The Future of Christian Identity in the Episcopal Church

By

Christopher D. Girata

Date: 10 April 2017

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Recent surveys show that the number of Americans who claim no affiliation with a church body has doubled in the last decade. In addition to the unaffiliated, those who are affiliated with a church body are spending less time in connection with that body. According to philosopher Charles Taylor, we have shifted the way we see the world from an uncontested reality, where truths are absolute, to one that is contested. At the same time, our corporate identity has become individualized. This shift has created a construct where individuals have the opportunity to challenge the traditional view of being, allowing the current shift from deism to atheism. Modern adults are no longer effected by the outside world, but rather, they are buffered and isolated from others, focusing on extreme individualism.

Social science research has shown that individuals experience lasting change through the dynamic power of small group relationships. If small groups are indeed vital to the transformation of individuals, Christian communities must begin to invest in true small group ministries in order to transform individuals. The Episcopal Church has failed to effectively connect and assimilate individuals into established communities, however, that trend can be turned around. Investing in integration programs and employing small group dynamics to achieve meaningful transformation in individuals can help the Episcopal Church stop its slow decline and begin to grow into the future, transforming more lives for Christ.
Dedication

To the glory of God and in deep gratitude

to my four great loves, my wife, Nicole, and my children, Brayden, Layna, and Annemarie, whose love for me is constant;

to my parents and family, whose encouragement never fails to inspire;

to my grandmother, Sue, whose support made this work possible;

to my holy friends, whose sacred nudges encouraged me to the finish line; and

to my church colleagues searching for hope and courage as they build the future.
Chapter 1: Identity Shift

Religious Identity in the United States

The United States is in the throes of a radical shift in religious identity. In recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, the religious identity of Americans is shifting at a higher rate than ever before, both between and away from religious groups. In 2008, The Pew Research Center published a groundbreaking study titled *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* that noted, “More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all.”\(^1\) If the church is to remain relevant in spreading the Gospel, those of us in the church will need to change the way we understand and live our faith by developing structures that provide opportunities for individuals to connect with God and one another more deeply.

History of Demographic Studies in the United States

Specific surveys to study the religious affiliation of Americans began in the 1950s, but, before those surveys were conducted, the US Census asked questions about

religious affiliation as early as the 1850s. The 1850 Census was the first to include questions about religious identity. Over time, those simple questions became more detailed and specific, thereby expanding the understanding of religious identity. The 1850 Census concluded that there were “18 principal denominations in the US.”² Between 1850 and 1890, the complexity of the census survey questions increased each decade, as did the categorization of religious groups. In 1890, the number of reported denominations in the United States had expanded to 145 distinct denominations within 18 umbrella families of churches.

In 1902, the US Census Bureau was established, and its permanence as a government entity allowed the continued expansion of demographic study. In 1906, the Census of Religious Bodies was created as a separate, specific survey of religious affiliation and identity within the US population.³ That survey, initially conducted the same year, began a ten-year cycle of study that continued to expand over time. The 1906 survey of religious affiliation continued to identify and define unique worshipping groups. It concluded that the adult population of America was separated into 186 denominations in 27 family groups. Some of the growth in denominational diversity can be attributed to “the influx of immigrants to America,”⁴ but it also shows that the studies were becoming more accurate in understanding the diversity of religious identity in the growing country.

³ Ibid.
The mid-twentieth century saw a philosophical shift in the study of religious affiliation in the United States. National leaders began to question the legality of asking questions about religion in national surveys. That criticism came to a head when, in 1946, Congress failed to include the necessary funding to tabulate and report on the survey findings, effectively ending the national study of religious identity in the United States. The Census of Religious Bodies agency continued until its official end in 1956. “The unpublished results of the Census of Religious Bodies in 1946, and its ultimate demise in 1956 was part of a growing public debate over the propriety, merit and feasibility of the Census Bureau asking questions about religion.”\(^5\) The 1950s and 1960s saw a sharp rise in the debate over civil liberties, including the challenge to surveys addressing religious identity. Although there were efforts from civic leaders to advocate for the inclusion of such questions, leaders within the government, specifically those developing the general census surveys, refused to include questions about religious affiliation.

**Recent Studies on Religious Affiliation in the United States**

Recently, there have been two national, privately funded surveys on the religious affiliation of adults in the United States. Those studies, done in 2007 and again in 2014, showed that the shift in religious identity and affiliation was happening faster as time progressed. By tracking the shift that took place between those two studies, as well as

comparing the general data gathered in the early 1900s, we can see how quickly religious affiliation is declining, especially within Christian groups.

In 2007, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a survey that found that “the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion.”\(^6\) The group with the highest level of growth in the last generation is the group unaffiliated with any religious group at all. This shift has been touted as the demise of religion, but as we will see later in this paper, a decline in religious identity does not necessarily indicate a lack of desire to relate to God. Rather, as we will see, although religiosity has declined, the search for a spiritual identity remains strong. This growing demographic group, termed “spiritual but not religious,” provides an opportunity for church leaders who can tell the gospel story in a way that is not tied to institutionalism but tied directly to God.

Following that survey, the Pew Forum conducted a second national survey in 2014 that showed that the shift uncovered in 2007 continued. Religious affiliation of any kind is declining nationally at a shocking rate. Although that decline affects nearly every religious group in the United States, mainline Protestant groups have seen the sharpest decline. The total share of the US population that identifies as Christian has declined, both as a percentage of the population and in real numbers. The studies find that “the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has

dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% . . . in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.”

However, in that same period of time, the total US adult population grew by about 18 million people. One might be able to argue that although the percentage of the population that identifies as religious declined, due to the population increase, the actual number of those religiously affiliated remained stable. Yet when the percentages are converted into real population numbers, there is an actual decline in the total number of people who profess a religious affiliation, with a total net loss of approximately 5 million adults.

The declining numbers of affiliated Christians in the United States is offset by the rise of those who are unaffiliated in general. “Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular’ – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.”

These same unaffiliated adults also are getting younger. “As this rising cohort of highly unaffiliated Millennials reaches adulthood, the median age of unaffiliated adults has drops to 36, down from 38 in 2007, and far lower than the general (adult) population’s median age of 46.”

Although the Christian population is declining in general, for the purposes of this paper, the real story in the data gained from these surveys is the sharp decline of adult

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8 Ibid.

Mainline Christianity has seen the greatest share of decline in religious affiliation in recent years, but there is hope that this trend can be reversed. Recent studies that break down the demographic affiliation into generations indicate that in the youngest adult generation, those born between 1990 and 1996, religious affiliation has declined from one generation to the next in every single group except Mainline Protestantism. The portion of that young adult generation, identified as “Young Millennials,” is higher than the next oldest generational group, the “Older Millennials” born between 1980 and 1989. The reason for that shift is being hotly debated in leadership circles. By seeking to identify reasons why the youngest adults have bucked the larger statistical trend of less affiliation over time, specifically within mainline Protestantism, leaders of mainline Protestant churches can expand the ways in which they grow their congregations in the future to redevelop affiliation.

