from unique—other denominations are facing similarly stark losses over the past decades. What we're doing as church isn't working anymore.

¹²¹ The UCC Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD), "United Church of Christ Statistical Profile" (Cleveland, Ohio: The United Church of Christ, 2019), <https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/2019-UCC-Statistical-Profile.pdf>.

This shrinking of church, in membership, budgets, and social stature, has been happening since the 1960's, but it seems that churches have mostly started to realize these trends in the last couple of decades. In recent time, churches have attempted to implement all sorts of strategies to keep people interested and engaged. Yet the strategies that we are using to deal with this are largely just trying to "improve" on the old strategies and make them better. The problem is, these are the things that aren't working!

Gil Rendle, an ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church and senior vice president at the Texas Methodist Foundation, draws on his experience as a consultant helping churches wade through change in his essay "Waiting for God's New Thing: Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time, or Why Better Isn't Good Enough." He describes the difference between improving (taking what we already know how to do and doing it better and more efficiently) and creating (doing something new and unknown, something we do not already know how to do).¹²² He writes this of what he saw in church denominations desiring change:

[M]ost of the new church starts that I see are not new creations. Yes, of course, they result in new congregations. But, most frequently they are another iteration of, or an improvement of earlier efforts of, a process of doing something that we already know how to do. We develop new strategies and engage new partners, such as parenting congregations to share the effort of new church starts. Yet the result is a congregation, much like the more vital ones that we already have, most frequently in communities most like the communities we are already most effective in, engaging more people (the affiliated) most like the ones we are already most comfortable and competent with.... We deeply need these new congregations. Let us be careful to neither diminish the need, nor the hard work required, to produce these new church starts. Even among the "species" of the affiliated, a new congregation, without pre-established norms and traditions from earlier generations, is more attractive and engaging. However, ... I suggest that these new congregations are an example of us doing what we know how to do. They are improvements, not creations.¹²³

¹²² Rendle, "Waiting for God's New Thing."

¹²³ Rendle.

Rendle argues that starting a new congregation, within our existing denominational structures and mostly resembling the congregations we already have, is not a new creation, but is instead an improvement on what we already know how to do – congregational church. In order for the church to survive into the future, we need to be willing to create new things, to wade into waters we don't understand, to experiment with solutions we haven't even thought of yet. We need to create "...New faith communities, in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people, which resonate with those who choose not to affiliate with organized religion."¹²⁴

Another way to view the current struggles of churches is through the lens of technical problems vs adaptive challenges. Technical problems "may be very complex and critically important... [but] they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how."¹²⁵ Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, "can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew."¹²⁶

For churches, trying to figure out how to survive into the future is an adaptive challenge. And yet, we are treating it as if it is a technical problem. We want a program we can follow, steps we can take, a quick fix for "How to Attract Young Families to Your Congregation." So much of what I have seen happening in the conversations that churches were having about Millennials is looking for "quick fix" solutions to the problem. What is the straight-forward and manageable thing we can do to bring the young people back to our pews (with the unspoken

¹²⁴ Rendle.

¹²⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 19.

¹²⁶ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 19.

addition – and keep everything else we do the same)? The problem with this thinking is that it oversimplifies the problem and attempts to move to solutions too quickly without really understanding what is happening. As Heifetz et al. point out in their book, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, “In most organizations, people feel pressure to solve problems quickly, to move to action. So they minimize the time spent in diagnosis, collecting data, exploring multiple possible interpretations of the situation and alternative potential interventions”¹²⁷ My project in these pages is a beginning attempt to help my organization – the institutional church, and most specifically the United Church of Christ – better understand the “problems” that the church is facing with the Millennial generation, by spending more time in the early stages of diagnosis, data collection, and exploring interpretations. Only after spending the time doing the hard work of observing and understanding the adaptive challenges in front of us will we be able to move into a stronger future.

This adaptive work is difficult because along with changes that need to be made within our church system, there comes a feeling of loss and grief. As Heifetz explains, “[S]ystems, organizations, families, and communities resist dealing with adaptive challenges because doing so requires changes that partially involve an experience of loss.... It requires a modification of the stories they have been telling themselves and the rest of the world about what they believe in, stand for, and represent.”¹²⁸

This sense of loss within the church is often felt in congregations, if not spoken about. Erik Parker, a Lutheran pastor in western Canada describes some of his experiences as a pastor through his blog, *The Millennial Pastor: An iPhone Pastor for a Typewriter Church*. One

¹²⁷ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 7.

¹²⁸ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 22- 23.

posting, titled “On Being a Millennial Pastor – Leaders who don’t remember the glory days,”

Parker describes the many conversations he has had with parishioners and other church leaders

(who are nearly all older than he is):

[A]s I had yet another conversation with colleagues or parishioners or other church folk lamenting the absence of young people, the decline of attendance and giving, and the general sad state of the present church... it dawned on me. **These people are grieving.** As soon as I could see it, it was like pulling back the veil and seeing the weight being carried by nearly everyone around me. Everyone of a certain age that is.

The glory days were gone. The days when pews were full, Sunday Schools bursting at the seams, programs well attended, giving was enough to pay the bills and increasing, when every family had 4.2 kids and a housewife who would devote volunteer time to the church, or keep the house in check while her husband did. Those days were over. But it wasn’t just that those days were over, it was the intense desire to bring them back. Churches, pastors, leaders who could remember those days seemed to be universally bound and determined to somehow bring that glory back. Get the young people back, get the families back, fill the pews, resurrect the Sunday Schools, meet and exceed the budgets.

My problem, as a young pastor was, I wasn’t grieving the glory days with most people around me. I wasn’t grieving them because I don’t remember them.

Even though now I have almost a decade of experience under my belt, I am still a young pastor by mainline standards. And it has always been tension [between] the church that most people around me are grieving, and the one that I have always known and loved.... The church has always been filled with grey hair in my memory. Sunday School has always been pretty sparsely attended, youth groups have never been more than a handful of kids, budgets have always been hard to meet, and there are rarely times when it is hard to find an entire pew to yourself in worship.

This is only version of the church I know... and it is the one I am called to serve.¹²⁹

Overall, in the church we have been telling ourselves a story of the “glory days” of the past,

when pews and classrooms were full. We have envisioned ourselves as an institution that

provides a solid and unmoving foundation of moral values, social services, education, and divine

interaction not just for our members but for the entire society around us. This vision is not a bad

one; it served churches well for a time. For a while, the stability of the church was helpful to its

¹²⁹ Erik Parker, “On Being a Millennial Pastor – Leaders Who Don’t Remember the Glory Days,” *The Millennial Pastor* (blog), March 12, 2018, <https://millennialpastor.net/2018/03/12/on-being-a-millennial-pastor-leaders-who-dont-remember-the-glory-days/>.

presence and growth. But now, things around us are changing in a way that our stability – in particular, the structure and polity of churches and denominations as a whole – is becoming more restrictive than helpful. What used to be assets are now holding churches back, as we are unable to be flexible and adjust to the needs of people around us. As Gil Rendle put it, “At the same time, a steady, stable agreement of denominational identity and practice does not serve us equally well in times of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ [as the world we live in is rapidly changing]. When the change in the mission field is abrupt enough, and of a magnitude that challenges the very assumptions of the denominational paradigm, polity is experienced as constraining and prohibitive, rather than steadying.”¹³⁰

What are Millennials looking for in a church?

Perhaps to begin an answer to this question, we can look again to the Millennials who *are already* actively engaged in churches. What do these young people appreciate about church? What are they looking for when they search for a church to join? What draws them into churches and keeps them connected? In my research, I identified two primary characteristics that Millennials look for in churches. For Millennials, these attributes are some of what is primary to what it means for a church to be a church; it is what draws them into church and keeps them connected and involved there. The two characteristics that I identified in my research are *community* and *purpose*.

¹³⁰ Rendle, “Waiting for God’s New Thing.”

COMMUNITY

For the Millennials actively engaged in church communities, community was consistently listed as both a personal value for their lives and an important aspect in the churches they are a part of. When asked about her personal core values, Taylor specifically listed “community” as the first one. Sarah’s first core value was “authenticity,” followed by “relationships, with all kinds of people.” When asked to describe themselves, both Kayla and Rachel talked about a personal importance of caring for other people. Jessica described herself as someone who loves other people “too much,” to the point that it gives her anxiety. When these Millennials were talking about church, community was about having relationships that are deep, genuine connections with others; relationships where one can be fully oneself without fear of judgement from the other person. They are looking for communities that involve these relationships with both their peers and across generations. They do not want just friendly niceties, but desire to really get to know other people. Millennials are looking for communities where they can feel a sense of love and belonging akin to a feeling of family, where they can have conversations of importance even when they disagree with someone.

Jessica describes this sense of community when she spoke about the first time she visited the church where she is now a member, after having had several negative experiences of feeling disconnected, unwelcomed, or shamed by other church communities. She said,

I remember the very first sermon I heard [the pastor] give the very first time we visited. It was about faith. He said “faith” like 20 times in this sermon, “You just have to have faith”. Like, just have faith. He kept repeating that, repeating that. I was like, “Is he trying to tell me something?” Should I just have faith, should I just try again, should I just leap and connect with this church? And then after the sermon, [a church member] made a point to come up to me and start up a conversation, and I just felt such a moment of warmth and welcome and loving that I’ve *never* felt in a church. I just had never felt that same feeling before, and I was like, “Oh this is kinda good, is this what it could be like?” ... [Previously,]

I've never felt welcome at church, ever. I've never felt anyone wanting me to be there. And I felt like people wanted me to be there when I went [to the church I am now actively involved in]. ... As I started coming to [this church], I found connections, I found love, I found what I could even call family.

For Jessica, the simple act of a church member coming to talk to her after worship made her feel welcome and showed her that this was a church community of which she would want to become a part.

Kayla spoke about the importance of searching out a church that allowed her to grow her faith in the company of others with whom she could learn and grow alongside. She said, “[Faith in God and being part of a church community] one and the same - I can incorporate reading the Bible in my life, but if I don’t get that fellowship and interaction, it’s very one sided and based on my knowledge, there’s no room for the Spirit to work. [Faith and community] are tied together.” For Kayla, she sought out a church to become a part of because she knows cannot be a person of faith without a community surrounding her.

Elizabeth described what she and her husband appreciate about their church as being a community centered around diversity and acceptance. She said, “My husband really did the research behind this church, he found it, and we started going, and [from] day one, we really liked it. ... It's very open, and diverse, and they believe in what we believe in, which is to say that you can be kind of whoever you are and you are accepted, and [we celebrate an] open table for communion. And very family involved.” For Elizabeth, the aspect of a church being a community that was accepting and encouraging to all people was of high importance in their life of faith.

For Rachel, an accepting and supportive community was an essential aspect of church because of her college experience as part of Cru. Although being involved with Cru “opened up

[her] faith more,” and she developed some connections with other women in her Bible study group, she also admitted, “I knew I was hiding a piece of me from the whole world. So I was a part of it, but I knew I wasn’t completely myself because I couldn’t be at that time, so I couldn’t get the full experience.” Since moving to where she lives now and finding a church where she can fully be herself, she is so grateful for the sense of belonging and acceptance she feels as part of her church community. The first time she and her partner attended this church, they were “nervous as could be.” Rachel described feeling like they were taking a huge risk, not knowing for certain if the church community would accept them. Rachel and her partner did find acceptance in this church, so she said, “[W]e kinda just got hooked. We really enjoyed the friendliness of the people there and the positivity and it was just really welcoming. And it’s continued ever since we’ve been a part of it. It was a pretty easy decision that we knew we wanted to become members of the church because we felt so welcome there and felt so cared about, and that’s what we needed.” Since then, she says, “[My faith] has grown immensely. Kinda makes me think, I don’t know where we would be if we didn’t find a church, if we didn’t find an accepting group. We wouldn’t have met half the friends and bonus family we have in our life. It’s like, what would we be doing, who would we be talking to, who would we be engaging with [if not for the church].”

Taylor also spoke about finding a community in which she could feel like she belonged and build relationships across generations as a primary factor in her search for a new church home as an adult. She said,

In terms of being involved in church, I think the community piece of it just falls in line with so much of how I structure who I am.... So when I moved back to the Midwest and put down roots, it became important for me to find first and foremost a community of people. [The church I found was a] place where I could sing, but also when I started meeting people - I was 23 or 24 at the time - [I met] a group of people where there were so many amazing women who I looked up to and they

were just doing amazing things in the community, volunteering, or in these high powered nonprofits or all these different places, or they had all these beautiful children or they were raising kids or doing this or that - or whatever they were doing with their lives, it felt like I was hugged by all these awesome women who were part of the congregation. I thought, “Oh, this could be a place where I could have mentors and feel like I can come into my own, and I can have opinions, and people might disagree with me, but they won’t shun me because of it”.... That's one of the big reasons why I like our church community that I’m involved in right now, there’s this big breadth of ages of people who are involved and engaged, and I think that’s so important.

For Taylor, she knew she had found the right church when she found a community of women of which she could be a part and develop deep and meaningful relationships.

For these church-going Millennials, finding the right church *community* has strengthened their sense of faith to the point that they have oriented their entire lives to become full participants in their churches, because of the welcome and acceptance they have felt there. On the other hand, I also heard some of these same desires for community and connection with others reflected by the Millennial siblings who were not involved at church – but they had not found a church that they felt truly reflected these ideals. Sometimes, this led them to the point of feeling that churches in general were not places of welcome and acceptance, but were instead places where people are disingenuous and unfriendly.

Christopher explained his disinterest not only in church but also in other similar organizations and institutions by saying, “One thing that I dislike about organizations, for example church, is that you go to these things and I feel like people put on this face, this mask, and they are like, ‘I’m at my best behavior because it’s church,’ and it's not real. At least that’s always been my experience of going to any church, or even church-related organizations or stuff like that. And so it’s hard to find organizations where people aren’t just putting on their best face and aren’t as genuine. That’s why I like doing casual things with friends. Or if I was going to

join something, it would be something casual, people aren't feeling like they have to put on this face." For Christopher, his previous experience at churches has led him to feel that they are not places of true community but instead are characterized by false niceties.

For Megan, she has remained a member of her Catholic parish, but she has not found a community connection in this church. Desiring this connection of relationships with other people, Megan and her husband have found a sense of community in other places, namely their "CrossFit family." She says,

I feel like there are not very many opportunities to get involved [at our church]. I know there are things to get involved with, however I don't feel like it's a community. I feel like my CrossFit is a better community - we love our CrossFit family, everybody knows everybody, we get together and do things together and we go to things together, we obviously work out together. So I feel like that's a bigger community than my church, which is a huge parish in [the city we live in], yet I can probably tell you the name of many 10 other people in the church - and that's because I know them outside of the church! They don't create many opportunities to get involved. I haven't felt a pull to get involved in the church because I don't really know what I would get involved with, I don't know where I would start or what I would do.... Unfortunately, [church community] has become an aspect that I haven't gotten involved in, not because I haven't been interested in getting involved, but because I feel that the [opportunity] isn't there.

Because she has not built meaningful relationships within her church, Megan spends less time there and much more time where she does have deeper relationships, with her workout group.

Overall, the Millennials who do desire to become members of a church are looking for a place where they can find community, a place where they feel welcomed and accepted and where they can build meaningful relationships with people across generations. These relationships will continue to draw the Millennials into the church and keep them connected.

PURPOSE

In addition to a desire for community and real relationships, Millennials who are active in church place a high priority on a church having *purpose*. For Millennials, church needs to make a difference, to accomplish (or at least work towards) goals and get things done. They need to see that something is changed because of their participating in church; this change can be within themselves personally, within their church as a whole, or in the wider community outside of the church. If Millennials feel like everything always stays the same whether they go to church or not, it is not worth the effort they are investing to be there. Millennials, especially those who are in committed relationships and have young children, have so many demands on their time. If a church (or other organization) is lacking in purpose or stalling out without getting anything accomplished, a Millennial is likely to feel that it is not worth their time to be there, and will probably leave.

Sarah explained this not only about church, but also for another community organization she was involved in. She explains, “One of the reasons I haven’t been going to [another community meeting] as much [as I used to] is because I felt like they were dancing around and talking too much and not getting things done. And that’s one of my first things - I’m not going to spend time away from my child or not doing something with my family or not focusing on something at home, to go to your meeting and this organization if we’re not taking it anywhere. So my first criteria is that we have a purpose and that we’re going to do something and get something done. And then from there, I ask do I feel like it’s valuable for our community.” Whether she is spending her time in church or in another organization, Sarah wants to know that her time is adding value and accomplishing something. She added that, in addition to church, she also spends time coaching youth sports. She chooses to spend her time on this because she likes

mentoring youth, and it has a clear purpose. She said, “Part of what I like about sports is its very focused, there’s always a goal, it’s very clear. It’s not wishy-washy. [And it] usually doesn’t have to do with money or anything superficial.”

On the other hand, Millennials also have experiences with churches that lack a clear purpose, and this is often a discouragement for them. Ashley, one of the non-church siblings I interviewed, explained that the church she grew up in did not do an effective job of teaching aspects of faith to help children understand what was important. She said, “One of the greatest things about [the church of my youth] was how laid back it was, and that was also one of its weaknesses. It was a little too laid back, a little too casual. Which made me feel super comfortable, but for stuff like Confirmation [and baptism] and stuff like that, there wasn’t enough form to it, so I think they suffered for that.” Within that interview, her sister Kayla responded back, “That’s why I like [my current church] because it’s still laid back, but there’s also that structure put in place, so that when things need to get done, they actually get done.”