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Imago Dei – The Image of God

Our culture is shifting away from religious identity, yet Americans acknowledge the existence of a higher power, of God, and as consistently as ever the desire to develop and live a spiritual life. Religious affiliation is on the decline, but it does not follow that belief in God in American society is declining at this same rapid rate. As Christians, we believe that the sense of God in the world and a desire to connect with God is fundamental to our created order. We are, after all, created by God and created to be in relationship with God and one another. The openness to acknowledge and seek after God or the divine is nothing new. That desire for truth and transcendence is ancient and fundamentally human. Awareness of God and the desire for spiritual identity acknowledges that we exist beyond ourselves and that our human nature is made for relationship.

It is still a viable belief that our human nature is grounded in the God who created us. Our Christian tradition teaches us that “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:27 NRSV).” Being made in the image of God explains why we seek the truth of that which transcends the world. Christians confess the belief that, having been created in

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God’s image, each person is seeking to reconnect with God. We are the creation, and our desire for a spiritual identity flows from the Creator.

The Latin expression, *Imago Dei*, reflects the biblical claim that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Debate regarding *Imago Dei* has occupied scholars and theologians for centuries. The theological claim that is made in the idea of *Imago Dei* is incredibly significant to understanding our identity. The basic claim is simple: humanity is in some way and in some form like God. “Man is the one godlike creature in all the created order. His nature is not understood if he is viewed merely as the most highly developed of the animals, with whom he shares the earth, nor is it perceived if he is seen as an infinitesimal being dwarfed by the enormous magnitude of the universe. By the doctrine of the image of God, Genesis affirms the dignity and worth of man, and elevates all men—not just kings or nobles—to the highest status conceivable, short of complete divinization.”

This fundamental idea is critical to unpack in order to understand the future of religious identity. To begin, there are three common ways of defining *Imago Dei*: substantive, functional, and relational.

Let’s consider each of these three perspective on the *Imago Dei*. First, the substantive understanding of *Imago Dei* roots the image of God in the spiritual makeup of humanity. This means that there are similarities between God and humans, characteristics that are shared between us. This understanding of humanity’s mirroring of God can be seen in classical art (e.g., as in the physical connection between

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Michelangelo’s God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). In addition to shared characteristics between God and humanity, the substantive view also implies that these similarities allow and facilitate a relationship between God and humanity. The *Imago Dei* is still located in the human person, and we have been given the opportunity and responsibility to be in relationship with God.

The functional view of *Imago Dei* places humanity in the leadership role in relationship to the created order. This understanding came to greater authority in recent years as scholars began to compare the biblical creation story with similar creation stories from the Ancient Near East. In those Ancient Near Eastern stories of creation, humanity was seen as an extension of God on earth and was meant to rule the created order. This idea that humans can an extension of God on earth can be seen in Ancient Near Eastern cultures that began to identify their leaders as divine, as gods, and as such ruled with a divine mandate.\(^{16}\) We can see this in leaders such as the Egyptian pharaohs. Yet the creation story in Genesis differentiates itself from its contemporary accounts by emphasizing the functional *Imago Dei* in every person, not just the select few. Humanity lives into the *Imago Dei* through ruling over the creation.

The relational view of the *Imago Dei* establishes the locus of our divine likeness in our relationship with God. That relational locus means that we have an inherent and created capacity to reason and discover the world that God has created, but that identity as the *Imago Dei* is made manifest only through our relationship with God. Karl Barth is the most prominent supporter of this viewpoint, arguing that the meaning and

\(^{16}\) Middleton, *Liberating*, 27.
purpose of God was to create a being that could be a real partner with God. That being, in all its non-deity (humanity), would be different than God, yet that differentiation grants humanity the ability to respond to God. “Man was created as this being.”17 Barth argued that the very purpose for which humankind was created is to be in fellowship with God.

Moreover, our human nature calls us into relationship with one another. We hold in common our creation as social beings. Our unity stems from the truth that God has purposefully worked through us in the world. In scripture, there is regular encouragement to share life with others. Some examples of this include: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Mt. 18:20),” and “the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs . . . . (Luke 10:1).” We are drawn to one another in community; we experience the fellowship of love that is the truth of Christ in our relationships with one another. God’s desire is that we experience the profound truth of love, but that truth cannot be fully experienced individually. As Stanley Grentz has pointed out, “On the contrary, the fellowship God intends for us is a shared experience. And therefore, the divine image is likewise a shared, corporate reality. . . . It is ours only as we enjoy community.”18

Connecting to one another is what God hopes for each of us. The connection we share through our common humanity is the most profound expression of the divine love

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17 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume 3: The Doctrine of Creation, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 183.
that God offers to the creation. However, lack of connection in today’s world undermines the communal foundation of Christianity. Connection to God and to one another is the priority of the Christian faith. As Jesus knew, community is fundamental to our human experience. Deep relationships to God and one another allow us to reach a more complete and healthy life together.\textsuperscript{19}

Connecting in the Future

The ways in which people connect to one another have dramatically shifted in the last half century. Historically, humanity was inclined to spend a large amount of time together in social groups. Whether hunting, farming, or socializing, humanity was bound together by the relationships built during activities. However, in the last fifty years, the time spent together has eroded, and with it the sense of unity that has defined religious identity.

In his landmark book, “Bowling Alone,” Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam, identified a multigenerational decline in what he called “social capital.” According to Putnam, social capital is “embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations,”\textsuperscript{20} and the opportunity and commitment to those social relations have declined sharply. Social capital is fundamentally the understanding that social networks have value. “Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to

\textsuperscript{19} Grenz, Created, xxvi-xxvii.
properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”

Communities have social capital when relationships are strong. However, as those relationships begin to decline, the social capital in a given community declines with it. In order for relationships to strengthen, civic participation must be high.

Civic participation in the United States grew year after year in the early twentieth century. Membership in civic and social groups established relationships between neighbors and allowed for the rise of social connectedness and capital. That participation peaked in the 1950s, and, by the beginning of the 1960s, participation in civic life began to wane. Many cultural shifts can be credited for that decline. Among them, Putnam identified the privatization of leisure (personal televisions, etc.), the growth and expansion of suburban life, and a commuting culture, as well as the rise of two-career or single-parent family life. The fundamental threads of communal life began to tear as individuals became more and more busy, naturally compounding over time.

As our American culture shifts away from the kinds of connections that sustained the social order in the past, new ways of connecting have sprung up. Even as large social groups decline, small social groups are on the rise. A landmark study of 1,000 small groups by Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist, found that fully forty percent of all Americans claim to be “currently involved in [a] small group that meets regularly and

\[21\] Putnam, Bowling, 19.

\[22\] Putnam, Bowling, 55-64.
provides support or caring for those who participate in it.” This rise of small-group participation is, in many ways, replacing the connections between neighbors. Instead of connecting in large corporate groups, individuals are being drawn together in smaller groups where individuals share common affinity with one another, but the close, personal relationships of the small groups are the ties that bind them together.

Small groups create social capital for those who are connected, even when those small groups are connected to larger social movements. Religious affiliation provided that connectedness for centuries. Individuals would build relationships with others within their church communities, creating a dense net of connection that manifested itself as social capital. For those inside the group, the capital was high. In the context of faith communities, the desire to connect with one another is understood to be an expression of our *Imago Dei*. This natural way of being has taken a digital turn as well. Beginning with the advent of social technologies like the telephone, our ability to connect with one another through technology enabled us to redefine relationships. It was no longer necessary for us to be physically present with one another to get a sense of connection. As technology has advanced, the ways in which we use that technology to enable connection evolved with it.

Although an extension of that technological growth, the Internet was a revolution in connectedness. Putnam comments, “Within a few years of the Internet’s launch, simulacra of most classic forms of social connectedness and civic engagement

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could be found on-line.”\textsuperscript{24} The connectedness that was developed through digital technologies began to replace physical connection, adding to the decline in civic participation, and, with it, the decline in religious identity. That same phenomenon has begun to shape religious groups in new ways as Millennials begin to make up a larger portion of the adult population.

Millennials “are history’s first ‘always connected’ generation.”\textsuperscript{25} Millennials desire, like all of us, to be connected to others. Just as generations have connected with one another throughout time, Millennials express a deep desire to build social networks. However, connection in modern life has moved primarily into a digital realm. For Millennials, digital connections are the primary way that they have connected with everyone in their lives. Being “always connected” has shaped the identity of Millennials in ways that are still misunderstood. As seen throughout history, social capital is created through social relationships. For the youngest American adults, those relationships are more defined through a digital experience than ever before. One recent study found that more than eighty percent of Millennials have social profiles on-line, with nearly that many engaging on at least one social media platform daily.\textsuperscript{26} The participation and activity through social media platforms proves that we are made for connection. Yet digital connectedness may not be equal to the ways in which we have connected in the past.

\textsuperscript{24} Putnam, \textit{Bowling}, 170. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Pew, “Millennials,” 1. \\
MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has become a critic of digital connection. An early advocate of the promise that digital connections held for us, Turkle has begun to question the ways in which we are being formed by our participation in such media. In “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,” Turkle criticizes the negative impacts of technology on our psychological health. For Turkle, the broad cultural shift is becoming manifest in complete ways in our youngest generations. The cultural disconnection we are experiencing has been exacerbated by more and more personal experiences of the world. Our corporate individuation has left us empty and hollow, searching for satisfaction in newer and newer customized social experiences. Yet this downward spiral does not have to continue. Turkle wrote, “We expect more from technology and less from each other. This puts us at the center of a perfect storm. Overwhelmed, we have been drawn to connections that seem low risk and always at hand.”

Turkle pointed to the ways in which technology has begun to control our behavior, keeping us focused on a digital world rather than the physical world all around us. She believes that the fundamental desire we have to be together is being undermined by technology. Instead of being strengthened by technology, she says that togetherness has been “crowded out by the half-light of virtual community.”

This criticism has been leveled against how people are using technology to connect, but their desire to connect is still fundamental to their nature. Our culture has been searching for

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28 Ibid.
connections in ways that prevent true connection, but the fundamental desire for spiritual identity and connection is still very present. If given the opportunity and encouragement to connect to one another in physical reality, virtual reality would always be second best. Although she does not address this directly, Turkle’s work suggests that there is a great opportunity in our current social environment to renew the gospel message.

Spiritual Identity

As Christians, we operate under the assumption that our common humanity is defined by our created identity. Each of us, created by God, has a unity with one another in God. That unity is being tested by shifts in our culture, not least by the rise of technology, but the truth of our desire to connect is still very present. Community remains fundamental to our human experience. The desire for connection is now being understood as a growth in spiritual identity, as opposed to the historic religious identity.

A number of scholars approach this topic from varied perspectives, but the common thread is that our world has changed and continues to change quickly, and those who lead churches need to better understand those changes. Many writers see hope in our current situation, grounded in the rise of a growing spirituality. In “The Future of Faith,” Harvey Cox articulated a commonly held belief that Christians are shifting into a new phase of the Christian story that looks very similar to the first generation of followers of Jesus. Cox wrote, “Despite dire forecasts of its decline, Christianity is growing faster than it ever has before, but mainly outside the West and in
movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies... negotiating a bumpy transition into a fresh era.”

The growth that Cox cites is anchored in our ontological identity in God. We seek the truth of God because we are created in the truth of God. The experience of the divine, a spiritual experience, is found when we connect with one another in deep ways. Our common quest for purpose, our search for meaning, stems from the love of our divine Creator and is fulfilled through our relationships with one another in response to that love. In other words, the desire to connect with one another is the fundamental way in which we express our spiritual life and how we find meaning.

As our culture shifts have the ideas that define it are changing as well. Throughout most of modern human history, religion was not a defined social construct. It was nearly impossible for people in centuries past to separate religion, culture, and national identity because they were all completely intertwined. Religion professor Mark C. Taylor described religion as “a complex adaptive network of myths, symbols, rituals and concepts that simultaneously figure patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting and disrupt stable structures of meaning and purpose.” That understanding of religion exposes the multifaceted way in which religious identity is understood within the complexity of modern culture. Today, Western culture has decoupled religion from national, psychological, and spiritual identities. Linda Mercandante identified the four

basic components that religion and spirituality share: beliefs, desire, rituals, and behavior.\textsuperscript{31} It is very common for people to seek the individual understanding of each idea, accepting some and rejecting others. As religious affiliation has waned, passion for spiritual connectedness and identity has remained, and, in some cases, even increased.

In earlier eras, what we called spirituality was often called piety. Today, people “commonly use the term ‘spirituality’ to refer to the interior life of faith and ‘religion’ to mean the necessary communal and/or organizational component.”\textsuperscript{32} This distinction has given rise to those who define themselves as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). For many, SBNR is not about the rejection of religion but about being freed by institutional limitations. This shift follows a larger cultural shift from collectivism to individualism. Our American culture has begun to reject the corporate and communal identity of religion and to replace those with an individual, more self-centered desire for spirituality. This shift will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter. Put simply, spirituality has separated itself conceptually and pragmatically from religion in such a way as to be establishing itself as its own, defined path.

**Future of Religious Identity**

It would be easy for those of us in the world of religious identity, particularly those active in leading religious organizations, to lament the shift that has taken place.


\textsuperscript{32} Mercadante, *Belief*, 5
Watching our culture lose its religious identity and replace that identity with a seemingly vague and self-centered spirituality can be disconcerting at best and defeating at worst. Growth is critical to the health of any organization, and the gradual decline of religiosity seems to predict a future without the health of religious institutions. However, there is a future available to us that honors the religious identity of the past while embracing the spiritual desires of the future.

As we will see in this thesis, the demographic shift of our American culture is under way and is not likely to be stopped. Yet we have the opportunity to seek a better understanding of that shift, identifying the underlining truths and shifting our own processes to better integrate and benefit from this new way of life. Institutions may not ever play the role they have in the past, but that does not mean institutions will cease to be. Instead, spirituality indicates a desire to relate to God in the most authentic and meaningful way. An important question to ask is whether institutions may again become vehicles through which individuals can connect more deeply with God?