It is not enough to say that for Millennials, churches need to have a purpose and leave it at that. Because purpose necessitates that the church is working for or towards their goal. What are the specific purposes that Millennials are interested in working towards? In my interviews, I found two purposes that Millennials find meaningful and are willing to work towards within their churches: giving back to others and learning or self-growth.

When Jessica first received a call to serve on a committee at her church, she wanted to say no, but then she felt what she describes as a pull from God to say yes so she could help other people. She said,

So I got a phone call, in the early part of the year, to become a member of the Board of Christian Education. My immediate response was to say no, and I just felt

this *huge* tug, huge tug. I wanted to say no, but the words wouldn't come out. I had to say yes. I feel like it was God's way to say, "Jessica, you're better than this, you have a lot to give to this world, you have a lot to give to church and people in church." So that's how I started to become a part of [volunteering at church]. I completely feel it was God's will. That gut-wrenching, guilty feeling that you have when you want to make a decision in your head, but you feel a pull to help even though I don't want to.

Jessica explained that she had not wanted to volunteer because she felt overwhelmingly nervous about being in leadership. However, her nerves were overpowered by the sense that she felt God calling her to give back to her church by being in this position.

Elizabeth spoke about the purpose of "doing good" as her reason to be involved in church despite her doubts and questions. Explaining the difference between her and her husband, whose doubts sometimes lead him to pull back from church involvement, she said, "I think [my husband] is more open with the struggle of believing in one religion, and the idea of still struggling with the idea of what happens after [we die]. I do too, but he's very vocal about 'We could just die, and that's it!' I get that, but I'm still going to go to church. I don't know, maybe I'm an idiot, but I still am going to do this, and it's because I believe in doing good, and this is a good, positive place." For Elizabeth, the desire to accomplish something good keeps her motivated and active within her church.

Kayla also expressed giving back and helping others as a primary reason she is involved in church. She said, "[Being part of a church] gives us [my fiancée and I] the opportunity to help others and to use many of our social skills and other gifts and a way for us to give back - we're at a point that we can't always give monetary donations, so we try to supplement that with our time." For Kayla, being part of a church involves her in the church's purpose of helping other people. This is one of the instances where the stereotypes about Millennials ring true: because of outstanding student loan debt, still being early in their careers, and/or the high costs of having

young children, many Millennials feel they do not have much money that they can donate to causes they want to support. Instead, they prefer to give their own time and personal investment toward accomplishing the purposes that they care about.

The second purpose that the Millennials in my study sought out in churches was the goal of learning or self-growth. For example, Sarah described her excitement when she heard the pastor of her church preach a sermon that finally “got it right.” I asked her to tell about a time she felt “spiritually fulfilled” at church. She told this story, “Being a teacher, and wanting to grow—I go to church is to learn ... And my huge beef with 99% of sermons is that they are impossible to follow and I don’t learn anything from sermons, and that is normally one of my really big problems with church. But [a particular sermon I heard from my pastor] I was able to follow and understand, and the message was clear, and I think everyone else understood too. For me, that’s what it is about, for me it was like, ‘Oh my God, somebody got it right! Hallelujah!’ I was so happy, and that was very impressive to me. That for me was the biggest connection point within our church.” For Sarah, a change happened internally from the learning she experienced during this sermon. The potential for this internal learning, growing, and changing is one of the primary reasons she continues to attend church.

For Jessica and Rachel, the self-growth they find in church is specifically tied in with their feeling of community. Jessica said, “As I started coming to [this church], I found connections, I found love, I found what I could even call family. And that family holds me up. And I feel like I am stronger. I feel like I am kinder, more patient. I’m a better person having these connections. And I understand that, I acknowledge that, and I want to continue being that kind of person.” Similarly, Rachel said, “[My partner and I liked the church we now attend] because it gave us a good sense of community, we wanted to be surrounded by good people.

Whenever we go there, it lifts us up more. It gives us a support network of people who really truly do care and are willing to share their stories or their God moments and inspire us, or at least myself, to live more in God's eyes." For both these women, their purpose in being involved in their churches, in continuing to come back again and again, is to be a better person – a person who is good, stronger, kinder, more patient. They have both seen a change within themselves, a change for the better, after being involved in their churches.

For Taylor, when she was looking at becoming a member of her current congregation, she knew that it was important for her to find a community that lined up with her value of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within the church. As she watched the church have this conversation, she also came to appreciate the care the church took in the community education involved in that discussion. She explained it this way,

My congregation was going through the process of [discussing whether to become Open and Affirming] during the first year that I was involved. I decided not to become a member until the vote went through, because I was like, "Oh, if this sh*t goes down, I'm not sure this is the congregation I want to be involved in," because this is so important to me. So I went to all the things and the community meetings, knowing that I wouldn't get to vote [because I wasn't yet a member], but wanting to know how it would all play out. It went through with flying colors - there were a few members who had left, and of course that was their decision - but overwhelmingly it was this really cool education process, there were these people in the beginning who said we don't need to be doing this because we already our doing this, it was this reeducation of why this is so important.

Taylor saw a change happen within her church through this education process that resulted in growth—not necessarily growth in membership, but spiritual growth—for this congregation.

This spiritual growth internal to the congregation would then have an external effect on supporting the LGBTQ+ community in their wider setting. The experience of this learning and spiritual growth and the potential for it to continue to develop into the future is one of the main factors for Taylor in her involvement in this church.

Related to this purpose of learning and self-growth, some of the Millennials I interviewed also talked about appreciating their churches for encouraging them to struggle with the “tough questions” in life and to learn through questioning. Rachel talked about her personal growth and learning in church, with gratitude for her pastors in encouraging her questions. She said,

[Being active in church] has opened up my mind a lot more. I feel like I have a better understanding. Between [the pastors at the church], there’s been a lot more explained [than at the church I went to as a kid]. And maybe it’s me being an adult and understanding things more, but it gives me a more open mind and better understanding for the Bible. And it’s great to know I have [my pastors] as people I can ask, “Can you explain this to me?” or “What does this mean?” or “To you, what does this mean?” or “How is this supposed to be taken?” It’s nice having that, where as when I was younger, it seemed to be closed off. I wasn’t comfortable [asking questions] and that makes a huge difference, when you are comfortable discussing something.

For Rachel, the encouragement to ask questions about faith has led to learning which has led to more questions. This learning and questioning has kept her engaged not only with her personal faith but also with the church. Similarly, Taylor felt that part of the purpose of her church growing up was learning through questioning, and this mindset has continued to keep her wanting to learn more and stay engaged in church as an adult. She said,

The environment [of my home church] was a great place to grow up. One of the coolest parts for me was that right in the mission [statement of the church], diversity is cherished, and there’s something about questioning, and that’s just interwoven into the entire education system of the church and everything they do with the youth, like questions are good - ask the questions, ask them more, find the answers, question those answers. [The church encouraged being] community with people who want to have dialogue with you figuring out those answers. Sit with yourself when you realize you can’t find the answers to some of these questions, this might not be the time for that. The whole idea of being really inquisitive when it comes to religion and faith was super formative for me. It weaves into so many different aspects of my life right now, that you can’t just take things at face value, it’s important to be reflective and to question and to search, and to debate - and debate with people who might disagree with you and realize that you might change your opinions.

For Taylor, one of the most important values in her life is learning and education. Experiencing this in church first as a child, she knew she wanted to find a church community that also worked toward learning and growing.

Another way that some Millennials I spoke with found purpose in learning and growth was through the education of children. Elizabeth talked about educating and shaping her own children as one of the purposes that she was involved in church. She said, “For me, part of the reason why I want my kids going to church is because I don’t want to be the only person trying to teach them to be a good person, and church helps with that.” For many Millennials, this purpose of helping children to grow in faith is not just about their own children but others in the church as well. Four out of the six church-active Millennials I interviewed with teach Sunday School or volunteer with another aspect of children’s ministries at their churches. Jessica said that she feels closest to God when she is teaching children at Vacation Bible School. She said, “The connections I make with the little kids, the connections I make with the youth, I feel like they open up to me and I feel such a sense of closeness to God when we’re [gathered all together outside for the closing worship service each evening].” For some Millennials, a vital aspect of learning and growth is helping to form the faith of children. For them, this is part of what motivates them to continue being part of the church.

To review: when Millennials who are wanting to participate in church are looking for a church to call their own; they are often looking for a church that has a genuine community and is driven by the goals of helping others and learning together. Millennials want to find a church where they can develop relationships where they are accepted and supported; and Millennials want to find a church that will give them a sense of purpose, and a personal involvement in that purpose, something we are working toward, together.

There is of course more to the church than just those two characteristics. So, what else is core to who we are that might be missing from this initial list? Certainly, faith in God or searching for God in our lives could be listed as a core aspect of the church. However, while the Millennials I spoke with did mention the importance of faith in God and spiritual connections in their lives, there is also a recognition among Millennials that spiritual moments often happen outside of church. That they can, and often do, find connection with God not in a traditional church setting but in other places. For example, multiple interview participants mentioned experiencing God in nature or the outdoors, or while doing service work or mission projects. While the stories they told about these experiences were often trips or other events organized by their congregations, these experiences of God and connections with spirituality were often outside of the “traditional” church worship experience. Gil Rendle puts it this way, “Consider the shift in the cultural attractiveness of congregations (as a form of organized religion). It is not news that people are increasingly reporting being spiritual, but not religious. People continue to seek meaning that can be found in the life of the spirit. They increasingly, however, do not do their seeking in congregations and denominations.”¹³¹ One of my study participants, Sarah, reflected on this same issue. She said, “I think that for Millennials, they are more spiritual than religious. And I think that’s part of the reason that they don’t go to church. Because I don’t think they like the restrictions of religion itself, and they would rather have the freedom of spirituality. They want that connection with God, and I think that’s what spirituality does, whereas religion puts restrictions on it for them. And Millennials don’t like restrictions.” Many Millennials—even some in that “religiously apathetic” category—are still looking for deeper meaning and spiritual connections in their lives. If a Millennial’s primary motivator is to find a connection with God,

¹³¹ Rendle.

or grow their own spirituality, I find it likely that for most Millennials (even the church affiliated ones!), they would actually find more of these experiences outside of a traditional church than within one.

How might the church respond? What difference should this make for us?

As discussed earlier in this chapter and throughout the previous chapters, many church members hold a considerable amount of fear about the future. If we cannot “get the young people back,” what will the church look like in the future? Will it even survive? Reflecting on this, Sarah also said, “Churches in general are going to have to do something dramatically different... because what they are fearing is valid. This whole fear about Millennials not going to church and people not going to church is very valid, because they don’t have money if they don’t have people coming to church. The whole system will fall apart. There will no longer be big huge institutions like Lutherans or Catholics if they can’t figure out what to do.”

There may be good reason for the church as an institution to fear right now, but I also have hope. I have heard it said within this context of the church’s uncertain future that the God we worship is one of death and resurrection. Yes, churches may be dying, but in faith, we do not die to death but die to find new life. And already, there are signs of new life around us.

I believe that the ultimate work we are called to as the Church is to help bring people to know and experience God through Christ, and to do so *in our time and place*. As the world has changed in the last 2,000 years, the ways of the church have changed over that time as well. And so, as the world continues to change around us, the church can watch these changes and find new ways of being church in the world.

Small, grassroots groups like dinner churches, house churches, and other bodies of faith and spirituality are gathering together to create communities for developing relationships, exploring spirituality, and finding meaning in people's lives.¹³² Often these groups are not entirely new inventions but rather draw on very old practices of faith that have been somewhat forgotten or ignored by many modern "traditional" church congregations. Gil Rendle explains,

[A] number of experiments in new forms of faith communities that are examples of new creation are actually reaching back to old, even ancient, forms to find their new way. The new urban monastic communities, the bubbling up of house church – bible studies, the informal mission movements, are new expressions shaped by basically unaffiliated folk drawing from old and historic models. A considerable part of the effort of the unaffiliated folk who have an allegiance to Christ is to recover the purpose of the church, even while seeking to escape the structure of the church. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will argue that these are efforts of creating something new, even if with ancient roots.¹³³

It bears repeating that even many of the non-religious communities that Millennials are engaging in (such as Crossfit, among others) are also helping people develop relationships, care for one another, and find deeper, even spiritual meaning in their lives.¹³⁴ Even those Millennials who are not affiliated with churches are not so lost to the world of the spiritual as we might have initially feared.

My inspiration for this project was the faithful spirits of so many Millennials who I know love the church and want to help the church live into new life to which God is calling us. Some of these Millennials are clergy with whom I am honored to work, some of these Millennials are lay people who I feel honored to pastor. All of them have energy and excitement and faith for the future.

¹³² ter Kuile and Thurston, "Something More."

¹³³ Rendle, "Waiting for God's New Thing."

¹³⁴ Thurston and ter Kuile, "How We Gather."

Perhaps, instead of asking, “How do we get young people to join our church?”, we really ought to be asking, “How are young people already doing the work of what we call ‘church’?” How are they already practicing community? How are they already experiencing God? How are they already caring for others and making the world a better place? How are they already finding meaning in their lives?

We must be careful not to ask these questions in a way that’s patronizing or dismissive, but really take seriously the idea that young people *already are* creating community, young people already are making meaning in their lives, young people already are making the world a better place than they found it (and that sure sounds like building the Kingdom of God to me).

Instead of lamenting that we could teach “young people” all about religion and God and life, if only they would walk through our doors - maybe we should be looking for more ways that we, the church, can learn from them.

APPENDIX

Survey Questions

Unless otherwise noted, all questions had an open box for respondents to write their own answers.

How old are you?
Are you married/in a long-term committed relationship? <i>[Response options: Yes; No]</i>
Do you have children? (If so, how many and how old are they?)
What is your birth order in your family of origin? (for example: 1st born out of 2, 3rd born out of 5, etc)
What would you say is your religious affiliation?
What is your gender?
What is your sexual orientation?
What is your race/ethnicity?
What is the highest level of education you have completed? <i>[Response options: Didn't finish high school; High school diploma/GED; trade school/associates degree; attended some college, did not finish; 4 year college/bachelors degree; Masters, Doctoral, or other graduate level degree]</i>
What is your occupation?
Do you have debt from student loans? <i>[Response options: No, I never had student loans; I took out student loans but they are paid off; Yes, I have student debt that I am still paying]</i>
What is your approximate annual income?

<p>How far do you live from the place you grew up?</p> <p><i>[Response options: I live within the same town that I grew up in; I live within the same county that I grew up in; I live within the same state that I grew up in; I live in a different state from where I grew up]</i></p>
<p>What type of community do you live in?</p> <p><i>[Response options: Urban; Rural; Suburban; Small town]</i></p>
<p>What type of community did you grow up in?</p> <p><i>[Response options: Urban; Rural, Suburban, Small town]</i></p>
<p>Did you attend church as a child and/or teen? (if yes, What denomination? With what frequency?)</p>
<p>On a scale of 1 to 5, with one being not at all significant and 5 being highly significant: How important is church in your life?</p> <p><i>[Response options: 1; 2; 3; 4; 5]</i></p>
<p>On a scale of 1 to 5, with one being not at all significant and 5 being highly significant: How important is faith in God in your life?</p> <p><i>[Response options: 1; 2; 3; 4; 5]</i></p>
<p>How often do you attend church currently?</p> <p><i>[Response options: Never; Occasionally (a few times a year); Less than once a month; About once a month; 2-3 times a month; Every week]</i></p>
<p><i>[only for those active in church]</i> In what ways are you active or involved in ministries of the church?</p>
<p><i>[only for those active in church]</i> Is your congregation Open and Affirming (ONA) of people who are LGBTQ+?</p> <p><i>[Response options: Yes, my church is ONA; No, my church is not ONA; I'm not sure; Other _____]</i></p>
<p><i>[only for those active in church]</i> List reasons (5 or less) why you are involved in your church.</p>

[only for those NOT active in church] List reasons (5 or less) why you are not involved in your church.

Outside of the church, are there community organizations, clubs, sports, or other activities or groups that you are involved in?

What does it mean to you to be a Millennial?

What are the characteristics of our generation?

Would you be willing to do a follow up interview to discuss your childhood experiences of churches?

[Response options: Yes; No; Other _____]

Interview Questions

- What are the core values that are important in your life?
- How do you define yourself as a person?
- Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church.
- When you were growing up, how was religion/faith important to your parents?
- How did your view or understanding of church change as you got older?
- Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?
- (if married/partnered) Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.
- Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Elizabeth and Christopher

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

Elizabeth: Am I starting, or do you want to go?

Christopher: Yeah, you're going to start!

Elizabeth: I guess with values, it's hard to know if that's what's important to you or if it's qualities. I guess for me, it's things like honesty, a sense of humor, and intelligence is important to me. Things that are important to me are my family, my job, my health. Probably what a lot of people would respond. I think that it's important to me that people treat me the way I want to be treated, and to be respectful, and kind, even when disagreeing. I might not necessarily agree with your opinion or what you're doing, but hopefully I can understand it or come to some kind of understanding. That works whether it's an opinion or when my son has a tantrum—I want to understand you, do you understand me, can we reach some kind of agreement here. I try to live by a code of being positive. I'm not a fan of people who complain all the time, that drives me crazy. Let's find a solution, whatever issue it is, and if there's not a solution, let's just move on. So positivity's really important. I'm a teacher, so I try to spread that to my classroom too. And with my family, we joke around a lot, and that carries through a lot of different aspects of life. I think being really honest with people and being open. I'm trying to think—[Christopher] will probably say something really insightful, and I'll be like, "Me too!"