It is well documented that a trend in our cultural shift is the desire to connect with fewer people more deeply. In fact, as will be developed in this paper, the rise of small groups in a myriad of fields has changed the way we relate to one another and can ultimately change the way we relate to God. Whether small groups are centered on recovery from addiction, support in times of deep grief and loss, or collaboratively working toward a common goal, the deep relationships humans have with one another have not fundamentally changed. It is rather the various ways in which those small groups connect with other small groups that is evolving. By definition, the self-centered
activity of small groups centers around a common affinity. That affinity can be explicitly spiritual or it can be implicitly so, but, with each connection we make with others, a true, deep spiritual connection is being made. We are seeking unity of our spirits and a deep connection within our souls.

The future of institutional religion is the primary concern of this research. I intend to consider the opportunities institutions have and encourage ways in which institutions can take advantage of our cultural individualism for the good of the whole. As our religious and spiritual identities shift, mainline Christian traditions in the United States have a unique opportunity to allow the secularization that undergirds our reality to inspire a new way of growing in relationship with God through our communal identity. More specifically, I will focus on the potential for the Episcopal Church in the United States to reimagine how it tells the story of Jesus and engages those inside and outside its membership to grow in its own constellation of spiritual and religious identities.
Chapter 2: Secularization

Common Life

The Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion, is grounded in the theology and traditions of the Church of England. Since its establishment apart from the Roman Catholic Church, Anglicans have understood that salvation was both an individual and a corporate act. Theologically and liturgically, Anglicans believe in the “common” experience of worship that connects individuals into a corporate life. This was manifested in the creation of the Book of Common Prayer in 1549, the first liturgical book of its kind. The Book of Common Prayer reinforced the idea that individuals were in it together. In other words, being Christian was both personal and communal. This approach to Christianity allowed common-language bibles to flourish, so that any literate person, even those outside the educated class, could participate in the life of the church community. In addition, hymns and liturgies were also published, so that any literate person could study and participate in order to reinforce the communal nature of Christian life.

This way of understanding our common life shaped Anglicans for centuries, including those in the American colonies, who ultimately founded The Episcopal Church. Today, the focus on a common identity is an inherent strength, but it is not understood
and employed in modern ways that bring people in. Our modern world\textsuperscript{33} has shifted, and most importantly, the dominant characteristics of our identity have shifted. These shifts have caused individuals to disconnect with one another and turn toward individualistic pursuits over corporate ones. I will argue that our deepest way of being still desires connection, but religious institutions, including the Episcopal Church, can no longer depend on the influence of the wider culture to bring people together. Instead, we will need to seek a better understanding of the shifts that have taken place and strategize ways to remain relevant to modern adults.

**Secularization: The Master Narrative**

Religion and religious identity have changed over time. No scholar would contest that the ways in which people identify themselves within religion and the ways in which religion functions institutionally have shifted. However, there is great debate about the reasons for those shifts and the implications for the future. How, for example, have we come to a place in time when so many people in the United States live outside any affiliation with religion? What has brought us to this place as a culture and can we shift our understanding of religion to increase affiliation in the future? What is the master narrative for this shift?

\textsuperscript{33} The term “modern” in this paper refers to the “Western world,” specifically those areas of the world that root themselves in European thought and cultural lineage, including America.
Scholarship focusing on the anthropology of religion in the Twentieth and early Twenty-First centuries has coalesced around a master narrative to explain the massive, global shift that has happened in religion: secularization. Secularization is the social shift away from religion and religious institutions toward secular ones. The advent of industrialization and the shift toward the rational and secular in the Twentieth Century have been the master narrative to explain the gradual decline of religiosity in Western Europe and North America. “The seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century—Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud—all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society.”

The secularization of our culture has and is continuing to shape each of us. The Twentieth Century forces that propelled that secularization have supported the commonly held idea that we are moving in an inevitable direction away from religiosity as it has always been construed into a new world where faith and belief, especially religious identity, will cease to matter on a scale of any significance. However, in the early Twenty-First Century, “this theory of the slow and steady death of religion has come under growing criticism; indeed, secularization theory is currently experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history.” As outlined in the previous chapter, there is no doubt that religious affiliation has declined. However, the statistical analysis of a broad survey can be misleading without a deeper look at the motivations at work.

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35 Ibid.
Although affiliation with religious institutions is declining, how much of that decline is a true indicator of the ways in which people’s worldview has shifted and how much of that decline is simply an indication of our common willingness and general acceptance to admit disaffiliation?

In 2007, modern philosopher Charles Taylor wrote a landmark work entitled *A Secular Age*. In this extensive book, Taylor explored the secularization of Western Christendom and the subsequent societies in which it expanded. The shift toward secularization is “a move from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”

His focus on belief becomes the foundation on which his exploration of the modern world stands. He unpacks the global shift of the modern world away from easy, prescribed belief, but not away from belief altogether. Instead, Taylor worked through a systematic process of how a belief-centered religious identity must evolve along with the shift in the way we understand the world around us, but that we can, in the process, evolve that in which we believe.

The secularization of our world did not happen overnight. Gradual forces of change pushed our culture toward this inevitability based on the way we began to understand the world. As human knowledge grew, so did our capacity to not only question our life experience, but to begin to research and prove causality of those experiences. For Taylor, the shift is one of fundamental belief. He argued that we no

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longer believe as we did in the past, making it necessary for us to change the way we believe or lose the capacity to believe altogether.

To begin, Taylor drew a distinction between faith, belief, and doubt. Faith and belief once existed together in the human condition. We had faith in what we believed about the world around us. That relationship between faith and belief has shifted. As we have learned more about the world, answered the questions about how our world works, doubt about what we used to believe has crept in. Throughout most of human religious history, doubt has been squashed by those in authority. In our modern world, however, we have the freedom and, in many cases, the ability to question those blind beliefs and challenge their truth. In today’s world, “we don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting.”

In a study of Taylor, James K. A. Smith explained the primary purpose of Taylor’s wrestling with secularization. That new capacity to believe while doubting has opened the door to questioning the “‘conditions of belief’—a shift in the plausibility conditions that make something believable or unbelievable.” Smith concluded that Taylor’s work on secularization focused on the same fundamental questions:

How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows us as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? ...Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God

38 Smith, How, 4.
39 Smith, How, 18.
in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?⁴⁰

These questions focus not on what is believed, but on what we deem believable. As Smith wrote, “The difference between our modern, ‘secular’ age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs, but rather the default assumptions about what is believable.”⁴¹

**Taylor’s Threefold Definition of “Secular”**

To understand Taylor’s analysis of the shift that has taken place, we must carefully examine the way he understands the fundamental idea of “secular.” For Taylor, the essence of secular is what is and is not believable. Although many arguments about secularization focus on the beliefs themselves, Taylor focused on the larger question of believability. In other words, Taylor argued that “secularization theorists (and their opponents) are barking up the wrong tree precisely because they fixate on expressions of belief rather than conditions of belief.”⁴² To that end, unpacking and defining the three ways Taylor understood and used secular are important to prevent misunderstanding.

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The first way that Taylor understood secularism is within the realm of public life, which is termed secular$_1$. Over time, religion has been pushed out of sphere after sphere of the common, public life. This division is one that is commonly understood. Our near-modern understanding of the church is often defined as seeking the sacred, while those who work in the world are secular$_1$. “The priest, for instance, pursues a ‘sacred’ vocation, while the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker are engaged in ‘secular’ pursuits.” This distinction is a modern one. Historically, although some spaces may have been understood as more sacred than another, everything in the world was understood to have a sacred presence.