Christopher: Maybe. Yours were good. For me, it's very similar. I'm a teacher as well. When people ask what I teach, I say, yeah, I teach social studies, but I also give the answer of I teach honesty, self respect, and accountability. Those are skills and values that I hold close to myself, if I'm going to be around other people, they need to be that way as well. How I kind of live my life is I will randomly think of my grandfather, on my mom's side. To me, he was the epitome of good. And so, if I'm losing my cool or thinking how should I handle this situation, I always think, "How would Grandpa do this?" He's a very helpful person, always tries his best. He'd always do what's best for other people. And I would say that I'm a people pleaser in that sense. Those are the values that I hold close to me. I don't get upset often, I would like to say. I would like to say I'm a pretty laid back person. I think it's just because people can kind of see, oh, he's a very direct person, he's going to be honest no matter what. Yeah, I can sometimes be too honest and put people off. But if people are honest and direct with me, I like that as well. And it's hard to make me upset if that's how people are around me. As for things that I value, I value individuality as well. I'm the only person in my family to move outside the Midwest. And yeah, I do love my family, but to me that's a group of people that's always going to be there. The only thing about me that sucks about moving out here is my nieces and nephews. Because I remember that distance between my uncles that I only saw once a year. As a kid, it was fine, but as we got older, do you lose that connection. So I do value family, but it's not like, "Hey, let's talk everyday," I don't need that. I never needed that.

Elizabeth: *[laughs]*

Christopher: She's laughing because she knows that it's true.

Elizabeth: I'm OK with it, I get it.

Christopher: Yeah, those are my values.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

Elizabeth: Talking about teaching—when we talk about different communication roles, there’s lots of different hats that we wear. So I see myself as a mom, first. I should probably see myself as a strong female—I’m smart, I think I’m kind, I’m funny. But I’m a mom. I’m a teacher. I’m responsible. I’m a sister. All these different factors play into my daily life. I’m the grocery-getter and the chore-doer—there’s a lot of stressors that add to me not answering emails in time! It can be a challenge, fitting all those different roles in, but I chose who this is. Overall, I see myself as a strong person and a good person.

Christopher: For me, I see myself as an individual first. I always like to do the different route on things, I like to try new things. And that’s a big part of who I am. When I think about me and what I do—yeah, I’m a teacher, so naturally I’m a leader, I’m a helper, again I’m a people pleaser. I will try best to help anyone in need—at least I don’t always do that with strangers, but if I know you, I will always do my best for you. I think a lot of people would describe me as someone who is laid back, someone who has a sense of humor, someone that you can depend on. I guess that’s me. I guess I don’t really see myself past that. Maybe it’s because I don’t have as many responsibilities as my sister, but that’s about it.

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church?

Elizabeth: That’s really hard. I think it’s hard to think about because you just see pictures of church when you were little. So it’s hard to know if I remember it or if that’s just a picture that I saw. I feel like I remember Sunday School as a really young kid, I remember going to class. I remember Driving to church with our grandpa--our grandpa was very influential, the same grandpa that [Christopher] mentioned. He was very influential in our church lives, and just in our lives in general. I remember hopping in the back of his green car, on his way to church, and he would play his Bible cassette songs for music, and we knew all the words. And then Billy Graham would come on the radio, and he would go, “Billy Baby!” and we would listen for the first five minutes of the show. I remember because it was a repeated thing. Those things in the car on the way to church, I know it’s not directly related to church, but for us, that was part of church, spending time with Grandpa on the way there. When it was winter, [he would ask], “How many Sundays until green grass?” And just these things related to him. I remember leaving Sunday School and he would be there waiting with a coin so we could go to the coffee table and get a cookie. Just this sense that he was a really strong part of our church life started really young. I do remember the other typical stuff, like the songs we know I remember hearing as a young kid, you know the songs they play every Easter. I remember those, and the trumpets. But a lot of it is around Grandpa.

Christopher: For me, I have a lot of early memories. I couldn’t tell you which one is earliest. The most consistent one is the one [Elizabeth] brought up, at the end of church or Sunday School, grandpa giving us a quarter to get a cookie, and the cousins all hanging out and this one small area that we just all took over at the end of church. But If I was going to go with the earliest, all I remember is that I didn’t like going to church, ever. So it would be like, ah, come on, why can’t I just sleep in? Or I don’t want to go—I remember being super young, I wasn’t in Sunday School yet, I had to go to regular church, and I remember just sitting there super bored and not liking it. As a kid, I was probably just being a brat. Another thing that would stand out is our Vacation Bible School or maybe it was Sunday School, where you’d have to go and do the kids’ concert thing. And I remember my brother, looking at him in the crowd and he would be fake picking his

nose, getting me to laugh really hard. And our mom was playing the piano--she eventually stopped the show for me to come sit next to her while she played, I was definitely in trouble. There was one other thing, an early memory that just slipped my mind--Oh! The only thing I specifically remember liking as a kid was if there was a thing for the kids to go up and participate in. I always liked that because I felt like I was putting on a show almost. But that's about it. Those are my early memories.

Me: [Elizabeth], did you remember if you liked church as a kid, if you enjoyed the experience?

Elizabeth: Yeah, I think so. I think the only time when I maybe didn't like church was Confirmation classes - they were awkward, it's at awkward time in your life, it was in middle school for us, and you had to go at night, after we already had school for the day. And even then, I don't think I minded too much because I liked the messages we were getting. And I'm a rule-follower, so when they told me to memorize the Lord's Prayer, it was like I'm gonna do it, I'm going to get this thing, I'm going to understand it by golly. Doing sermon notes wasn't my favorite thing, but again it's like, what's the message, what am I getting. Most of the time I ended up writing down "Jesus loves me" in some form or fashion and hoping I would pass--like who doesn't pass Confirmation? I don't know. I think that's about the only time that I was a little more uncomfortable, but again, that might only be the age range.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

Elizabeth: That's interesting. What's interesting I think is that our grandpa would drive us because our parents would stay home and sleep in. So it's hard to define it. But I remember my mom being involved in the church, but neither one of them ever expressed "Jesus is our Savior" or "you need to forgive" or the core elements of Christianity. It was really through our Grandpa I think. We knew church was important, we knew being good was important, but I don't know that religion defined that. It's hard to explain though because I think they wanted church to be important to us -

Christopher: Yeah -

Elizabeth: but they clearly were not sending the same signal all the time. I would say my mom was involved for a while with the children's choir and she would do solos, but I don't remember her regularly attending church services. Our dad's dad, our grandpa, was a pastor, a UCC pastor, so I don't know if there was an element of him being burned out by that, or just that he worked a lot. I don't know, he didn't go to church as often as my mom. So it's hard to know how faith was built in. I know we talked about it--I was more comfortable talking about that with my mom, and as I'm saying stuff, I'm thinking that maybe I'm not giving her enough credit. And maybe it's not "credit," but she and I went with my grandpa to a Billy Graham thing in the twin cities, he spoke at this stadium. So clearly, she was a part of my path, but I think it again goes back to Grandpa. Grandpa was such a key element that I think he maybe overshadowed our parents in that capacity.

Christopher: Yeah, I think me and [Elizabeth] have very different answers to this one. Because, being the youngest, my grandfather is getting pretty old by the time I was regularly cognitive of church. Yeah, our grandfather was our biggest influence. For me, I never remember our mom being involved really at all. When I was super young, I remember like I was saying she would play piano during concerts events but that was it. She definitely only went during Easter and Christmas and that was it. What I remember about my dad is he would be the one who would

drive us, pick up our grandfather, and then go to church. So my dad was pretty consistent about going to church, at least from what I remember. And when I would do Confirmation and Confirmation service hours, I had to do that with my father to build sets for the play. My dad was huge into the play, loved doing the acting. I remember him being Judas one year. And after doing some of that he would be behind the scenes, kind of directing a little bit. I don't remember exactly his role, but I remember doing way too many hours building the set and thinking I would rather be playing video games right now than having to do these hours I've already did. I remember my dad being way more active in the church, at least until I got confirmed. Then it was like, maybe he went. I know that he did go some after that, but definitely once I got Confirmed and I was disinterested. He had this perspective like, "OK, I did my job, you can make your own decision at this point."

Elizabeth: I'm trying to figure out if we're even answering your question, because it had to do with faith. And I feel like what we're talking about is more like the involvement of our parents, so hopefully that translates.

Me: I think the question is kind of both, and is intentional that way to see how it fits for you.

Christopher: Yeah, I guess [for our family] it was more in passing--we never sat at the dinner table and talked about religion. It was like something we do, and not really passed that.

Elizabeth: But I think they showed an importance of sharing your talents, at the very least. Like, this is how you get involved, and it's important to get involved.

Christopher: I think with me too, since I was the youngest, on everything, they kind of started getting lazy on me. I never did anything with church outside of going to church and Confirmation. Which I'm kind of grateful for, that they didn't force me to do something that I didn't want all the time.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

Elizabeth: I know for me, I was really involved up through high school, I taught Sunday School with my Grandpa. As a rule follower, I just kinda believed, I don't want to say blindly, but I was like, "Yep, this is how it is, Jesus died on the cross, and we forgive, and we go to heaven." And then when I went to college, I went to church on the important holidays, Christmas and Easter and maybe every once in a while, but it wasn't as important for me throughout my 20's, through 18-26ish maybe, 27. And then I started to go to church more around probably when I had my first born, maybe a little before then. Since then, and through my 20's, I questioned things more, and now still, I'm realizing as someone who believes, it's ok to question. I feel like that's something everybody does. And you're going to have your doubts. There's days where I'm like none of this could be true, we could just die and turn into ash, and I know I'm not supposed to do that as a Christian, but what do I know? How is my religion better than anyone else's? I'm ok with respecting other people's religions—not that I ever wasn't, but as a kid, I think I would have thought that was more wrong, and I certainly don't now. Now I think it's more about geography than anything. But I think religion plays a role for me now because I want my kids to have an opportunity to find morals in a place that I kind of did. I don't think church was the only place where I found that, but I think it was one aspect of a pie that helped fill in some morals for me. If nothing else, hopefully it can become another place where my kids feel comfortable, where they can be themselves and feel like people appreciate them and like them. I feel like in church a lot, that's a very positive place. School can be hard, family can sometimes be hard, church you might not always like, but in general you're going to find people there who are nice and caring, and so

far I feel like that's what it is for them [my kids] too. I feel like I want to get more involved now because I have a family and I've been at this church for a little bit, so it's important for me to give back. But my involvement in church has had its ebbs and flows. I think it's changed more now that I have a family.

Christopher: For me, as a kid, it was one of those things that I didn't question it. You're told and so it's like ok. The only thing for me, for as long as I can remember, I didn't believe in those stories you tell kids— Santa, the Easter Bunny, stuff like that. For as long as I can remember, I thought this is asinine, there's no way that this guy goes down the chimney to every house, there's no way. So that with the story of Jesus, it was a similar thing, like you're telling me this guy turned water into wine and walked on water? I accepted it, but I think the main reason why I accepted it or just chose to believe in it was the fact that the only thing I'm scared of in life is death. Religion gives you this sense of "hey, there's an afterlife, so don't worry." As a kid, whenever I would get high anxiety for a week of just thinking about death, it was like yeah, but don't worry, there's something afterwards. So that was basically really its role for me as a kid. And even still, with our grandfather, who we keep mentioning it's hard to not be around him and be influenced in that way because it's such a huge part of his life. And I would love to ask him more questions about it and what he actually thinks. It's almost like Grandpa believes this stuff, of course I want to be like him. So it was kind of that influence. As I got older, doing Confirmation--by middle school I was like, I didn't like it. I still considered myself a Christian at this point. But doing that [Confirmation] exit interview, they were like "how often do you think you'll go to church?" I was like I don't know, maybe once a month. But it was never beyond that point. Then I went to college. And I remember doing the application and having to put what religion are you, or whenever it was relevant--at least for me it wasn't a huge topic in college, at least for me, I never went to any church related event on campus. And at one point, I started to think, do I even believe in any of this? The answer was no, so how could I say I was a Christian? It was a freeing moment for me, because it was like I didn't have to pretend, I didn't have to act like this is right. I'm a social studies teacher, I learn about other religions and teach about them, so how am I to say that this one's right? I would rather say I'm agnostic, because it's simple for me to say "Is there something? I dunno, I guess I'll find out. Could there be nothing? That as well." My favorite way to describe it is a Bill Bur joke, a comedian, one of my favorites. He talks about comparing religion to him to curling. And he's like "you know, you have the person holding that pot and he holds it closely and slowly lets it go...." Like that's it, that's me for religion. I had this moment when I chose to let it go and it was a freeing moment where I didn't have to be pretend anything.

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

Elizabeth: Starting with just church specifically, my husband really did the research behind this church, he found it, and we started going, and day one, we really like it. To be honest, I think [Christopher] would really like it--I would never push that on anybody, but if this were a church you would go to, I feel like he would because It's very open, and diverse, and they believe in what we believe in, which is to say that you can be kind of whoever you are and you are accepted, and open table for communion. And very family involved. So we became members, baptized our boys, and I probably went consistently for about 2 years. And then I was like I

know I should get involved, I know I should get involved, but I was also fine just going on Sundays because I really liked our church. But then there was, last year, the first time I helped in the kitchen, and I really liked that. I didn't volunteer again, but I was like that was a fun experience. Then this past summer they were asking for Sunday School teaching volunteers. And I know that's gotta be a hard thing to find, so I was like, ugh, it's every Sunday what am I going to do? But I just had this nagging feeling, I am a teacher, I have young kids, there's no reason why I can't do this, I already go to church, I'm making excuses. So I volunteered. The preschool teacher has cancer so she can't teach this year, so I said ok I can do that. So I've been doing that since September, and I'm used to teaching 8th grade, and they are a room full of 3 and 4 year olds, and on day one I was like I don't know what I'm doing right now! It was crazy shock. But I really like it, people are really appreciative, so that's nice. I've realized I can try to put a lesson about Jesus together, but they care about candy and Halloween or whatever has happened to them. So it's a lot of, "yes, and Jesus loves us". Overall, I got more involved because I was comfortable enough in the church to get involved, and now that I've gotten involved I've seen that it's worth it to me, it's worth it to other people, other people appreciate it. I compare it to something else new I've done this year which is I'm teaching an aerobics class for the first time. The only connection I can piece together is that I had a nagging feeling that I think I can do this, I think I can teach this class. This summer, they said, "We're looking for teachers, if anybody is interested." And I thought, maybe I just need to dig in and do this. And now I have, and I really like it, I feel like people really appreciate it because there aren't enough teachers. So maybe it's partially, with being busy, I have to feel like I'm ready and I have to feel like I have time in order to dive in, because of the pressure of my husband working a lot, and me virtually being a single mom a lot of nights. But once I dig in and do things, I realize it's worth it or it's not as much time as I think. But if I'm going to do things, it's got to make sense time wise for myself and my family. And this does, because I was already doing both of those things, I'm just doing them in a different role now. I was already going to church and now I'm just at church a little bit longer, because I teach and then I go to church.

Christopher: I will say that for me, I am pretty selfish about my time. When I say I'm an individual, I appreciate doing whatever I want, whenever. I don't like making constant commitments to an organization. I think that's part of why I did dislike doing Sunday School [as a kid] because I knew that every Sunday, you're going to be doing that. I like to go with the flow with things. If I'm going to join something, it has to be fun to me. So I recently am starting to learn to climb. I can see myself becoming part of gym and climbing there and getting a climbing buddy, but there's no organization that I would choose to be part of to do good in the world, I just really don't have interest. Even when I think about school, I'm a teacher - everything about me is an anomaly because I'm as extroverted as I am introverted, some people would like be like what, you're introverted? But I think my family can definitely say, yeah he's introverted, it just depends on where I'm at. And when I'm in a situation where I don't know people and I'm not 100% into it, I'm just going to be sitting there. When I think about school, I don't do the extra curricular stuff. And it's not because I don't care about my students or anything like that, I think it's also because I'm jaded about the profession. Teachers are treated like crap, so you want my extra time? No, you have to treat me well in order for me to start to do that. So if I'm going to join an organization, or anything like that, it would have to be something that my friends are a part of. And I wouldn't look at it as going to something, I would be like oh, I get to climb, I get

to do this. And there's not many organizations out there that's like I get to do this. So I do a lot of video games and individual stuff.

Me: So even if it's not an official organization, those are still things that you choose to spend your time on. And you did say that you want to do things that are fun and enjoyable to you. But are there other things about those activities that are fun and enjoyable to you? Or could you elaborate more on what makes it fun and enjoyable for you?

Christopher: A lot of things I go out and do, it's something health-related. Hiking with friends, a physical activity that's also fun and engaging and stuff like that. Climbing, that's something healthy that I enjoy doing. I would like to join an ultimate frisbee thing or just any intramural sports. Again, it's something healthy and something I find fun to do, it's active.

Me: It sounds like--I don't want to put words in your mouth about it—but it sounds like there is also some level of community component to it, right? That you're doing these things with other people?

Christopher: Yeah, but that's more like doing it with friends. One thing that I dislike about organizations, for example church I think is the perfect example of this, is that you go to these things and I feel like people put on this face, this mask, and they are like I'm at my best behavior because it's church, and it's not real. At least that's always been my experience of going to any church, or even church-related organizations or stuff like that. And so it's hard to find organizations where people aren't just putting on their best face and aren't as genuine. That's why I like doing casual things with friends. Or if I was going to join something, it would be something casual, people aren't feeling like they have to put on this face.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.

Elizabeth: To be honest, [my husband] probably aligns more with [Christopher]. He had not gone to church regularly with me throughout our entire relationship. When we lived in [another city], I attended an ELCA church pretty regularly, and I liked it enough that I wanted to become a member, and at that time we had [our first child] and maybe even [our second child] too. And I felt like this is important to me. I never was going to make him be a member too if he didn't want to, but I think he just kinda did it anyway with that sort of respect. But he didn't really go to that church very often. Then when we moved down to [the city where we live now], we had a little bit of a break. But he did find the UCC church [here]. He's a high school principle, so he has a lot of connections with people. And he asked people about this church, or just where do you go to church as a question. But I think he is more open with the struggle of believing in one religion, and the idea of still struggling with the idea of what happens after [we die]. I do too, but he's very vocal about "we could just die, and that's it!" I get that, but I'm still going to go to church. I don't know, maybe I'm an idiot, but I still am going to do this, and it's because I believe in doing good, and this is a good, positive place. My husband's faith still has that element too--it's not that he doesn't like church or wouldn't go, but unfortunately, with his life being as busy as it is, just about everything gets sacrificed for his job. It's his family, his church life, his health, everything is second fiddle to responding to emails, planning the stuff he needs to for school. So I think he still believes that core with religion that church is a place he can find calm and he can slow down. And I think he has faith in the good in people, but I think he certainly still questions, a lot of what we all question, but he tends to be more of the cynic than I would be.

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

Elizabeth: At the church we go to now, we have amazing music. And music is really important to our family. I'll speak for myself, but I think [Christopher would agree] –

Christopher: Yeah.

Elizabeth: So there's moments when our church has [college] students that sing for us. It's not every week, but there are moments that they are singing where I'm just like, ah, that's it. It's not even the sermon, it's not even anything else in the service, but what they're singing, the lyrics and the way they are hitting chords, that is spiritually fulfilling to me because I can just feel it. It's that thing you can't put your finger on, you can't define it because it's an emotion, it's not defined because it's music. You just are feeling that moment. So I feel God and feel that spirituality a lot through music. And too there's songs that remind me of my mom or my grandpa. If I hear "I love to tell the story" I'm probably going to cry about 80% of the time because I feel that connection with God and my grandpa, or at least with my grandpa. I feel that sense of feeling like I'm sad, but I'm at home because I'm remembering him, and I understand God and my faith is a part of that. So a lot of my moments come for me when I hear music in church.

Christopher: For me, within church, I couldn't tell you one time where I was like this is for me, or I feel awarded or feel great. I can agree with the sense of church has a good message overall, or individual messages with the sermon or things like that, but I never can remember a time when I've left church and thought, that made me feel great. The only thing I can say that's rewarding that's related to church is maybe when I was a kid and I would stand next to my grandpa and just hearing him sing. Because I looked up to him, so it was fun to hear him enjoy himself. So, that maybe. It's church related--when doing my confirmation stuff and going to see my grandfather when he was at assisted living and just going through the Bible. Even though in my head I was like I'm not into any of this, it was a nice time and a good excuse to see my grandfather, I knew I was going to get to go see him. So that was the only thing related to church that I would say was spiritually rewarding. But other than that I couldn't tell you.

Elizabeth: I think for me too there's moments outside of church where I feel like I'm looking at a beautiful sunset, or I'm outside or even just on a walk sometimes. I don't cognitively think about it all the time, but sometimes it's like yeah, this is what it's all about. There's something here, and maybe it's God, and maybe it's faith, and maybe it's just fresh air, but it all feels good. So there's moments that I'm doing that, that that might enter my mind too, and it's not necessarily in church.

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Me: So there are four siblings in your family, correct?

Elizabeth: Yep.

Me: Where have the other two landed as far as faith or spirituality or church or whatever.

Elizabeth: [Our oldest sister], she's two years older than me. She and I live about 5 minutes apart. I went to a couple of different churches before I found the UCC church [where we live now] and was like "yeah, we're here, this is where we're going." And then [our sister] was like, "OK, we're going there too now!"

Christopher: Yeah, I feel like with [her] it's like, "[Elizabeth] is doing it? I'll do it too!" In everything. They're connected at the hip.

Elizabeth: Yeah, and it's fine. But she I think, I'm assuming—she's not here, but probably has similar viewpoints as I do. She's married to someone who's more cynical too, I'm pretty sure her husband is either atheist or agnostic. He'll come to church, so maybe he does believe, I don't know, we haven't talked about it in a while. They I think basically joined this church because we were there, but I also think [our sister] really likes it.

Christopher: I also feel like [our sister] goes to church because it has been part of her life. It's like the tradition thing. Unlike me, when I was like, "I'm going to let this thing go," she held onto it, at least from a distance. If [Elizabeth] would have never started going [to church], there's no way [our older sister] would have started going –

Elizabeth: [laughing] I don't know –

Christopher: I think [she] would give an excuse every time, be like "oh, I'd rather just do this on a Sunday." I don't think [she] would have started going. She only started going when you went! And that was still after a couple of years –

Elizabeth: Yeah, I don't know, but part of it could be our kids. We have kids that are –

Christopher: The tradition though, like with the cousins. We had that cousins thing, and I think [our sister] wants that too –

Elizabeth: I think that's true, but I also think it could be –

Christopher: You know her better, I suppose –

Elizabeth: For me, part of the reason why I want my kids going to church is because I don't want to be the only person trying to teach them to be a good person, and church helps with that. So I could see how—her wanting to do the tradition that we grew up with, yes, but ultimately with Sunday School, you do hopefully learn good things and good lessons, and get to be around other people who hopefully are going to get to be a part of that journey as well. So it could be the kid thing too. But yeah, I don't know that she would have done her own research about that. [Our middle brother] –

Christopher: [Our older brother] is three years older than me. I would say everything about [him] is about—he loves the tradition, everything he experienced he wants the same thing for his kids. He never left really outside his home town. So I think with religion it fits that, "this is what we've always done so I'm going to go 100% into it." Well, I don't know if he would say "100%", but he goes to church regularly. I would say it's a bigger part of his life than it is to [our older sister].

Elizabeth: He's involved, I think he does the music or technology or something with that. He attends the church that our sister-in-law grew up at. And I don't think he ever questioned that, it was her church so we'll go there. It's Lutheran, and we grew up Lutheran, so still with that tradition. The tradition kind of hits it on the head with [that brother].

Me: Where did you guys grow up?

Both: [A larger city], Minnesota.

Elizabeth: And that's where our mom grew up. I think our grand –

Christopher: Yeah, grandma at least—they moved there, but maybe they weren't from there, I think –

Elizabeth: Mostly from the Midwest, though, our grandparents were. Otherwise [the city in Minnesota] has been the hub for generations of it.

Me: Anything else to add?

Elizabeth: This topic I think makes [Christopher] and me sound really different, which is funny to me because we're really more alike than we are different –

Christopher: Yeah, I would say, out of the siblings, I relate the most with [Elizabeth], despite this

—

Elizabeth: So it's interesting that bringing the church questions in, it kind of creates this difference, but I don't know —

Christopher: That's why I wanted to do this. I wanted to hear your answers and talk about it.

Elizabeth: But I think a lot of our morals are similar. Maybe if you took church out of it, we still would forgive, and we still would try to be good people, and we still would try to do the Golden Rule. it's interesting answering these questions, because I feel like we're really similar though, but now maybe we're not. It's just interesting.

Christopher: Yeah.

Elizabeth: And by the way, I'm not a prude a church. I've said stuff at church that I probably shouldn't have, [Christopher], so there's no face with me. You get what you get.

Rachel

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

I would say my friends and family--yeah, I guess they're separate. Friends. Family. My happiness. And I would say more recently, my faith, since getting more into it.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

I would think I'm a friendly and caring person, always trying to be helpful and look out for others. I'm motivated. Um.... this is hard! Can we come back to this at the end?

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church?

Probably some of my first memories would be our CCD-slash-Sunday School type classes. Probably just a mix of that and just going to church, whenever we did with our family growing up, my mom, my dad, my brother and I. And, it's kind of a mix between that and our religious education classes, and how they were more goofing off because of people [in the class]. No one ever seemed to really take it seriously or really know about the topic either. Otherwise, Sundays going to church in our three-wing church that somehow seemed to hold more people than the actual city population.

Me: Do you remember anything about going to church when you were a kid?

Rachel: As weird as it sounds, what I remember is the smell of the pastor. Because—I don't know what it was, I don't know what it was, if it was just Catholic priests or what, but they had a distinct old man smell to them. As weird as it was. And then reconciliation—sitting in front and confessing our sins, or sitting behind a wall with a mesh thing so you could speak to the priest—kinda making me feel like they forced us to go, thinking back on it. Because we'd all go together as a class, then everyone had to go in one by one and we were forced to talk about what you needed to talk about. Yeah that was just weird, thinking back on it. Our church was always dark and gloomy, with stained glass windows. There was a very hole-y wall with designs cut into it. I think I remember sitting in church and trying to count them all the time, all the holes down and across and trying to figure out how many there were. Yeah, that's a few of the different things I can think of.

Me: It sounds like you may have spent a lot of time just looking at your surroundings.

Rachel: Kind of, yeah. Trying to figure out the pictures in the stained glass windows—because I think they somehow correlated with the Bible, but I don't know how. Because they explained it, but we were young and not paying attention or goofing off, and voila. It didn't stick.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

I'm not really sure how it was important to them. Growing up, we went for a while, I would say at least twice a month—because we lived in the country so we wouldn't go every weekend. And they didn't really talk about it much, so it's hard to say, I don't really know what they were expecting, if anything, or how important it was to them. It's not like we prayed around the table for dinner or anything, or said bedtime prayers or things like that. It was more like we go to this on Sunday and then we come back and then you go to religion classes. I guess they never said how important it was or why it was important or why it was important to them that my brother and I go.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

I would say it changed in college. I kinda took a break during high school. But in college, I joined CRU and that opened up my faith more. And then, coming out, [faith] wasn't neglected, but it was kinda put on the back burner, in the back of your head a little more. But then since moving to [where we live now], and finding a church that's accepting of LGBT population, [my faith] has grown immensely. Kinda makes me think, I don't know where we would be if we didn't find a church, if we didn't find an accepting group. We wouldn't have met half the friends and bonus family we have in our life. It's like, what would we be doing with our life, who would we be talking to, who would we be engaging with [if not for the church].

It has opened up my mind a lot more. Just because I feel like I have a better understanding.

Between [the pastors at the church], there's been a lot more explained. And maybe it's me being an adult and understanding things more, but it gives me a more open mind and better understanding for the Bible. And it's great to know I have [my pastors] that I trust immensely that I can ask, "Can you explain this to me?" or "What does this mean?" or "To you, what does this mean?" or "How is this supposed to be taken?" It's nice having that, where as when I was younger, it seemed to be closed off. I wasn't comfortable [asking questions] and that makes a huge difference, when you are comfortable discussing something.

Me: You said after high school and into college, you took a break from church for a little while, before joining CRU.

Rachel: Yep.

Me: So what led you into to CRU? How did that come about or how did you make that decision?

Rachel: I had a friend that was involved with CRU, and she was like, "Hey, why don't you come check this out, lots of fun," gave her whole spiel. She invited me to come, and I jumped in and went with it. I enjoyed the first nights, so then I continued going. Then I joined their Bible study there, it was a women's Bible study, so I met a good number of other women who were part of CRU. I built a connection there, and it was nice to have that community. But at that time, I wasn't out, and so it was difficult to figure it out because I knew I was hiding a piece of me from the whole world. So I was a part of it, but I knew I wasn't completely myself because I couldn't be at that time, so I couldn't get the full experience.

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

[My partner] and I were looking for a church because we had a discussion, we both grew up going to church, but we wanted to be more involved. We weren't sure how to do that with being an LGBT+ couple. Somehow, we magically found our backdoor neighbor [the pastor of the church we now belong to] who told us, yeah, we have others who attend our church who are a part of the LGBT community, so we kinda just gave it a shot. Though being nervous as could be. We took a jump, took a risk, and tried it out and since day one, we kinda just got hooked. We really enjoyed the friendliness of the people there and the positivity and it was just really welcoming. And it's continued ever since we've been a part of it. It was a pretty easy decision that we knew we wanted to become members of the church because we felt so welcome there and felt so cared about, and that's what we needed.

Me: Besides the church, are there other clubs or groups or organizations that you've been a part of?

Rachel: Yeah. I've been a part of WILS, Wisconsin Leadership Seminar. It's a program for sophomores going into their junior year of high school, kind of like a leadership weekend retreat

type thing that I've been a part of since I attended when I was in high school. It has helped me find who I am, part of myself. I've been part of the Girl Scouts; more recently I've helped out with Miracle League, an adapted rec baseball league.

Me: So joining those things, with the million thousand options out there--how have you decided what things are worth it for you to put your time into?

Rachel: The organizations and clubs that are worth it and important to me are the ones that make me happy and surround me with people who lift me up and support each other and are there for each other, and that kind of thing. No one—OK, I can't say no one, but most people don't want to be around negativity and that kind of attitude. Whenever I'm with people from those organizations, it's always a good time. And I feel like I always come out ready for the next round and ready for whatever gets thrown at me. It's just happiness.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.

I know it was a struggle for her when she was younger. But I think now that we have found a church that is opening and welcoming and accepting to us, I think it's deepened more. I can't say to what extent though--we've talked about it, but it's not that we always go so in depth about what you think or where you're thinking about things because we do it together but on our own, if that makes sense. Like, I do a devotional every night, whereas I think she has her own other devotional that she does, or she'll study things in different ways than what I do. Because we learn different and do things differently. But I know with her involvement in using her musical talents, that's helped her connect more than when we first started dating and knowing each other, I definitely think [her faith] is growing since then, and she's had more positive experience now than she did when she was younger.

Me: So why is it important for the two of you to keep coming to a faith community? You said you talked about it, and you realized that you both were raised in church. But why wasn't it like, "Well, we were raised in church when we were kids, but we're done with that"? Why was it something that the two of you wanted to continue doing?

Rachel: I think because it gave us a good sense of community, we wanted to be surrounded by good people. Whenever we go there, it lifts us up more. It gives us a support network of people who really truly do care and are willing to share their stories or their God moments and inspire us, or at least myself, to live more in God's eyes.

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

I would say probably giving my testimony at church, when we were first talking about the ONA process. Granted, I was nervous as heck the whole time. But being able to share that and feeling so welcomed, and still loved after—it was just like how could I not come back to there? It was just such a wonderful experience being able to share that and not feel shamed because of who we are or who I am. It was like I could feel comfortable around these people and I don't have to hide myself. It let me know, God's looking out for me and he's here for me, and he's making me stronger through all this. It's been one of the most powerful things that's really stuck with me. Not even First Communion, or stuff like that, but giving my testimony.

Me: And what a contrast with what you said about being in that Bible study group that you were a part of in CRU, where you were there and a part of the community but you were always kind of behind that wall of not being your whole self.

Rachel: Yes. It was like here I could be [my full self] and people are like, “It’s ok, share your story, we’ve got you and we’re here for you, you can do it and we’ll still love you no matter what.”

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Me: Going back to question number 2: How do you define yourself as a person?

It’s tricky, I don’t really like to think about myself, I’ll admit it. But after going through all the questions, I would say, I’m a Child of God. But I’m still that caring loving person, always trying to look out for others and raise them up and not tear anyone down. I am me, that’s the thing I like to say. I am me. I am my own person, I have my flaws, I have my positives, I’m my own person, and that’s the way God made me.

Me: Do you have any sense as to why you’ve ended up a person of faith when your brother hasn’t?

Rachel: Not really. My brother and I are distant, so it’s just hard to say. I know he went to a—I don’t want to say a religious based school, but he went to a—Lutheran college, I think, but then that could have easily been because of his football scholarship too. But if I think really hard about it, it could be because he didn’t have as hard a times, or took things—We both have different struggles, but I don’t know. I don’t really know.

Me: Anything else you would like to add?

Rachel: I’m just glad that I found [our church]!

Jessica

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

In this moment in time? I would say family, friends, faith. Those few things.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

That's a good question--it almost takes a little thought though. I try to be honest, sometimes I find it difficult to be honest because I don't like to hurt feelings. I try to always pursue being kind and to teach that to other people, and to try to help others open their eyes to other people's perceptions. I like to try to help others think about walking in someone else's shoes. I'm hardworking. I love *way* too much sometimes, it gives me anxiety. And I love to try to be a good friend and family member to people.

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church?

I have just a general memory of going to church, and just sitting there and being told to be quiet. I never really understood anything from church, I basically just was present. I do remember my first Communion, I remember the white dress I wore, and I remember walking up. But I don't really remember--I was too young to understand what it was or what defined it.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

I don't remember it being a part of my dad's life at all.