The second way Taylor explained the idea of secularism is the general decline of both religious belief and practice, which he calls secular$_2$. This is a logical expansion of the first explication and, along with the first, has been explored and studied in many different ways. This second way of understanding secularism expands the implicit idea of separating secular$_1$ from the sacred and gives it a more legal boundary. In the United States, we can understand this definition of secularism as applied to basic ideas such as the separation of church and state. For example, if a school is a sacred institution, prayer and religious identity are permitted. However, if a school is a state institution and

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$^{43}$ Each of the three ways Taylor defines “secular” will be noted by the corresponding subscript number.  
$^{45}$ Smith, How, 20.  
$^{46}$ Bellah, “Secular.”
the state is necessarily a-religious or secular2, then religious identity and practice are defensibly forbidden. “According to secularization theory, as culture experiences modernization and technological advancement, the (divisive) forces of religious belief and participation wither in the face of modernity’s disenchantment of the world.”47

What is differentiated here is the difference between secular1 and secularism2. When the idea of what is secular begins to be manifest in tangible boundaries, then it becomes secularism.

Finally, the third way Taylor articulated secular, termed secular3, and the focus of A Secular Age, is “the notion that...a society is secular insofar as religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable (and contested).”48 As the title of his book suggests, we are living in a secular3 age in which the conditions and experiences of our lives guide us to search for the spiritual.49 There is no longer an assumption that belief in God is unchallenged by our social order. Indeed, a challenge to the status quo and/or a traditional view is seen as the most fundamental human condition. “For the first time in western history, a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option . . . accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, not any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.”50

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47 Smith, How, 21.
48 Ibid.
49 Bellah, “Secular.”
50 Taylor, Secular, 18.
Deism to Atheism

The influence of this shift in what is and is not believable impacts the way in which we understand the divine. For most of human history, the relationship between what was human and divine was fluid. Indeed, there was no human reality without a relationship to the divine. However, a separation took place between human identity and divine reality has now occurred. The common understanding of this divergent path stems from the rise of science and reason, with greatest energy exploding from the Enlightenment. Much has been written concluding that the decline in religious identity is predicated on the rise of science and reason. However, Taylor argues against the view that secularism is a result of science and reason. On the contrary, the rise of secularism is the natural progression from a church-led shift into deism.

Taylor began by describing the Middle Ages as a time of enchantment and wonder. He identified three facets of the medieval worldview that helped define belief: “(1) The natural world was constituted as a cosmos that functioned semiotically, as a sign that pointed beyond itself, to what was more than nature. (2) Society itself was understood as something grounded in a higher reality, earthly kingdoms were grounded in a heavenly kingdom. (3) In sum, people lived in an enchanted world, a world ‘charged’ with presences, a world that was open and vulnerable, not closed and self-sufficient.”

Because of those constructs, belief was a part of the fundamental human experience. One could not conceive of a world in which the divine was not present, making an atheistic outlook nearly impossible.

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51 Smith, *How*, 27.
Following the Middle Ages, the church gradually has opened the door to a new way of understanding the world, allowing a shift into humanism. For Taylor, the shift to a humanist understanding of the world is not, as some philosophers have argued, our primary nature. Instead, Taylor argued that we are naturally connected to the mysterious and the divine. Rather, we had to learn how to relocate what we believed to be most significant, to learn to be humanist.\textsuperscript{52} That learning came in four important phases.

First, and the necessary seminal step, was a shift away from a higher, divine purpose and order that transcends our human flourishing. Before this shift, it was common to understand there to be an ultimate good, an ultimate purpose to which we as humans aspire. That could be the truth of heaven and hell or the righteous end of the world. But as our social order grew and expanded, our priority relocated from a divine hope to a more this-worldly plan. Smith asserts, “Taylor sees an important shift . . . in the work of Adam Smith and John Locke, among others. Whereas historically the doctrine of providence assured a benign ultimate plan for the cosmos, with Locke we see a new emphasis: providence is primarily about ordering this world for mutual benefit, particularly economic benefit.”\textsuperscript{53} That anthropocentric shift reordered the purpose of God, shrinking God into a smaller sphere of influence and expanding our human capacities toward a growing independence of God.

\textsuperscript{52} Smith, \textit{How}, 48.
\textsuperscript{53} Smith, \textit{How}, 49.
The anthropocentricity continued with a second shift as the “eclipse of grace.” God has now been put in a specific place, independent of human activity and interest. Humanity came to understand its independent strength and purpose, and through reason and effort could realize goals without God’s help. God remains an important player but is reimagined as either the watchmaker who energized the world into being but does not interfere with its running, or as a judge who will ultimately evaluate our lives. Taylor described this shift as “providential deism,” opening the door for humanism to become an exclusive option for understanding the world.

The natural third step in this progression is the loss of mystery. If we have the capacity to know the good and figure it out, then the way that God works is no longer a compelling mystery. What at one time was God’s providence is reduced to simply God’s plan for each human life. As Taylor put it, “the potentialities we [once] attributed to God [become] human potentialities.”

The final step in the shift is a departure from God’s plan in total. God, being reduced to the watchmaker who does not interfere or interject in the world, becomes irrelevant altogether. The idea that “God was planning a transformation of human beings which would take them beyond the limitations which inhere in their present condition” is no longer sensible or resonant. The loss of God’s participation in the world leaves an absence of the divine.

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54 Taylor, Secular, 251.
55 Taylor, Secular, 224.
The shift that Taylor identified carries humanity from belief in God to deism into humanism and is ultimately on a path to atheism. Perhaps the great irony in all of this is that Christian leaders helped this shift along through the efforts of its great apologists. Christian apologists began to struggle with the new expansion of the human worldview by attempting to explain away the conflict between the new order and the old. In the early Twentieth Century, apologists struggled with many dynamic theological questions, perhaps none as important as the problem of evil. Theodicy became a hallmark of Christian apologetics, but these efforts were taken up in a way that mirrored the secular shift away from the necessary truth of God’s immanence.

Over time, God shrinks into the role of Creator and benefactor, but God’s role in the world remains general inspiration at best and unnecessary at worst. In essence, God is present in a system that runs on its own. And if God is only an inspiring presence, “it is not clear why something of the same inspiring power cannot come from the contemplation of the order of nature itself, without reference to a Creator.”56 As Smith concluded, “Once God’s role is diminished to that of a deistic agent (by his defenders, we should add), the gig is pretty much up.”57 Apologists allowed for the possibility of a truly atheistic worldview that had previously been unthinkable.

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56 Taylor, Secular, 234.
57 Smith, How, 53.
The Quest for Spirituality

Even as these cultural and philosophical shifts were taking place, the desire for spirituality has remained. For Taylor, the desire for the spiritual is an expression of the truth of our human condition. It is not a desire for belief but a desire to connect with an ultimate presence outside ourselves. This desire often comes from a profound dissatisfaction with a life that is stuck in the mundane. This modern sense of spirituality is different than its ancient expression. Rather than a quest for God, modern spirituality is a quest for the individual. Spirituality has been remade in the humanist ideal, putting the self above the divine.