I think it was very important to my mom, but she was criticized completely because she had been divorced. And I remember her coming home crying because the church did not accept her anymore because she was a divorced person. And oh my gosh, I'm just remembering this in this moment that I remember that about a church and that is one of the things that put me off about church. Like, how dare that church not love my mom and accept my mom. I'm just realizing that in this moment—that that is one of my—I didn't want to be a part of anything that didn't love my mom and didn't accept my mom. Because it wasn't her fault.

It was very important to my mom, even though they didn't accept her completely, she still kept trying, because it was a part of her traditions, it was a part of her bringing up. She always tried to be a part of the church because it was always important to her. But I don't remember going very often. I think we didn't actually go very often because I think the way she felt when she was there.

Me: That's interesting, that tension there. She didn't feel comfortable there, yet she must have still felt some kind of pull or some kind of draw or a feel that she had to be there.

Jessica: Yeah. I don't know if it was a draw or a pull from God, or if was more of a feeling of expectation or feeling of pressure from her parents.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

My view of church, as I got older—When I got married, I had experience at a WELS Lutheran church, and they did not incorporate women really at all, and I felt like we were completely shunned as a visitor in that church. So that was a bad experience. We could not accept communion, I just felt like even other people in the parish would look at us, not say hi or be friendly. And we could have been potentially members. But then a friend of mine brought me to [current church] and I remember the very first sermon I heard [pastor] give the very first time we visited. It was about faith. He said “faith” like 20 times in this sermon, “you just have to have faith”. Like, just have faith. He kept repeating that, repeating that. I was like, is he trying to tell

me something? Should I just have faith, should I just try again, should I just leap and connect with this church? And then after the sermon, [a church member] made a point to come up to me and start up a conversation, and I just felt such a moment of warmth and welcome and loving that I've *never* felt in a church. I just had never felt that same feeling before, and I was like oh this is kind of good, is this what it could be like?

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

How I made the decision to become involved in church? Oh..... [my pastor] has a way. So when I got married, and became a member of the church, [the pastor] must have been talking to [my spouse], and [my spouse] has always been a big part of church. [My pastor] had made a comment, "If you are here, [Jessica] ought to be there too!" It made me think a little. I have never had any thought to be a part of anything in the church. I was like ok, I'll show up, and I'm going to leave [without getting really involved]. But then, when it comes to children, it just gives me happiness working with children. So I got a phone call, in the early part of the year, to become a member of the Board of Christian Education. My immediate response was to say no, and I just felt this *huge* tug, huge tug. I wanted to say no, but the words wouldn't come out. I had to say yes. I feel like it was God's way to say, "[Jessica], you're better than this, you have a lot to give to this world, you have a lot to give to church and people in church." So that's how I started to become a part of it. I completely feel it was God's will. That gut-wrenching, guilty feeling that you have when you want to make a decision in your head, but you feel a pull to help more even though I don't want to.

And to be honest, every time someone asks me to do something at church, it's always my instinct to say no. But then I think about it more, and sometimes the yes just comes out. I was recently asked to be the leader of our ONA [team]. I did not want to say yes, but it came out so involuntarily, "If no else will do this, I guess I will." Does that sound like someone who really is excited about it? But I knew that there was a purpose, and it is very important to me. I just have such a passion to help now.

Me: Backing up, even before that, you talked about going around and visiting different churches and trying to find a church that felt like a fit--what drove that decision? Why was that what you were doing instead of "Oh, it's the weekend, why don't we just sleep in?"

Jessica: So why do I go to church instead of sleeping in?

Me: Yeah, or any other number of decisions you have of how to spend your time, why even go to worship in the first place?

Jessica: As I started coming to [my current church], I found connections, I found love, I found what I could even call family. And that family holds me up. And I feel like I am stronger. I feel like I am kinder, more patient. I'm a better person having these connections. And I understand that, I acknowledge that, and I want to continue being that kind of person.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.

He had a very strong upbringing with religion, he went every Sunday. His father was even as strong willed about it, like it's a day of rest. You go to church with your family, you come home, it's a day of rest. There's no working, nothing. He has a very strong religious background. Very strong.

It's no question with [my husband]. It's habitual, it's what he's known, it's what he's always known. And I suppose he's kind of helped push me when I've had days of not wanting to go, he's been like "you can do this."

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

Every year at Vacation Bible School. The connections I make with the little kids, the connections I make with the youth, I feel like they open up to me and I feel such a sense of closeness to God when we're out by those three crosses [outside the church during closing worship] And Moon Beach [church camp]. When I come home from Moon Beach, I am completely reset. And I have every experience up there. I know God is present. I think it's the quiet. When it's quiet, you can acknowledge God easier. It's easier to forget him when it's busy and loud. I think just having that quiet, it's one of the biggest places I feel God is up at Moon Beach.

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I did remember one more thing from church when I was a teenager. I remember they put a transparency up [on display], saying how I should vote based on gay marriage. And they were telling me to vote against it. And my mom—I started getting up to walk out, because that was against any moral compass I have. I feel it right here [in my heart]. Who are they to tell me how I feel? They can educate me, they can teach me the Bible—I feel what I feel. How dare they tell people they can't love one another. I just felt so sick over it. I still get so sick over it. My mom's like "You can't get up in the middle of church, blah blah blah." And then I resented her for that, for making me stay there. And that was like the last straw. I'm like, I'm never going to church ever again. Never. And I went to church because of [my stepson], because he went to school [at the WELS Lutheran church], that's the only reason we went to church there because it was a part of his schooling when he did presentations. Then, like 10 years later, [my friend] brought me to [my current church], and I'm like "nuh uh, sorry." And then I heard [the pastor], and I thought, oh, this is different.

Me: That's what I was just about to ask--with that intense anger and really disgust with what the church was doing, how then did you get back to the point of coming back to church now?

Jessica: I've never felt welcome at church, ever. I've never felt anyone wanting me to be there. And I felt like people wanted me to be there when I went [at the church I'm at now].

Sarah and Megan

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

Sarah: Oh gosh, you couldn't have started off any harder! This is really funny, we were just talking about core values, [my wife] and I were just talking about this.

Megan: You guys have deep conversations.

Sarah: We're coming up with family core values –

Megan: Such deep conversations!

Sarah: That's what you get when you marry a woman –

Megan: You know, if I asked [my husband] what his core values were –

Sarah: It would be like hunting, working on the garage –

Megan: Yeah, I don't even know what he would say! You know, I was asked this question recently [at a workshop I attended], and tons of people put faith as a core value. And that didn't even cross my mind to put that first. Family is first for me. And then I would say....[pauses]

Sarah: Do you want me to go?

Megan: You go ahead, if you have answers.

Sarah: My first one is—the first one that comes to mind is honesty.

Megan: That's a good one.

Sarah: [My wife] and my conversation was—I disliked her opinion in that all our values should be core values. I'm like, "Sweetheart, that's not the purpose of core values." I'm not going to list all the values in the world off as my core values. Core values are choosing something that's more important than everything else. OK, so I'm going to go relationships. I'm going to take out honesty and go authenticity.

Megan: You could maybe say strong ethics, because ethics would include all those.

Sarah: Yes. Relationships - with all kinds of people - authenticity, and... [long pause] I want to, in some way, put like growth, personal growth. Like Knowledge—Everyone should be growing in some way, I don't like staying stagnant. Those are my three.

Megan: Mine is going to be family. I guess I don't know how to say this, but some type of sustainability, as far as a viewpoint on the world. Environmental sustainability, I think is important. And then, personal wellness - including physical wellness, mental wellness, as well as educational growth.

Sarah: You could say well being.

Megan: Yeah, personal well being.

Sarah: We call that holistic in the educational world, being holistic.

Megan: Yeah, being holistic. I think that's important.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

Sarah: I guess the first definition that comes to mind is teacher, by occupation. But beyond that, I believe I am the biggest dreamer in the entire world.

Megan: She is!

Sarah: Yup, she can attest to that. That's why I think growth is really important to me, because I constantly have these dreams, and I'm trying to achieve these dreams, and I think that really defines everything I do, in all aspects of my life. In my education, in my home, in our family, in my professional world. That's how I would define myself: I would define myself as a dreamer, beyond saying just that I'm a teacher and a mother and a wife.

Megan: I would say, generally, occupation is how I would normally define myself as well. Especially because in our fields, police officers and teachers, they're all so similar—Well, I don't know about teachers, but police officers, we're all type-A personalities—but it is different, being a female officer. So then the next way I define myself is as a wife, and a soon-to-be mother. I am also a bit of a dreamer—not quite as much as Sarah, because my husband tends to reign me back.

Sarah: He does really hold you back [laughs]

Megan: He doesn't like it when we get together and start conniving about things.

Sarah: They don't like us to get into the same room and do that. They also don't like us to go shopping together, because we just say yes to each other. She's like "Should I get this?" And I'm like "YES!!!" So we're bad together, in that sense.

Megan: So yeah, I'm going to say I'm a server of community, I'm community-driven, I serve for others in the community. That I guess is the best answer I can come up with.

Me: Megan, if you define yourself as a police officer, do you personally feel a distinction between being a police officer vs seeing yourself as a female police officer, and do you think that's different?

Megan: I have a lot of opinions about female officers and male officers. I definitely play a different role in my department than my male counterparts. Mostly because I handle things differently, and I deal with things differently on a day-to-day basis. It varies by person, but in general, [the male officers] tend to take a tough, more masculine approach to things... I do a lot more talking, I would say, when I'm on a call. It's not true for all of them that they don't talk as much, but I will talk things out a lot more than they will. As well as, people tend to react differently to a female officer, they're not as intimidated by me.

Sarah: Do you find that helps though?

Megan: It helps in certain situations. It depends what the situation is. In some aspects it doesn't help, but sometimes it calms the situation down....

[we talked about this for a few more minutes]

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church.

Sarah: My earliest memory... it might not be the earliest, but it is the earliest and most traumatic early memory that comes to mind.

Megan: Why does it have to be traumatic?

Sarah: Because it's the Catholic Church and Catholics are very traumatic! So, my earliest memory was going into confession for the first time. I vividly remember going into the church.

Me: How old were you, about?

Sarah: When does Confirmation start? Or not Confirmation, I mean Reconciliation. Very early I think, in first or second grade. I think we had to do Reconciliation before we did Communion -- I don't really remember, it was all very mysterious to me. So - I vividly remember standing in the line at church, having to go in, thinking this was an awful idea, whoever conjured up this one. And then I really don't remember the actual process of it, I just remember before, being there and being nervous about it. I remember being in [the church we attended at the time] –

[here Megan and Sarah have an argument about which particular congregation they were in when this would have been taking place]

Sarah: Well, it doesn't matter where we were! My first memory is still Reconciliation, which was a torturous thing.

Megan: OK, some people find it very comforting and helpful. You can go in and say you murdered someone and they will forgive you.

Sarah: Which is absurd!!

Megan: I'm saying it's helpful for some people!

Me: Do you have any idea what you confessed to at that age?

Sarah: It was probably me being mean to Megan, maybe lying to my parents. But no, I don't really remember.

Megan: That is similar to my first memory, but I was going to say my First Communion.

However, we would have been at ____ [*more argument about which church they attended at the time*]. Regardless of the location, I do also remember the Reconciliation, but the first thing that popped into my head was the communion. And it was more so me being nervous that I was going to -- the Catholic Church is very particular about steps and procedures and rules. So we spent weeks practicing in class, going up to practice.

Sarah: And they told this AWFUL story about a lady who went up and a kid who went up there for the first time to take the wine and spilled it all over the floor. So that was all I had in my head. Why would you tell kids that, as I was about to take this jug of wine.

Megan: And of course we're in these pretty white dresses --

Sarah: That was all I could think of, the whole time we were taking Communion. It was rough. One of the reasons why I attend [my current church] is because [we take communion] in the little individual glasses. It helps.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

Megan: In the summertime, it was like oh we're not going to go as often, because we're busy... when holidays came around, mom became crazy. It was very important suddenly. It was an increased level of importance.

Sarah: During Advent, it was very important. Even today, for them, that's very important for them to go during Advent.

Megan: She loves Christmas and Easter.

Sarah: They will go, all year round, probably once to twice a month. It's not like they go just Christmas and Easter.

Megan: Yeah, they don't go just for the holidays. But it was very clear to us growing up that the holidays are more important than any other day.

Megan: More important than any other time periods. And then the rest of the days, you get to relax almost on the churchgoing, so that was a little strange.

Sarah: They always kept us involved though. We were always in classes. Like the Wednesday night class or whatever, because we didn't go to Catholic School, we went to Wednesday night religious classes.

Megan: I don't remember that we were ever—we never put up a fight or had an issue with going. Do you remember complaining about it at all? Because I don't.

Sarah: No I never remember being a teenager bucking it, or doing that, we never really did that. But yeah-- to me, with Mom, it was like we're going to sit and say we went [to church]. It was almost like she felt better having just been there, not necessarily having learned anything or heard anything.

Megan: I don't necessarily think that that was her fault. She couldn't hear, so she at least did enjoy just being there. She read the book in front of her and go through the whole thing and she reads the story from the Bible. She just couldn't hear the sermon very well.

Me: And that was always true, even when you were kids?

Sarah: Yes, it was always true, even when we were kids. And my response as kids was like, "why don't we sit closer so you can hear the sermon?" Because afterwards we would even talk about the sermon sometimes-- it wasn't like oh we went to church and nothing happened, on the way home we talked about the sermon and stuff, as we got older, which I thought was a great practice to do with your kids. But [our mom] was never really able to participate in the conversation because she couldn't hear and didn't know what happened.

Megan: However if we did get a priest that happened to—some of the priests would talk louder than others—we would suddenly get like a new priest who she could hear, and it would be a revelation for her. She would be like, "I could hear him! I loved him!"

Sarah: So again I would ask, "Why don't we sit closer so you can hear him?" And she said, "Well, we can't give up our pew!" Like that was more important than actually hearing the sermon--you can't change pews!

Megan: we also sat in a specific order in the pew. Just like the procedures and the rules [that the church itself has]. Some if it, now that I think of it, it sounds crazy.

Sarah: But that's what people do! You just sit in the same general area the whole time.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

Megan: I had started to realize that there are more things out there, there are more religions out there. And I was very –

Sarah: She's a Buddhist.

Megan: I am not a Buddhist! I wouldn't identify myself as that, but I like the beliefs, and some people even believe that Buddhism isn't even a religion, it's more like a –

Sarah: I love that you're a Buddhist.

Megan: It's more like a belief system, as opposed to a religion, because you don't believe in God. It's a lifestyle.

Sarah: I believe that Millennials are –

Megan: You didn't let me answer the question!

Sarah: Sorry, sorry. Continue. I got sidetracked about her being a Buddhist. Because it's fantastic. You should have seen how disappointed mom was.

Megan: Anyways—I still identify myself as a Catholic, however, I enjoy the beliefs of Buddhists, I like their overall thought process. But anyways, to answer your question, I had started to realize that there's more out there and basically, I started getting almost disappointed in the Catholic religion- I started realizing that they could basically say whatever they want to say or put whatever they want to put in their specific book, just like any other religion can put whatever they want in their book. So they basically put whatever their core values and say that's what their religion is. And started becoming disappointed in the things the Catholic Church was focusing on that I didn't feel were a big deal, or I didn't feel that it was as important, that they shouldn't care about a certain topic. Do you want an example? I mean like, some of the rules are just so strict-- the frown upon you getting divorced, and then not getting an annulment. Then in their eyes, your next baby that would have, let's say if you got married again, then the baby -- some priests wouldn't be interested in baptizing that baby and would actually say no. And that kind of blew my mind, that just because you get a divorce and you didn't do it the proper way –

Sarah: And that if you don't baptize a baby, he's going to—that's absurd! That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard in my entire life.

Megan: So some of the beliefs are just kind of—I think are a little bit out there. I believe in a lot of what the Catholic church believes, but at the same time, I think a lot of their other beliefs are just absurd and unnecessary, that I don't know why it's part of the religion.

Sarah: While I was a teenager in the Catholic church, I knew that I was gay. It drastically changed my perspective on myself while I was in high school, because the church was telling me that I was going to hell. So for many years as a teenager, in high school, I was like, I can't be gay -- I've got to do everything I can to not be gay, because I'm going to go to hell, and I don't want to go to hell! So I went through that phase, and then basically got to college and said, you know what, I do not believe that God could possibly send me to hell, when someone could kill someone and then go into a Reconciliation booth and apologize, and they're not going to go to hell, but I'm gonna go to hell because I love someone else? So I came to that realization, and whether that's just a manifestation in my head, or whether it's a real thing, I don't know, but I decided that. And then from there—I think that for Millennials, they are more spiritual than religious. And I think that's part of the reason that they don't go to church. Because I don't think they like the restrictions of religion itself, and they would rather have the freedom of spirituality. They want that connection with a god or with God, and I think that's what spirituality does, whereas religion puts restrictions on it for them. And Millennials don't like restrictions.

Megan: Yeah, they tell you what you can and cannot believe. The Catholic Church for example, or probably any religion, they have their list of rules, and their list of beliefs, and sometimes the Millennial generation doesn't like to do what they're told, or don't like to fit into a mold.

Sarah: Oh definitely. So from there, in college, kind of like [Megan], I said, let's see what else is out there in different religion forms. And I got involved in some other more “free” Christian groups, and I thought they were too free—going from Catholic to these super free churches really blew my mind, and I didn't like how free it was.

Megan: Because there's something comforting in the rules in the Catholic religion

Sarah: Exactly, there is—you always know what to expect. But even these “free” Christian groups were still not accepting of LGBT groups. So it still wasn't a good fit—even though they were “free,” free does not mean accepting, that's for sure. So from there, I guess what really really changed things for me was probably [my wife] the most. From there, I probably would have stopped being a religious person, and I would have just done what I call being spiritual. But [my wife] desperately wanted a church –

Megan: What religion did she grow up?

Sarah: Catholic. Yeah, she desperately wanted to have a church to belong to—and that really could have gone either way for me, I would have been fine with it, or I would have been fine without it, take or leave, whatever—it was probably because of her that we even found [our current congregation] or became a part of a religion, because she wanted that.

Megan: Were you guys part of a church in [previous city where you lived]?

Sarah: We were part of a church [there]. A very neat church, but also not accepting of gay people. But they were pretty hippie-dippie there.

Me: What kind of church was it, do you know?

Sarah: I don't even know. A free church, I think.

[Here, the three of us discussed briefly what a “free church” is.]

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

Megan: From my church standpoint - I feel like there are not very many opportunities to get involved. I know that there are things to get involved with, I know that there are aspects to get involved with, however it's not—I don't feel like it's a community. I feel like my Crossfit is a better community –

Sarah: That's why people love Crossfit.

Megan: We love our Crossfit family, everybody knows everybody, we get together and do things together and we go to things together, we obviously work out together. So I feel like that's a bigger community than my church, which is a huge parish in the city [where we live], yet I can probably tell you the name of, maybe, 10 other people in the church –

Sarah: IF she knows them from outside of the church.

Megan: Yes, and that's because I know them outside of the church! It's not that I know them because they are people I go to church with. It's like, I have this one coworker who also goes to the church, so I know his name and his wife's name. So I don't feel like they don't create many opportunities to really get involved. So in that aspect, I feel like I haven't really created a—it hasn't been a goal for me to get involved in the church because I don't really know what I would even get involved with, I don't know where I would start or what I would do. From a community standpoint, I have also identified myself as a community server, so you would think that I would be really involved in my church. But so then I tend to really prioritize my involvement in the community in things like work related organizations, like the K9 stuff, or, like I said, Crossfit or stuff with that. Like I said, unfortunately, [church community] has become an aspect that I haven't gotten involved in, not because I haven't been interested in getting involved, but because I feel that the presence isn't there.

Sarah: As my family would say, I go to too many meetings.

Megan: She does, you're right.

Sarah: I go to lots of meetings. Outside of church, I'm involved in many things through the school—with sports, with coaching, with organizing the sports at the middle school level. So I go to a lot [of meetings] about that and I'm very involved in that. I also—I'm a little less involved right now, but [my wife] and I are also really involved with the co-op [grocery store that is trying to establish a place in town]. [My wife] has been going to more meetings than I have been because I've been watching [our daughter] while she attends meetings. But we're involved in that. Outside of sports, there's always an insane amount with school. Not just with me teaching, but outside of school, but still school-related, that I end up being involved in like committees and clubs. And then church related—how that involves with church—I would say I try very hard to put church first and prioritize church things. There will be nights where meetings crossover, and I usually try to prioritize church when I can.

Me: With all those community things, and the school things and so on, how do you decide what's valuable for your time? Why do you care about the sports and the co-op and church?

Sarah: I only do things with a purpose—one of the reasons I haven't been going to the co-op meetings quite as much [as I used to] is because I felt like they were dancing around and talking too much and not getting things done. And that is one of my first things—I'm not going to spend time away from my child or not doing something with my family or not focusing on something at home or being with [Megan] or whoever it is, to go to your meeting and this organization if

we're not taking it anywhere. So my first criteria is that we have a purpose and that we're going to do something and get something done. And then from there, I ask do I feel like it's valuable thing for our community. So I feel like for the co-op, that's a valuable thing for our community. I really want there to be a co-op here, and that's why I got into leadership for it. But as I got there and realized that we're talking too much and not doing enough and not acting—and I felt like every single meeting we're just sitting there, talking about it and talking about it, and we're not doing anything. That, to me, is a waste of my time. So I want to make sure that, first, it matters to me, and that it's important to the community and myself and my family, and second, that we're actually doing something. So like with sports, with the committees and with me coaching and stuff, I feel like it's very valuable and the one thing that I love about sports is its very focused, there's always an end goal, it's very clear. It's not like anything else in that it's not wishy-washy. It usually doesn't have to do with money or anything superficial. There's a goal—let's score points so we can win this game. We practice so we can go to that meet and win it, or whatever it might be. So I do really like that aspect of sports.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, or religion, and how did their views affect you?

Megan: [My husband] He was baptized, Catholic, but his parents never prioritized church in anything. I don't think he ever really who to church with his parents. He ended up going to Lutheran services with his babysitter that he had on weekends, because his parents worked weekends, so he was with another family on weekends. When I had finally met him, I almost had to convince him to attend LifeTeen [Catholic youth group events with me] –

Sarah: GREAT music. They kill it on music.

Megan: Yeah, it was probably one of the things I enjoyed about the Catholic church. It was the most positive experience that they provided for us. It was community driven, we went on retreats, the music was great, we actually wanted to attend services, there were discussion groups that we participated in. So [my husband] did this with us, [Sarah] and I, when we were in high school, and he had a good experience with it. I would say that [now] we have similar views and beliefs in that we agree with some things that the [Catholic] church says, and we disagree with other points. We want faith and religion to be part of our life, however he's never -- it's almost like pulling teeth to get him to go to Mass. He dresses like he's going to go, but then he doesn't. If anything, as a couple, because it's so hard to get him to go, then it's hard for me to go, so we end up planning other things on the weekends. It's also hard because we have always been weekend workers, we've never worked a regular Monday through Friday work shift. Now he is, and now [at the end of my pregnancy], I'm home. So now we have more opportunity to go, but we haven't been going to Mass on Sundays because we've been so busy. We have other things to do in life that we then have prioritized over going to Mass on Sundays. So, I don't know—It's challenging to get him to be interested in going to church. We've had the conversation: should we be going to a different church –

Sarah: I've been trying to recruit [for my church], it's very hard.

Megan: Should we be going to a different church that we'd feel more involved in and that we would actually want to go to on Sundays—we've had that conversation, and yet we still have yet to pick another church. Primarily because of my mother's disappointment if we actually were to do that.

Sarah: I think you're overestimating her level of disappointment. I think she would care more about you going to church and be happy that you're attending church.

Megan: Maybe.

Sarah: She loves [the Senior Pastor at our church]. He sold her a [Christmas] wreath once. That somehow won over her heart.

Megan: So yeah, I would say that [my husband] isn't—would you say that he's not spiritual?

Sarah: Yeah, he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would like pray about something, right? Like, I don't think he's praying anytime or looking to God for answers, right?

Megan: No. It's more like he participates because I like to participate. So when we do go, it's because he's there more of—like with Mom—oh this is what we do, we go to church Christmas Eve.

Sarah: I think one of the reasons you don't go to church very often is because he doesn't have the desire to go. So it's a very easy, "oh well, if he doesn't want to go, so let's not go, we've got other things."

Megan: Whereas, he will prioritize Crossfit over other things. The only reason why I'm talking about Crossfit so much is that it's a very interesting community. He'll prioritize Crossfit. For example, on the Fourth of July, he'll wake up early, leave our camping trip to go to Crossfit and work out with his friends and Crossfit family. So he'll prioritize that, but yet, I can't get him to go to church on a Sunday when we have nothing else going on. But I almost don't even want to blame it on him, it's almost not even his fault. We should really venture out and try other things, because clearly the Catholic Church doesn't seem to be working for us as far as an involvement standpoint. So we should -- and I should take steps -- to try and get involved somewhere else, and see if he would be more interested in that. Because he's not interested in it [right now].

Sarah: I would be less involved if it was not for [my wife]. In our family, she is the arrow who points us to religion. Not to spirituality—quite frankly, I think I'm more theological than her, and research based, and interested in the Biblical history behind it all, I'm always asking questions, I think of stuff—she doesn't come up with stuff like that, but the community of church and the religion itself, that's really what drives her and she cares a lot about that. And so I care a lot about that, because of her. So I definitely attribute that to her. She had a really similar childhood to us in that she grew up going to Catholic Church, and went through all the sacraments. And she went through the same thing of her parents disappointed that we're not going to a Catholic Church but still happy that we're involved in some kind of church. And both our parents really do like our church. One of the things with gay people and their parents is that parents don't want their child to be scrutinized—any parent, right? You don't want your kid to be scrutinized or judged or whatever or upset. And they [my parents and my wife's parents] appreciated that that's not happening at our church. So I think that's what gives them that feeling that it's ok that you're not involved with the Catholic Church then.

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God /inspired/spiritual fulfilled.

Megan: For me, the time that we were involved in LifeTeen was probably the most fulfillment that I have ever received from the Catholic Church. From the standpoint that I felt like I had the community aspect of involvement, we were actually having discussions and learning things—yeah, it was an excellent experience. We went on retreats and we really—it was the first time that I really enjoyed being a part of something at the church.

Sarah: Do they have that anymore?

Megan: Yes, I believe so.

Sarah: Good, that's really fantastic.

Megan: I don't know if it's the same as it used to be. Remember, how large it was getting and then they were having trouble supporting it, that large?

Sarah: Yeah, it was so big that - almost too successful for them, that it became too hard to support.

Megan: But it was such a good thing because they offered-- teenagers need guidance, and they need peers, and they need mentors they can look up to. There were mentors, and people got to know the leaders who were involved, and they looked up to them and talked to them about things. There were small group discussions about stuff. That was probably the best thing I have been involved in from our church.

Sarah: In the Catholic world, I would say the same thing, from in my Catholic life. Oh! OH! I forgot to say this! This is so cool. When I started out at college, I was actually a part of the Catholic church. So that first year, I was still coming out of high school, not wanting to be gay, blah blah blah. So I did go to a Catholic Church for a year, and one of the things that happened to me was that I was very homesick at the beginning of college, like most college kids would be. And the Catholic church had this outdoor service, which I thought was really unique to the Catholic Church so I went. And then afterwards, they had this thing where the congregation made these goodie bags for the college kids, so all the college kids got to come through and take the goodie bag. And for some reason, it really meant a lot to me because it was –

Megan: A goodie bag of what?

Sarah: It was like those treats, you know, to have in the dorm. And I don't know why it meant so much to me, I just thought it was really nice of them to think of all the college kids, and at the time I was really homesick, so yeah, it meant a lot to me. So I wrote them a thank you card, I wrote the church a thank you card and whatever. And then I ended up—something happened that I was at church and they needed a religion teacher, and I volunteered to do it. And in the interview, they were like, “Are you the same [Sarah] who sent this thank you card?” And I was like, “Yeah, it really meant a lot to me.” So they gave me the job solely because of [that], I was not qualified, not qualified at all, but they gave me this job solely because I wrote them this thank you card. So that year I taught religion class every Sunday at their church.

Megan: I also taught religion class for a year.

Sarah: Yeah, she did!

Megan: That was one of the ways that I tried to be involved.

Sarah: It was good though, you tried.

Megan: I tried, yes. Maybe first graders were not the best experience for somebody who was not a teacher or not an education major in any way!

Sarah: Yeah, so that was my Catholic positive, good experience. For the most part, everything with [my current church] has been very positive. One of [the associate pastor's] sermons was probably the most, at this church. I'm going to rack my brain for it—[The senior pastor] was gone, it was within the last year –

Megan: So we're kind of narrowing it down here!

Sarah: She doesn't preach very often, so it does narrow it down. I have no idea what the story was, or the theme, nope, nothing. But I will tell you this - one of my reasons I go - because being a teacher, and wanting to grow - I go to church to learn. I don't know if that's other people's purpose of church, I don't think it is everyone's purpose of church---

Megan: Nope.

Sarah: Right, OK. But I go to church to learn. And my huge beef with 99% of sermons is that they are impossible to follow and I don't learn anything from sermons, and that is normally one of my really big problems with church. But [this particular sermon] I was able to follow and understand, and the message was clear, and I think everyone else understood too. For me, that's what it is about, for me it was like "Oh my God, somebody got it right! Hallelujah!" I was so happy, and that was very impressive to me. That for me was the biggest connection point within our church. Preaching is an incredibly hard mode of teaching. It's probably the hardest mode of teaching we have. There's nothing visually, there's someone just speaking, you're trying to involve scripture, which is very hard for people to understand. So I can't imagine how hard preaching is. I give you all the credit in the world, because I know how hard it is. So I was very happy because [the pastor] got it that day. What it was about, I don't remember, but what happened afterwards, I remember!

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Sarah: I feel like churches in general are going to have to do something dramatically different. Because what they are fearing is valid. This whole fear about Millennials not going to church and people not going to church is very valid, because they don't have money if they don't have people coming to church. The whole system will fall apart. There will no longer be big huge institutions like Lutherans or Catholics if they can't figure out what to do. And I know exactly what they need to do, but of course they are not going to do it.

Me: And what is it that's exactly what they should do?

Sarah: The first thing Catholics should do is allow their priests to get married. That's the very first thing they should do. Because people are not going to take that lifestyle as much anymore. They're not going to buy in. And nuns. People should be allowed to be married, that's the first thing they should do. [They have a] serious priest shortage problem. And you know what, quite frankly -- and this is a very, very intense statement, but-- if, maybe, you would allow your priests to get married, maybe we wouldn't be having sexual assaults on children anymore. Like, why do you think that's a problem in the Catholic Church, and not in other churches quite as prevalent?... That system needs to go. So you can get some more priests, get some young people in there. So that's the first thing that I feel like the Catholic Church should do. I mean, there's a lot of other things --

Megan: Well what about the churches who also have their pastors get married? Obviously some churches allow their pastors to get married. That might not be the only problem.

Sarah: You're right, that's not the only problem. The second thing is that I feel like women need involvement. Millennial women and the women I'm teaching, these girls that I'm teaching, we're teaching them to be powerful beasts. These girls are educated, their involved, their powerful. And they will NOT want to be a part of something that they can have no involvement in, that they don't have a vote in, that they don't have a say in. That's Millennials, and that's the children below Millennials. And if the churches don't figure that out very soon, I mean that's half of your population right there. Women rule the roost. I truly feel like women run households in our current situation, and if the woman of the household says, "You know what, we're going to church. We're doing this." Then you know what, more people would go to church. Megan, rule the roost!

Megan: I don't know if I want to go to the church that I'm involved in.

Sarah: Well, that's a different issue. But yes, I feel like women is number two, that's the second fixer [for churches]. Then there's other stuff too, like traditions and incense, and confirmation, I

think you can keep all that. People like that stuff. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. It's rituals. Like [Megan] said, rituals, and structure, is sometimes comforting, you know. I don't think they need to try to be more hip or any of that. They don't need to do that.

Taylor

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

Community, a love of nature and the outdoors, and living a life of integrity but also of choice. I don't know how to explain this one a little bit more--Not living a life that I'm supposed to be living or that I need to be living, but living a life that I choose to be living, making decisions based on choice in the circumstance.

Me: When you talk about integrity, how would you define that?

Taylor: I'm becoming a mom this winter, so my husband and I have been thinking of some of the core values that we have as a unit--in our marriage, and as a couple, and how that is going to factor into how we will raise our child. So living a life of integrity, it goes along with that choice piece to me, it's about being true to yourself and your own value system vs. subscribing to anyone else's value system or one you think you should be subscribing to. And things, maybe doing simple things and small gestures that maybe no one else is seeing. If loving nature and the outdoor world is important to you, then no one is going to see you picking up the piece of litter, but you can still pick it up. Little things like that, that add up to a greater whole.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

I am a woman. I am a wife, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. I am a teacher, and an educator. I'm a collaborator, I'm a small business owner. I try to define myself not just based on what I do for a living, but have the things that I do for a living represent some of the larger things that are important to me and those larger titles. So the aspect of community being important to me, when my parents were raising my brother and I, it was really important--they basically said, you can do what you love for your job, and you might not make a lot of money doing it. You can make a lot of money for your job, and you probably won't love doing it. It's a rare few that can find the connection that's both of those pieces. There's no judgement in either of those things, you can choose either. My brother and I, we chose different. For me, I had to have a job that I felt passionate that it's a career that I'm doing something for the greater good, that I'm using my core values and channeling them with my strengths in order to do something positive. When I think about ways in which to define myself, I do think of myself as an educator, but I try not to lead with "I'm an educator," because it's much more integrated than that. I do define myself as a Christian, but it's not at the forefront of the list of things for how I define myself, mostly because I have had negative experiences of people making judgements about what that looks like. It's taken a little bit of time for me to come into my own as an adult in our generation with that title and figure that out. I haven't unpacked it all yet.

Me: It definitely can be a loaded term.

Taylor: Oh my goodness, yes. It's hard to just put the term on the table without trying to clarify. "Oh, but I go to a UCC church. And we're Open and Affirming. And I believe in a woman's right to choose." it's almost like a justification of it, more than an owning it situation. And it actually was multiple years of me being a member of my current congregation before I was even using social media as a way to post or promote anything related to my religious or faith-based life. Because it felt like, I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea that I'm judging anyone else for their beliefs or for their involvement or for any of those things. So it took a little bit of time for me to feel like I got my groove and was confident enough to put that as one of the labels. "Label" sounds like a bad thing, but as one of the ways that I define myself.