This, too, has been helped along by the institutional church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, churches responded to the change in culture by changing the ways in which they encouraged members to relate to one another. Taylor described this period of time as the Age of Mobilization. With it, came the desire to mobilize around new ways of worshipping, studying, and living together. Denominationalism thrived, strengthening the connections between members of the same denominational groups but weakening the common Christian identity. Along with this phase came a desire to reorder our civic life. Societies, such as that in the United States, began to reorder themselves under the belief that “[God] can be present to the extent that we build a society that plainly follows God’s design.”

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58 Smith, How, 84-85.
59 Taylor, Secular, 447.
According to Taylor, the Age of Mobilization ended in the 1960s, giving rise to the Age of Authenticity. This period is defined as an age of individualism.\textsuperscript{60} As a direct expression of exclusive humanism, this individualistic phase has brought about the understanding that “each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own.”\textsuperscript{61} This understanding of the world and our place in it is a seeking out of our own authentic natures. It is a retreat from historic Christian identity, seeking spiritual identity beyond typical church life. That desire for a new spiritual identity disconnects us from religious life; however, it expresses itself in classic spiritual practices such as meditation, charitable work, and study groups.

This seeking has become pervasive in our American culture. We can see the desire to be part of a group, connected to something beyond ourselves, manifested in the growth of industries that are defined by their individuality, not their collectivism. Gone are the organizations that could rely on membership to simply toe the party line. Instead, we are witnessing the devolution and diversification of identity for the sake of individualism.

However, even as individualism has become the first priority, the ultimate goal is to relate oneself to a higher spiritual reality. In the Age of Authenticity, there has been a qualitative shift in the spiritual vision. “The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my

\textsuperscript{60} Smith, \emph{How}, 85.
\textsuperscript{61} Taylor, \emph{Secular}, 486.
spiritual development as I understand this.” This directly impacts the classic understanding of religious identity and connectedness to religious institutions. “The choice of denomination was understood to take place within a fixed cadre of theological expression, say that of the apostle’s creed, the faith of the broader ‘church . . . [But] in the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether ‘church’ or state.” By putting ourselves first, by prioritizing our individual experience of the divine, “a new spiritual injunction arises: ‘let everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don’t be led off your personal path by the allegation that it doesn’t fit with some orthodoxy.’” Although that spiritualism is far from the historic reality of Christian identity, the desire for spiritual truth to transform one’s reality is still familiar within the framework of religious identity.

The explicit desire for a spiritual life—to connect with the truth of the spirit—is one of the great gifts of secularization. Taylor even goes so far as to argue that the shift to the secular is not necessarily a bad thing, and, if we made a thoughtful choice, we might not even want to return to the way things used to be, to a premodern dispensation, because, as Taylor wrote, “… doesn’t every dispensation have its own favored forms of deviation? If ours tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we shouldn’t forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of

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62 Taylor, Secular, 486.
63 Taylor, Secular, 486-487.
64 Smith, How, 88.
forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse.\textsuperscript{65} Could we, as moderns living in a secularized\textsuperscript{3} world, embrace the growth that has taken place and work toward a new way of defining religious identity that has the good of modernity? Indeed, the presence of a spiritual desire, the common seeking of those who are secular\textsubscript{3}, provides an opportunity for connection and growth, even in the oldest, most well-established mainline Christian institutions.

**The Future of Belief**

The shift into a secular\textsubscript{3} reality has been established and perhaps the most important concept that Taylor hopes to convey is that no modern American, regardless of the desire a spiritual life, is outside that secular\textsubscript{3} truth. To that end, Taylor introduces a concept that we must understand in order to anticipate the shift coming in the future: the immanent frame. The immanent frame is a particular kind of social construct, based on secular axioms, that preclude a transcendent reality. This shift is a radical break from the social order of the past, a break that has been created through the linking of dynamics that have been identified up to this point. The immanent frame “only becomes deeply established in our understanding of the world through a set of connected changes . . . [that] represent profound changes in our practical self-understanding, how we fit into our world and into society.”\textsuperscript{66} For Taylor, the rise of the

\textsuperscript{65} Taylor, *Secular*, 513.
\textsuperscript{66} Taylor, *Secular*, 542.
immanent frame is the fully articulated shift in a disenchanted world, where our physical reality is governed by structured, knowable rules that we can discover through our own efforts.

This frame “constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one.”\(^67\) No matter whether a modern individual subscribes to the possibility or reality of transcendence, every person now lives in a secularized\(^3\) world with the immanent frame defining what is in and what is out. Put another way, the immanent frame causes each person to perceive possibilities differently. For some, the frame is closed, and they can only live within the boundaries of the frame as they perceive those boundaries in the world. For others, the frame remains partially open, allowing the possibility of transcendent experiences that define their worldview. For the latter group, the possibility of conversion has proven reasonable enough to redefine the way they live. Those who convert to a transcendent worldview do not leave the immanent frame, they simply live in it differently.\(^68\)

Conversion is important for us to consider. For Taylor, conversion is less often from non-belief to belief, and more often from a loss of belief to belief again, a re-conversion.\(^69\) This is incredibly helpful to distinguish, because in the context of mainline Protestant groups, and based on Pew surveys (noted in the previous chapter), we know that many of those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” have a background in

\(^{67}\) Ibid.
\(^{68}\) Smith, \emph{How}, 132.
\(^{69}\) Taylor, \emph{Secular}, 744-745.
religion, but that background did not sustain them into adulthood. They are the ones who could be reconverted into a new kind of religious identity that acknowledges modern secularism in honest ways and also points to the openness of the immanent frame in which we live. That openness allows the transcendent to break through and bring about a new, more fulfilling sense of God.

However hopeful, the idea of reconversion is “fraught with a unique temptation: nostalgia.” This nostalgia can tempt those who are dissatisfied with modernity toward a perverted reconversion that seeks to reconnect (and in many cases, reestablish) a romantic Christianity of the past. This kind of nostalgia can bring about a measure of conservatism that places faith in an a-historic belief that the goodness of North American or European culture is the Christian religion itself. Modernity can place a blind subjectivism on that perspective, compelling some reconverts toward an “unremitting hostility to liberalism and to the idol of democracy,” leading to a commitment that “the idea of Christianity was essential for order itself.” In essence, this nostalgic reconversion ignores the truth of secularization and yearns for a world that did not and cannot now exist. In the premodern world, there was an acknowledgement of and appreciation for the differences between the heavenly and earthly worlds. Taylor calls the separation between those worlds the gap, and the space between the gap has been getting smaller.

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70 Smith, How, 134.
71 Taylor, Secular, 734.
According to Taylor, the gap between “the two orders in which the Christian lived, the City of God and the earthly city,” 72 kept individuals from attaining the proper degree of devotion to the Christian way. Leaders in the church desired to bring the ideals of the Christian life into the range of the average person. That would allow the church to motivate individuals toward a higher level of being. The reform of the church was necessary to lessen the gap, and that reform was a primary motivator of the broader secularization. Defining “a way of life open to everyone…couldn’t help by bring about a definition of the demands of Christian faith closer into line with what is attainable in this world.” 73 Instead of bringing the ideals of the Christian life into the reach of most people, the reforms reduced the distinction between God’s reality and our human reality. Nostalgic reconversions are dangerous precisely because they reduce the vision of God to something moralistic and attainable. Indeed, mainline Protestants are most at risk of sanitizing the radical, supernatural story of God into something that is simply hard work.