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church?

I grew up in a non-denominational community church. Most of my connections to church early on were all music related. I'm a vocalist and started singing in church early on, when I was 3 or 4 years old. Church choir and the friendships that were formed at a young age and a lot of those people are still in my life. Most of the connections that I've stayed in contact with through high school were people that I've met when I was 3 or 4 singing in church choir. When I took a break from attending church in college and graduate school, when I put down roots here it was really important for me to find a church choir to be involved in. but I'm very persnickety--I didn't want to pick a church or a church choir that I didn't feel like their values were in line with mine. I wasn't ready to become a member right away, because I feel that that's an important thing and a decision that shouldn't be taken lightly--for me I can't take those decisions lightly. Because for me, it would also mean cutting ties and not being a member of my home church which I felt so passionate about but wasn't as active in anymore because I was obviously miles and miles away. So I found the choir at [current church], I loved the choir, loved the congregation, went to a couple meetings to learn more, and about a year later became a member. And that kind of grew from there. So music is a big thing for me.

So recently I reached out to the woman who was the youth pastor during my time--I had gotten really invested in the youth program and they have a youth leadership program and retreats, a world religions retreat and confirmation and all this--so it was a really big part of my middle school and highschool life. [This leader], who ran that entire program, is really still like a second mom to me and a mentor. I struggle with anxiety and depression and she was really there for me in college and is really just this rock of a person for me. Not necessarily even from a faith-based perspective, she knew me and she was looking out for my wellbeing and she was another perspective for me to talk to who wasn't my parents when I was going through some of those things. But when I moved to [the city where I live now] I called her and said "How do I find a church here?" So we were googling together--ooh, this one has diversity in the mission, this one has a video of the pastors, oh it's a female and male pastor--looking through the options. The environment [of my home church] was a great place to grow up. One of the coolest parts for me was that right in the mission [statement of the church], diversity is cherished, and there's something about questioning, and that's just interwoven into the entire education system of the church and everything they do with the youth, like questions are good--ask the questions, ask them more, find the answers, question those answers. Being community with people who want to have dialogue with you figuring out those answers. Sit with yourself when you realize you can't find the answers to some of these questions, this might not be the time for that. The whole idea of being really inquisitive when it comes to religion and faith was super formative for me. It weaves into so many different aspects of my life right now, that you can't just take things at face value, it's important to be reflective and to question and to search, and to have that inquisitiveness when it comes to religion, and to debate--and debate with people who might disagree with you and realize that you might change your opinions. And have this really cool dialogue. So that's how I was raised, and I think it's a really cool background.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

My dad was raised in the church that my family was raised in, so his family had been members for like 50 years. My parents got married in the church. A lot of the focus for [my parents] in the church was my brother and I. so it's a little bit of that cliché, they got us through Confirmation, and that was an expectation that we would go through Confirmation and then make a decision about whether or not we wanted to become members and whether or not we wanted to grow

within that element. But then once we did that, and I got more and more involved, and my brother less and less--but then my parents less and less as well. Because they really did make the focus of it us and our integration into the space. And I see that happening in my current congregation, we talk about that all the time, how do we re-engage the parents that now have college-age kids.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

It was very different for me, growing up in the south suburbs of Chicago and being exposed--I went to 17 different bar and bat mitzvahs in seventh grade, being exposed to a world religions retreat in Confirmation--we went to an all African-American Baptist congregation in inner city Chicago, and we went to a Temple, and a Mosque, and the Baha'i shrine--all these different places and having all that exposure. An incredible amount of racial diversity and religious diversity and socio-economic diversity, and gender and sexual diversity--everything--right in your own community. Verses moving to central/southern IL. And I remember describing it like having to put sunglasses on because it was just so white, and so conservative Christian. And all of a sudden I felt that the word "Christian", on a liberal arts college campus where people are so divided in terms of what Christianity is, I felt like I'm not going to be involved in religion. So in college, I felt myself being shut off to some of that a little bit--I went to a couple of faith-based youth group type things, and it was like, "Oh, you can join the evangelical club!" And I was like "WHUP" *[makes a sound and gesture to indicate turning quickly and moving away]*. No way. I never found the right grove. In graduate school, I lived in a very small town in upstate New York. There's something very welcoming and inviting about the midwest that wasn't as much there--even though I had a wonderful experience while I was living there, finding a congregation for what I knew would be a short time, just 2 years, I had no idea how to distinguish what congregation was the right fit for me. Besides going in and putting myself in that situation where I might say the wrong thing and then realizing, oh, it's not that type of congregation. I'm pretty good at reading people, but at the time I felt like there were hidden meanings in things and I couldn't translate them all. Especially being in a new part of the country and it felt very foreign. So when I moved back to the midwest and put down roots, it became important for me to find first and foremost a community of people. A place where I could sing, but also when I started meeting people--I was 23 or 24 at the time--a group of people where there were so many amazing women who I looked up to and they were just doing amazing things in the community, volunteering or in these high powered non profits or all these different places or they had all these beautiful children or they were raising kids or doing this or that--or whatever they were doing with their lives, it felt like I was hugged by all these awesome women who were part of the congregation. I thought, oh, this could be a place where I could have mentors and feel like I can come into my own, and I can have opinions, and people might disagree with me, but they won't shun me because of it. Or any of those things. So it definitely was like a 6 year hiatus in college and graduate school.

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

In terms of being involved in church, I think the community piece of it just falls in line with so much of how I structure who I am. I actually got a great chance to parcel through some of this when my husband and I were getting married, specifically talking about raising our children,

because my husband was raised Catholic, went to a K through 8 Catholic school, had a very negative experience in that environment. Or let me rephrase: he could have had a more positive experience, but wasn't necessarily suited for the rigor or the structure that was expected. So he formed a very negative perception of Christianity and religion as a whole. Then upon meeting me, we had to figure out what that looks like for us to have different opinions, and where's the consensus on that, and how does that look while we're expanding our family. And I remember about a year in--my congregation was going through the process of [discussing becoming] ONA during the first year that I was involved. I decided not to become a member... until the vote went through, because I was like oh if this sh*t goes down, I'm not sure this is the congregation I want to be involved in because this is so important to me. So I went to all the things and the community meetings, knowing that I wouldn't get to vote, but wanting to know how it would all play out. It went through with flying colors--there were a few members who had left, and of course that was their decision--but overwhelmingly it was this really cool education process, there were these people in the beginning who said we don't need to be doing this because we already our doing this, it was this reeducation of why this is so important. Then I became a member that spring, and the pastors invited all the new members over to their house for dinner. [My husband] and I had just started dating, and so I invited him to come with me, and he was like yeah, ok, I guess. And I remember walking home from that. And he was like "No one talked about Jesus. They just talked about meditation. Was it who I was sitting by?" and I said no. He was like "There wasn't--we didn't pray" and I was like, well there was the prayer for the meal. And he said "Oh, yeah. Well, that was interesting." I said, yeah, a little different than how you were raised? And he said, "yeah, very different." So we started to figure out, he likes to hear me sing, so he comes when I'm singing. He likes a good potluck, so anytime there's a church potluck, he'll come. He's not a member of the congregation, there was never an expectation that we needed to do it as a family unit. But then when we started to plan starting a family, for me it was very important that he trust my judgement enough in any group of people that I would choose to involve our children in, whether that's a play group or a school or a church community, that he trust my judgement enough that I would want our child actively engaged in this component until they can make the decision that it's not for them, if and when that happens. And it was funny because he said, "But they can't just say it just because they want to sleep in, that's not an excuse". So it's funny, and it took some trust to get to that point, especially because I had had nothing but positive experiences, and knew exactly when the negative experiences were coming, like the evangelical groups in college, I said no and walked away. Whereas he had negative experiences which had built up and changed his preconceived notions. So on Sunday mornings, when I go to church and have choir practice, and the service, and I'm hanging out after and I'm doing my thing, he's doing his thing, the thing that he needs to unwind for the week, which is usually grocery shopping and cooking and watching a sports thing, and whatever he needs to do on that Sunday, that is his choice and his time, and he knows that I need this choice, that I designate this choice for this time in my life. I'm an introvert, but not nearly to the extent that he is. He's much more introverted on the scale than I am. So I love being connected to these larger groups of people, and I love the multi-generational aspect of being involved. I was never--I think college was the only time that I felt I was being totally isolated in terms of being surrounded only by too much college kids, and then your professors, but there was no old and young. But then I started into more student teaching and getting into the classrooms, and that changed because I had this other element with the kids and getting into the classroom spaces and getting that need met. And in my job currently, I get lots of kids' field trips and camps and

classes and all that kind of stuff, and I don't always spend a lot of time with adults. But church then is a chance to connect with the older generation too. That's one of the big reasons why I like our church community that I'm involved in right now, there's this big breadth of ages of people who are involved and engaged and I think that's so important.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.

Me: We can skip this question because you totally anticipated it--unless you have something to add?

Taylor: No, I can't--Well the funniest thing is that, for me, in learning about [my husband's] faith background, is that his parents actually were not the norm marrying. I think [his mom] was, I don't even know--Lutheran?-- and his dad was Catholic. And there wasn't even an expectation in their house that the boys needed to be Catholic because they were part of a Catholic family. [My husband's parents] went to different congregations growing up, they had this really diversified understanding and idea [about faith], it was really the K through 8 school system in the Catholic school that was the negative implication verses the Catholic Church, or any other church environment that he was a part of. So it just demonstrates how important school experiences, and at that age particularly, can be. Whether it's faith-based or whatever it is--you hate to swim, you're forced to swim, you hate to swim for the rest of your life. One of those kind of things. In a way, that was an easier hump to get over than if it had been--I can't say this unequivocally I guess because it's not--it's not a really rigid family structure in which it was expected that he was doing these things. He really did get a lot of choice in the matter and formed negative opinions on that choice. Upon further reflection, talking to his mom about [his bad experiences in school], she said, "It's one of my biggest regrets. Just because it was good for his older brother doesn't mean that it was good for him. We could have changed that, he could have gone to another school. But it wasn't in our thinking, we were both working, this is the school we go to, this is the K8 we chose for you and your brother" verses maybe making a change based on his learning style. So for [my husband] and I, it was less about anti-religion or Catholic religion or anything, it was more about that school and that not great fit for him. And so it opened up for him to be asking a lot of questions about what I get out of it, why I enjoy it, what my experiences were, how they shaped me, who in my life is still in my life almost 30 years later because of the faith background that I had, and I think it's just cool conversations to have.

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

My connection to my spirituality and to God is directly tied to my connection with nature and being outside. So when I was 16 or 17, I went on my first trip to the boundary waters, a canoe trip that was like a youth group canoe trip situation. It was life changing. In a place that was more remote than I had ever been--coming from a family that camped, but like next to a car. So having this amazing experience of being outside in nature. I also went to a church camp that my church had run in Saugatuck, Michigan for 5 years, and then was a camp counselor for 5 years. So for me, there was this innate connection to lakes and bodies of water, the outdoor world, bodies of water, Lake Michigan, and our church looks over the lake--not directly but it's in the distance. And this idea of the lake having her own personality and being moody or having good days and how much this connection between nature and God and spirituality, those things can't be picked apart for me. So, yeah, that trip to the Boundary Waters was high up on it for me. I also went to Guatemala twice with my church, not for mission work but for cultural learning

immersion experience, in which our church had been giving funding for a Mayan school--instead of forcing children from smaller rural areas in Guatemala to go to the larger cities and the Catholic schools were the only options, so they had to drop their traditional Mayan clothing, and their traditional Mayan languages, and they were going to the cities and then not going home, ever--there was a series of schools started in the early 2000's where children were 2-4 hours away from their communities versus 8 hours away, the uniform was traditional Mayan clothing, they were speaking Maya learning English learning Spanish, and it was a very immersive program. Our congregation has been sponsoring and assisting in this program, and sent a delegation down for light, service-ish work, but for me it ended up being just observations in classrooms, and being able to experience and observe all different types of teaching that was happening, and a lot of learning, meeting different community members, learning about the structure and why the school was what it was and all of that, so that was another big moment for my faith. And I think it definitely factored into one of the reasons why I wanted to be a teacher and not necessarily in a traditional classroom setting, because I felt that there were so many different ways that we learn and are educated. And for me, international travel in my middle school and high school and college age time, studying abroad and having those types of experiences was incredibly influential. So thinking about ways that I can incorporate experiences outside of the four walls of a classroom, how to make that into a career, that was a big connection point.

9. **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Me: You said a little bit that for you and your brother, when you were teenagers, your parents gave you kind of that freedom to choose, and you invested yourself more and your brother drifted away from the church.

Taylor: Yeah.

Me: Do you have any guesses or any sense of what's the difference between the two of you and why he chose that other path when you chose this one?

Taylor: As I mentioned my parents are both teachers, I ended up a teacher though in a very different way. My brother's brain is structured very much like my dad's in that my dad was a math and science teacher, he is very analytic but also very emotional. My brother got all of that, but without the emotional piece of it. He sees things in black and white, it's right or wrong, yes or no. My husband is an engineer, and so this actually primed me really well for understanding a little bit better how he thinks too. And there's so much grey in religion and spirituality and people. And if you're involved in a church, religion and spirituality and people are just what it is. Not "just"--there's grace and there's love and there's all these different things, but all based around religion, spirituality, and people. Those cannot be black and white. We weren't raised in a situation in which religion was black and white, we were raised in a situation in which religion was grey. And he [my brother] took that idea of question it, question it, question it, and he questioned it enough that he was like "this isn't for me. There's too much grey here"--if I were to put words in his mouth, I don't want to put words in his mouth but that's my perception of it. In conversations with him now that we're older there's not a negative thing, just that he doesn't believe in it, he doesn't need to believe in it to live the life he wants to live. I respect that decision in him. I thrive in the grey. It's fun and it's challenging and it's messy -- and that's not who he is, very similarly it's not who my husband is.

Kayla and Ashley

1. What are the core values that are important to your life?

Ashley: For me, it's - we're all here struggling on the same path, we're all here in the same boat, don't mess up other people more than you have to. Own your stuff and just try to be the best person you can. Those are probably the main focuses for me.

Kayla: For me, I would say trying to be the best version of you that you can be. I try to focus a lot on hard work, helping others, not causing any undue issues for other people if you don't have to. So kind of the same thing –

Ashley: We're on the same path –

Kayla: Yeah, same thing but different words.

2. How do you define yourself as a person?

Ashley: That's a little difficult, that's a little broad.

Kayla: Yeah

Ashley: Passionate. Screwy. Fairly hard working. A little weird. And just trying to do the best I can. That's about it. I mean, I can keep coming up with adjectives, but that's what's most important.

Kayla: These are hard questions to put into words. What I picture in my head is one of those grid pictures with different words. So I guess some of the words would be: Christian, lesbian, playing with non-binary—I guess maybe more androgynous I guess is one of the things I think describes me, humorous, hardworking. I try to be respectful.

3. Tell me about one of your earliest memories related to church?

Ashley: That would be a Unitarian Church in Florida. They had a summer school, a Bible school that I got to go to and we did a ton of arts and crafts. One of the ladies there was just incredible. She really made an imprint on me at that point. And she was always so passionate about church, and passionate about helping people, and passionate about helping the kids discover their faith, and that really impacted me. One of my favorite things we did, we did hot air balloons with paper mache. And we put our hopes and our dreams on them and we hung them up so they were flying. That would be my earliest memory of church.

Me: How did you end up there, were you living in Florida at the time?

Ashley: Yeah, our dad was stationed in Kings Bay, Georgia. We were living on an island in Florida and we would drive to Jacksonville for a Unitarian church, which was 35 minutes away I think.

Kayla: Yeah.

Ashley: Of course you would have been a baby at that point.

Kayla: Yeah, but I still remember how far [our home] was from Jacksonville.

Ashley: That's because the mall was there.

Kayla: My earliest memory is a vague memory of a summer camp that I remember making a wire curled cross. But that's not much of a memory, it's very vague. I think of actually being at church would be the Methodist Church we went to in Curran, Michigan –

Ashley: Pastor George.

Kayla: Yes.

Ashley: He was an old hippie.

Kayla: Yes. And so they had ceremonies very similar to [my church now], with a lot of the speak and respond [style of worship]. But I was like 6, so I didn't really—it just seemed like actions, and at that age I wasn't really making connections with the spiritual aspect of it, so it was just kind of weird for me.

Ashley: Something we did on Sundays.

Kayla: Yes! And one of those times, I had to go up to the front and then Pastor George sprinkled water on me and got me wet and I didn't know what the heck was going on. Then I just went and sat back down and went, "OK, this is an extra weird Sunday" –

Ashley: "So that just happened" –

Kayla: Yeah. "So that just happened," 6-year-old me. That just happened. Can we go home now? I'm weirded out.

Me: So you don't remember anyone explaining to you what was happening at all?

Kayla: I don't remember it –

Ashley: It was explained –

Kayla: I'm sure it was explained.

Me: Sure, but not in a way that 6-year-old you understood or retained.

Kayla: Right.