All of Taylor’s work leads us to the main question: what is the future of belief? As church leaders, how can we take the reality of secularization, understand its dynamism, and then use its inherent truths to engage a new future of belief? Taylor lays out two potential futures based on his analysis – one that is premised on the triumph of secularism, and one that responds to our transcendent reality:

One future, which flows out of mainstream secularization theory, sees religion shrinking further and further. Of course, no one expects it to disappear totally, giving way to science.... Most atheists accept today that there will always

72 Taylor, Secular, 735.
73 Ibid.
be a certain degree of ‘irrationality,’ or at least inattention to science, and the wildest ideas will always have defenders.... The basic supposition here is that religious, transcendent views are erroneous, or at least have no plausible grounds.

I foresee another future, based on another supposition. ... In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it. They are shutting out crucial features of it. So the structural characteristic of the religious (re)conversions. ... that one feels oneself to be breaking out of a narrower frame into a broader field, which makes sense of things in a different way, corresponds to reality.74

Taylor takes these descriptions a step further, putting flesh on the bones of these theories. Secularism has become the lenses through which all modern adults see the world, but that does not negate the truth of transcendence. If we assume as Taylor does that the truth of the transcendent will continue to push on the immanent frame of secularism, then the future of religious identity in the modern world will shift based on two realities.

First, in societies where the immanent frame roots deeply, people will start to understand that life is no better or less complicated without religion. People will still hurt one another and the pain they experience will still be undeserved and unfair. This will begin to lead modern secularists to the realization that religion was not, in itself, the cause of the bad. Instead, they will begin to wonder whether what they see in front of them is all there is, leading to the second reality. “At the same time, this heavy

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74 Taylor, Secular, 768.
concentration on the atmosphere of immanence will intensify a sense of living in a ‘waste land’ for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries beyond the frame of secularism.

There is a hopefulness in those realities, a promise of a future in which spiritual desire will be an access point to a renewal of religious identity. Our culture has undergone and continues to undergo a massive shift toward secularization, affecting everything about us, especially our individual identities. Better understanding the ways in which secularization has shaped identity and self-awareness will aid in the development of formative techniques for the future.

75 Taylor, Secular, 770.
Chapter 3: Self-Awareness

Modern Psychology

Our human social structure is based on individuals who relate to one another in specific ways. Exploring the ways in which individuals understand their differences and how individuals relate to one another, particularly in small groups, will help us understand the global shift toward a more secular culture and how religious groups can redevelop religious identity. We have looked at two deep trends in our culture: identity shift (from religiosity to spirituality) and secularization. These trends have affected how we think about ourselves. Unpacking the fundamental ways in which we define ourselves will shed light on the foundation of identity.

Many disciplines have studied the self and our self-awareness. Perhaps most notably, the field of psychology has delved into the study of the self with the most depth and diversification. Founders of modern psychology, such as William James and Sigmund Freud, studied a wide range of self-focused processes that have contributed to the growing field of self-awareness. Considering their formative contributions, in addition to the growth in self-awareness studies from scholars such as Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead, as well as Shelley Duval and Robert Wicklund, will move us closer to identifying how individuals form self-understanding. In addition to understanding the formation of self-awareness, we will look at the work of scholars such as Ann Phillips, Paul Silvia, and E. Tory Higgins, who explore self-discrepancy theory,
seeking to predict distinct emotions based on human vulnerabilities. These authors will guide us to the culmination of understanding modern identity as defined by philosopher Charles Taylor and the way institutions can impact that identity.

**Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness is defined as “the accurate appraisal and understanding of your abilities and preferences and their implications for your behavior and their impact on others.”

As we have seen in previous chapters, the shift toward the secularization of our culture has impacted our identity. Identity can be understood in many different ways, but, principally, and for the purpose of this paper, identity is being considered in two primary ways: individually and relationally. In the early phases of modern psychology, one’s identity was seen as individualistic. As theories of the self were developed, psychologists considered the ways in which we establish and evaluate our sense of self, or self-awareness. How we establish self-awareness and how our self-awareness is affected will be the focus of this chapter.

Although psychologists have focused more on self-awareness as an individual trait, affected and impacted by the individual himself, more recent theories have begun to examine and advocate for theories of self-awareness that include our relationships. Many theories that are being explored in recent decades have described self-awareness

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as having a more complex structure, influenced by both individual and relational forces. Those newer theories that emphasize the impact of relational forces open the door to identity formation that is not wholly internal, but include the influence of those with whom we have relationships.

The Self

The field of psychology, as it exists today, is a relatively recent academic pursuit, developing separately from other fields in the late Nineteenth Century. One of the founders of modern psychology, William James, wrote *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, a seminal work on the subject.\(^77\) In it, James explored psychology from a myriad of perspectives. For example, James drew distinctions between two parts of the self, the spiritual and the social. The spiritual self focused a sense of morality inward, while the social self focused that sense of morality into the world.\(^78\) For our purposes, his consideration of “the consciousness of self” is most helpful.

In Chapter 10 of *The Principles of Psychology*, James began examining the self at its most fundamental, the empirical self. From that point, he continued to unpack ideas such as self-love, pure ego, and the pure self. For James, feelings of self-esteem were derived from our individual goals and how we work toward and perceive our

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accomplishment of those goals. We develop self-knowledge through this process of reaching or failing to reach personal goals as individuals. Self-knowledge, in turn, develops into self-awareness by impacting our ego. Our ego guides who we understand ourselves to be and how we fit in the world around us.\textsuperscript{79}

Charles Cooley, an early Twentieth Century psychologist, continued this thread of thought by expanding and redefining some of the conclusions James drew about the self. For James, self-esteem (and therefore the pure ego) is based on individualistic goals and ideations, but not so for Cooley. Cooley shifted from the self as a function of individualization to the self as a socially derived perspective. He wrote, “The social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own. Self-feeling has its chief scope within the general life, not outside of it.”\textsuperscript{80} Our sense of self might be, as James would agree, the way in which we define ourselves internally, but we derive that sense of self in relationship with others. This idea is critical to understand, because it can help us to identify how to impact and shape self-identity. If, as Cooley posits, our self-identity is shaped by our relationships with others, then using groups to impact that identity can shift people to and from religiosity.

In the 1920s, Sigmund Freud published multiple works focusing on the human psyche and the definition of the self. His most important work on the self came in 1920 when he published an essay called \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, in which he defined his

\textsuperscript{79} James, \textit{Principles}, 291-400.
theory of the human psyche in three parts: consciousness, unconsciousness, and preconsciousness. In 1923, Freud further defined this theory in his book, The Ego and the Id. This new schema of id, ego, and superego, articulated the relationship between the three levels of consciousness. “The id is based on our pleasure principle. In other words, the id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation... The ego is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the long run... The superego is the moral part of us and develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our caregivers.”