Ashley: I don't think she was focusing upfront when it was explained. Because I remember that day. And yeah, you were with a bunch of the little kids -

Kayla: "A bunch of the little kids"? Why was I the only one in our Sunday School class?

Ashley: No, on some Sundays we'd have more kids.

Kayla: OK, that's fair.

Me: So it wasn't anything that was pre-explained beforehand?

Kayla: It could have been? It could have been.

Me: But again, not in a way that 6-year-old you understood or remembered what was happening.

Kayla: Yeah, I don't remember them having anything like what we do now with Confirmation classes or anything like that. Correct me if I'm wrong, [Ashley].

Ashley: They were part of Sunday School, so basically they would take an extra part of the class and go through the Confirmation stuff. Unfortunately, they saved it for the end of the class, and by that point most of the kids were restless and bored.

Me: Pretty checked out?

Ashley: Yeah. So, it could have been handled better, but it was there.

Kayla: I would agree, since I have no memory –

Ashley: Yeah, but you were also 6. I don't remember most of the stuff when I was 6 –

Kayla: Yeah, but 6 is still a decent age for retention, I would think. I don't know.

Ashley: It depends.

Kayla: Yeah, obviously. I don't know. But that's my earliest memory of church.

Ashley: One of the greatest things about that church was how laid back it was, and that was also one of its weaknesses. It was a little too laid back, a little too casual. Which made me feel super comfortable, but for stuff like Confirmation [and baptism] and stuff like that, there wasn't enough form to it, so I think they suffered for that.

Kayla: That's why I like [my current church] because it's still laid back, but there's also that structure put in place, so that when things need to get done, they actually get done.

4. When you were growing up, how was religion or faith important to your parents?

Kayla: I would describe Mom as being spiritual, even though she would say she was Unitarian if she had to pick a religion. Because Grandma and Grandpa are Unitarian. Dad—I don't think he is very religious either. He really likes Tai Chi, and I feel like he leans more towards that aspect of it. But even that, I don't think he gets much into it. Because I remember he told me that Grandma was Latter-day Saints, Mormon, so –

Ashley: A missionary. Well, she was a daughter of missionaries. She was in Jerusalem for quite a while, as a kid.

Kayla: Really?? She died right after I was born.

Ashley: Yeah, I was 7, so you were a baby.

Kayla: I think that it was important for them to expose us to religion so we could make our own decisions. But as far as mainstream religion, I don't think it was super-duper important to them.

Ashley: So I have a slightly different take on it, because I got to see more of their transition. So they were very much Unitarian, but the focus was more on exposing us to faith and giving us a firm base with ethics and morals. And being a good person. Question things. Figure it out on your own, don't just take someone else's answers for you, because then it's not going to mean as much to you. So they gave us a basis with Unitarianism, which is focused less on the Bible and more on just "don't be a jerk". But they always encouraged us to question things and explore. So they started out with Unitarianism, and as we got older, they made sure we were exposed to different cultures and different faiths. And just encouraged to find our own path, and they would support us no matter what—as long as we didn't turn into jerks. Because in Unitarianism, they are less focused on the Bible and Christianity—I would describe my mom as more of a Neo-Pagan now, and my father as more of a Zen Buddhist. Yeah. Dad's a sceptic, but he's very into Buddhism, which is less of a faith and more of an ethical and moral practice. It's a framework for living well. And they both actually have gone through these Druidry courses. Because again, it's less of a faith and more of a framework for living your life. So yeah, I would definitely say that Dad went from Unitarian to Zen Buddhist, and Mom went from Unitarian to Neo-Pagan. But either way, they've always encouraged us to pay attention to faith. You need to believe in something, figure out what it is that you believe in. That's how I saw it.

Kayla: That's fair. Her perception level's a lot higher than mine. I'm just doin' my own thing.

Ashley: *[pointing at herself]* Emotional intelligence; she's got the logic brain. I can't do math to say my life, but I can read emotions in people.

5. How did your view/understanding of church change as you got older?

Kayla: I actually started going to a Mennonite church in high school, because--well, I almost got expelled from school so I started hanging out with different people and started going to church -

Ashley: With "firm encouragement" from our parents. Very firm encouragement.

Kayla: Yes. So that, I think, pulled me closer to Christianity. We had Pioneer clubs in Michigan, in elementary school, so I would go there because most of my classmates were going there.

Me: Was that like a scouting thing?

Kayla: Yeah.

Ashley: Three quarters of the school was progressive Mennonite. Most of the school board, almost all of our classmates—progressive Mennonite.

Kayla: We also had Amish Mennonite and Amish in the community, so I think that's a relative term of "progressive" Mennonite.

Ashley: There were Mennonites everywhere!

Kayla: There were. There really, really were. So that gave me a basis, and then I went to a two-year Bible College. So that was actually a first stage of missionary training, so that gave me a different aspect of Christianity. And then, coming out at 21 *really* changed my perspective of Christianity. So I had come to terms with me and my life in relation to my relationship with God -and then just a ton of crap kept happening, and I didn't have a church to go to either, because I'd moved to very rural Michigan. So the chance of finding a church that's ok with a lesbian -

Ashley: There were a lot of Baptists -

Kayla: very slim. So I think that helped me grow as a person as well, and so now I've been slowly coming back and trying to restore my relationship with God. So I guess as far as Christianity, I was pretty conservative in high school, then going through the years, I have knowledge to go with it, but also I've been able to form my own opinions. I feel like I'm a surfer dude of Christianity now—I'm not conservative any more, but I'm not completely liberal either, so I'm kind of in the middle and I'm ok with where I'm at.

Me: Why did you decide to go to Bible college?

Kayla: I didn't really know what career I wanted to go into, but I did know that I wanted a better understanding of the Bible. So rather than go to a university and take a bunch of classes that I may or may not need, it was cheaper to go to this Bible school and then that gave me more time to figure out what I wanted to do. Honestly, I can remember the argument that Dad and I were having.

Ashley: Mom and Dad were not thrilled. They almost said no.

Kayla: I guess a way that [my understanding of faith] has changed is that in high school, it was like this is the Bible, this is what the Bible says, and that's God's word. And then it changed by going to Bible college, because I had more knowledge to back it up, and I had a better understanding of what things are actually saying, rather than just taking it at face value. And then at this point in my life, I know that bridging that cultural gap makes a huge difference as well. So even though it [the Bible] says that, it might not mean what you think it means.

Ashley: As a kid, church wasn't something I wanted to do, I'd rather stay in my bed, but once I got there I'd have fun -

Kayla: We call that "Bedside Baptist."

Ashley: Yes. It was always an open and accepting place, where they'd talk to us like we were human, they didn't talk down to us and they encouraged us to look at things and question and think. And we got to do fun arts and crafts and it was just such a positive experience. As I got older, I started encountering the more negative aspects of Christianity. When we found the Methodist Church in Curran, that was a really cool place. But suddenly, we were in this hyper conservative area. I actually went to youth group. I was a very adaptable person [I moved around a lot as a kid.] By the time [Kayla] was coherent of her surroundings, we had stopped moving around for the most part. Whereas [for me], I'm very good with people and very good with adapting to new situations. So I would start doing whatever the people around me were doing, so within a few weeks, most people around me didn't know that I was a stranger. So I started going to youth group. We went to one called "Power House" - it's all the music and lights and fancy speeches and frickin' people speaking in tongues. My dad called them a bunch of loonies. And at first it was a lot of fun, but then I started paying attention and I thought, this is kind of weird. It was a little cult-like. And then the youth group at the Mennonite Church [where we moved next], people started telling me like "meditation will let in the devil", my yin yang symbol was an evil symbol, just the most bizarre, to me, absolute bizarre. Then they were showing us videos about

how evolution was fake and showing human remains next to dinosaur remains, and all this faux science stuff. And I'm going, our dad is a heavy-duty skeptic, and so we were raised in that environment. So I'm like, "What is going on here?!" And then I started encountering more and more Christians who are just hateful and judgy, just incredibly full of judgement and negativity. And at church or outside of church, they were always convinced that they were 100% in the right, 100% factual, everything, and that's not how life is. And even at that age, I knew something was off here. And they would never have a discussion, they would just tell you something. You know how many times I've been called a devil's whore, or that I'm going to hell—it definitely started affecting my view. Especially when our parents taught us to question things, people don't always know what they are talking about, look into it. But the more I started to push back [against church people and their beliefs], the more I started to say, this isn't for me, and I started looking at other paths. At this point in my life, unfortunately, I will specify if I know someone who is a *good* Christian, because that is not the norm. A good Christian is someone who lives by the words of Jesus and is open and wants to help people and lives a good code. And a lot of Christians just think it means you get to point the finger at people and call them names. Then—[to Kayla] forgive me—I saw what Bible college and church did to - - she started becoming a lot more conservative, a lot more narrow minded. She'd come home and say "women should not be above men," "women should not teach men," this is what they were teaching her. And I was like "huh???" So much closed mindedness, so much hate and negativity, it drove me away. And I realized I could live by my own ethical and moral code without a book telling me what to do, and I don't need a bunch of hopped-up judgy people telling me that I'm going to hell. I screw up sometimes, but I do my best to be good, to do good things and help other people. If I'm going to hell because I don't pray to a certain God or don't bend the knee in a certain way, then I guess I'm going to hell, because I'm not going to live by those rules. So that's how church changed for me other the year. [Kayla's current church]—I feel comfortable there. There's not a whole lot of churches where I can just go in and relax. I feel comfortable there. So for me, that is the vast exception.

Kayla: I'm trying to become less narrow-minded, because at a point, I realized, my goodness – Ashley: Yeah, well, because it's kind of a form of brainwashing –

Kayla: It is. Yeah, no, that college was a mild cult.

Ashley: And it's easy—well, I've been through the abuse cycle. And it's the same kind of brainwashing. Eventually, you wake up and you realize, "How did I get here?!" And I saw her going through that, just with Christianity.

6. Tell me about the decisions that you make to be involved in church or other activities/organizations/causes in your life. How do you make the decisions to be involved? How does going to church factor into your decision making?

Kayla: I say, "I", but I also mean to say, "we" with [my fiancée]—we choose to become active at church because it's a really good social outlet for us and we like the community. It also gives us the opportunity to help others and to use many of our social skills and other gifts and a way for us to give back--we're at a point that we can't always give monetary donations, so we try to supplement that with our time. I don't really think that there's any other organizations or other things, other than going to work, that we really spend much time with.

Me: You were involved with some stuff with your school more recently, right?

Kayla: Oh yeah, the Student Government Association. Yeah, my mentor conned me into it. I'm just kidding –

Ashley: Well, you're not wrong –

Kayla: Yeah, a little bit, a little bit. But I chose to do that because I thought it would be a great growing opportunity for me, because I know I have some leadership skills but I might not always want to step forward and be that person, so not only was it a really good fluffer for my resume, it was a great growing experience and a networking opportunity, and a way to insert myself into the community in this area, in [this county]. And it was fun. But mostly it was a growing opportunity, and I thought it would be a good idea to try to push myself out of my comfort zone.

Ashley: For me, at this point in my life, I go to church to support [Kayla and her fiancée.] Or someone I'm with, a friend or partner or whatever. I'll go to support them. Other than that, I have zero interest in going to church. Obviously. As far as organizations, I haven't done any volunteer work since I moved because it's just been--I got out of an abusive relationship, moved across the country, it was a horrible situation and I've been slowly rebuilding myself and my finances and get to a place where I'm not just surviving. But when I do volunteer, it tends to be with the Red Cross blood banks, or animal shelters, things I'm passionate about, and things that I can offer concrete aid in some form. Because I'm a poor person, I can very rarely donate money, but I've got strong hands and time, so at least I can help out with those. It's things I'm passionate about—I'm passionate about helping people who can't help themselves, and—I almost became a veterinarian, I just didn't want to go to University for 12 years—I'm passionate about animals, so that's how I pick and choose.

7. Tell me about your spouse's feelings about spirituality, faith, and religion.

Kayla: [My fiancée] and I are both Christians, and we both attend [our current church], but she grew up going to a Catholic Church. To be honest, I don't think we really talked about it in any great detail. We probably should have that conversation. To be fair, she has been reading more and I got her a daily journal for the whole year and it has Bible verses in there, to reflect on. So she's been incorporating it [Bible reflections and faith] more into her daily life.

Me: So I know how you found [your current church], but did you two talk about wanting to go to church together, or was there some point that that became an important part of your relationship together? Or how did it even happen that you knew you might want to go to church together?

Kayla: In high school I was active in church, and even then I liked the sense of community, and helping to organize Christmas Eve services and stuff like that, it was something I really enjoyed. So after almost 10 years, I wondered if we could find a church around here because that would be cool. So I asked [my fiancée] about it, because I knew she used to go to church, and she agreed that it would be cool, so I started to research churches, and she did too, and finally after mega stalking the church website, I finally just decided to ask [someone I knew]. We've had the conversation that like "all people are welcome" doesn't really mean *all* people are welcome -

Ashley: A lot of churches say that. I'm a polyamorous pagan, there's a lot of churches I'm not stepping a foot in!

Kayla: So that's why I ended up just asking about it. I looked at every page on [on the church website] except for the wedding page that said they did same-sex marriages –

Ashley: Of course. You didn't stalk hard enough!

Kayla: Obviously, that last 2% of stalk-age would have given me my answer.

Me: But so it sounds like it was more like searching for a community than it was from a faith kind of place. Yes? No?

Ashley: May I offer my observation?

Kayla: Sure.

Ashley: From what you guys said, you're looking for community rooted in faith.

Kayla: It's kind of one and the same. Because I can incorporate reading the Bible in my life, but if I don't get that fellowship and interaction, it's very one sided and based on my knowledge, there's no room for the Spirit to work. [Faith and community] are tied together.

Ashley: Now this is where it gets weird.

Me: OK.

Ashley: Do you know what polyamorous is? So I am polyamorous, I have two partners. I recently moved in with one and he has two kids. So before I moved in--because this is an important question, and people tend to get a little antsy with religion—I'm like, "How do you handle religion with your kids?" Because I don't want to anger his ex-wife or make him uncomfortable or whatever. As long as I know going in, keep my mouth shut or talk about it, you know. And he said, "Actually, we're not religious. So if they ask you questions, answer honestly." My other partner, he is married and they have 5 kids. They go to church once or twice a month usually. She will take a couple of the kids a little more frequently than he goes. They have three autistic kids, out of 5, so it can be a lot. So church will vary. They are very Christian, they were both raised very conservative. Obviously they have changed some perceptions in life—to lead to being polyamorous!—but it is still very important to their spirituality to at least go and have that fellowship and have that community. So one partner, not religious at all; the other one, not hyper-religious but it is still very important. My first husband was Lutheran.

[sarcastically] That was fun –

Kayla: Super fun –

Ashley: Super fun. We went to Catholic Church, because there was no Lutheran Church in the community.

Me: This was a conservative branch of the Lutheran Church, I'm guessing?

Ashley: I don't know for certain, since we didn't go to a Lutheran Church. It seemed closer to Catholicism than anything else. But more conservative, yes. And then my second husband was more pagan than anything. So kind of an across the board spread.

8. Tell me about an event involving the church in which you felt close to God/ inspired/ spiritually fulfilled.

Kayla: You go first.

Ashley: So my parents did not have me baptized as a baby. They wanted me to make a conscious decision and approach it knowing what was going on. So at the Methodist Church in Curran, I was baptized with our Aunt and Uncle sponsoring me. And again, the church was very laid back. But Pastor George walked me through, we talked about it beforehand. [Kayla] was 6, I was 16. A little bit of an age difference, a bit of a different conversation there –

Kayla: That's not right, you weren't that old –

Ashley: Yes, I was 16 –

Kayla: No, you're only 6.5 years older than me, that's not right. Logically impossible –

Ashley: We went to that church for a couple of years –

Kayla: I know that!

Ashley: Moving on. Regardless of age—I was a teenager, OK! Yes, part of it was the community that we were in was very religious, and that did provide more of an impetus for it that it might have otherwise, but it was a conscious decision on my part. And it led me to think very deeply

about my spirituality. And I knew that I might not fit in with most Christians at that time, but I felt close to God with that. I was approaching it with an open heart, and I felt welcomed. So, that was probably the most spiritual moment of my church going years.

Kayla: I'd say for me, one experience was that I went on a missions trip as a chaperone with a high school youth group to Arizona, to the Hopi Reservation. There was an established church on the Hopi Reservation, so we went and we ran VBS for them. So it was a program called "Pandamonium," so I got to dress up as a panda. So obviously I was an instant celebrity with all the kids. And I was also in charge of, on one of the days, the daily devotional for the high school students. So that was really fun. And it took us a couple of days to get out there, and we made stops at places that were connected to the church, either between family or friends of the church. So we stopped in Kansas and Colorado Springs. So that was a lot of fun just getting to spend the time with the youth group and being about to go on the trip and experiencing life on the Hopi Res. I had never been to Arizona, so it was a completely new experience. And it just being completely open country and driving through New Mexico and trying to figure out what the huge shadows were when there was nothing on the ground and then realizing that they were clouds blocking the sun--yeah, that was a bright moment on my part. But just experiencing the difference of the land; being in the same country and yet such different cultural styles and such, having grown up in Michigan. Seeing how happy all the kids were when we came and were spending time with them and stuff. It was just great.

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ashley: I think we pretty much covered everything –

Kayla: Yeah, I think we talked a lot!