Building on Freud’s theories, other psychologists, including Roy Schafer, Gerhart Piers, and Milton B. Singer, “distinguished between the superego representing the moral conscience and the ideal self representing hopes and goals.” Freud’s research and theories opened up the idea that our sense of self is complex and multifaceted. That basic idea shifted and redefined the self-awareness studies of the Twentieth Century that followed.

Decades later, Shelley Duval and Robert A. Wicklund published A Theory of Objective Self-Awareness, which was the first work to develop a complete theory of self-awareness. Their theory further differentiated self-awareness into two distinct forms:

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objective self-awareness and subjective self-awareness. “When attention is directed inward and the individual’s consciousness is focused on himself, he is the object of his own consciousness – hence, objective self-awareness.”85 This is in contrast to the subjective self-awareness that results “when attention is directed away from the self and the person experiences himself as the source of perception and action.”86 Duval and Wicklund established that the effect of objective self-awareness is negative feelings. “According to the theory, when people direct their attention toward themselves, they...focus upon the discrepancies that exist between their ideals and their actual, or real, positions.”87 In other words, those who are most objectively self-aware, or are put in situations that increase their objective self-awareness, experience negativity that manifests as self-criticism. This can produce a cycle in which an individual, when isolated from others and encouraged toward more and more objective self-awareness or self-focus, can spiral into ever more intense negativity. This cycle of negativity is a result of the isolation and individualism of objective self-awareness.

The Self in Relationship

The first shift in theories that explicitly included the impact of others was developed in the 1950s by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingram. They described the sense

85 Duval, Theory, 2.
86 Duval, Theory, 3.
of self as established and impacted in four distinct ways. Those separate influential factors are understood in relationship with one another and have been articulated graphically in a 2 x 2 pattern, forming what looks like a window. Termed a “Johari window,” each quadrant represents a different facet of our self-understanding: (1) what I see in me, (2) what I do not see in me, (3) what you see in me, and (4) what you do not see in me. The graphic example follows:

![The Johari Window Model](image)

Each of the quadrants represents the presence or absence of knowledge. The *open area/arena* is common knowledge, known to the individual and to those in relationship with the individual. These quadrants represent obvious characteristics like interests and abilities. In the *blind spot*, individuals believe something about themselves that is simply not true or is a belief that is not shared by others. For example, someone may think that he has a beautiful singing voice when, in fact, and based on the
experience of others, he does not. The third quadrant, the *hidden area or façade*, represents knowledge that the individual possesses that others do not. Examples of this knowledge include secret habits of embarrassing stories from the past. This knowledge is what most individuals hope to keep hidden from everyone else. Finally, the fourth quadrant represents knowledge that is completely hidden from everyone, including the individual. This includes simply forgetting information, as well as those experiences and emotions that are repressed.88

Understanding the impact forces have on identity has been a hallmark of psychological studies of the self, particularly those theories that contain identity within the self alone. Continuing the research into the relationships between different facets of self-knowledge, self-discrepancy is a psychological theory that describes the internal conflict one goes through when different threads of self-awareness conflict in the formation of identity. This theory, first developed by E. Tory Higgins in the 1970s, was not only intended to identify the ways in which a person creates identity but also sought to predict the emotional state of a person who is experiencing self-discrepancy. Although the work outlined above defined the different facets of the self, Higgins created a “framework for revealing the interrelations among the different self-states.”89 In doing so, Higgins outlined a new way of understanding the self.

The underlying dimension of self-discrepancy is the relationship between what Higgins calls domains of the self and standpoints on the self. The domains of the self are

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88 Furnham, *Self*.
broken down into three parts: actual, ideal, and ought. In many ways, the three parts of the domains of the self harken back to the Johari window. The actual self is a “representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually possess.” The ideal self is a “representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess (i.e., a representation of someone’s hopes, aspirations, or wishes for you).” And finally, the ought self is the “representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess (i.e., a representation of someone’s sense of your duty, obligations, or responsibilities).”\(^9^0\) Just as Luft and Ingram’s theory combines the influences of self and the other to form four fluid quadrants, Higgins combines the self and the other to describe the complexity and nuance of forming identity.

This shift from self-awareness as an independent process to one that is impacted and formed by “the other” is an important shift to note. As psychologists, and indeed philosophers, have expanded the theories of identity in the last century and a half, there has been a return to the acceptance that our sense of self, in fact our true self, is shaped by factors outside of our person. The beginning of modern psychology that defined identity as a truth that was self-contained and self-defined differentiated greatly from the way human experience was impacted by the world in ancient times. These theories created boundaries between the self and the other. This shift in the latter part of the Twentieth Century acknowledged again the truth that our identity is shaped by

influences from outside ourselves. This is not a new idea but has led to reimagining how the other influences the self.

**Self-discrepancy**

How we define ourselves, particularly how we are influenced by external experiences, is critically important to understand if we hope to identify ways in which we can shape religious identity. Higgins’s expansion of self-awareness is most helpful as it sets up a framework that engages “the other” in the formation of identity. Identity that is formed by exterior forces, such as religious or spiritual identity, has remained primarily the realm of theologians and the philosophers. As a psychologist, Higgins was not concerned with religious or spiritual identity throughout history, yet unpacking his psychological theory of self-discrepancy will help us move toward a more expansive discussion of self-state representations and, thus, identity. The importance of Higgins’s theory is its attempt to predict the emotional state of a person after an experience of inconsistency. If we better understand the way an inconsistent experience shapes one’s emotional state, then the challenge of religious experiences, a fundamentally inconsistent experience, can be shaped to positively influence emotional reactions.

As outlined above, self-discrepancy theory is based on two principles: domains of the self and standpoints on the self. The domains of the self (actual, ideal, and ought) are set in balance with the standpoints of the self (own and significant other).§ This

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balance is a nuanced understanding of influence. The domains of the self are an extension of self-awareness that connects to the historic theories of the early Twentieth Century. The three-state theory focuses on one’s measure of identity based on what is true (actual) and what one hopes for (ideal) or what is expected by the world (ought). This theory generalized the influence of the world on identity. Anyone knows that the world, or “the other,” does not influence evenly. A fleeting experience can rarely have the same formative impact as a frequent habit, just as a casual acquaintance can rarely have the same formative impact as a long-term relationship. Higgins used that fundamental idea of influence and added a second dimension to his understanding of the self, the standpoints on the self.

The standpoints on the self claim a truth that we are influenced in different ways and to different degrees by the depth of our exposure and intimacy with the other. The two standpoints on the self, own and significant other, place the weight of influence on internal attitudes and values, as well as the attitudes and values of a significant other, such as a mother, father, spouse, or close friend. That means that there is a dynamism and multiplicity to one’s self-state. Each self-state is related to one another, yet different based on the formative impact of each to a myriad of significant others.

Experiencing discrepancies in life is natural, but this theory establishes a way of understanding how discrepancies impact identity by setting up a “dichotomy between

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approach and avoidance.” Identity can be shaped through intentional influences. This has a great impact in understanding the formation of identity, because it sets up a way to shape emotional responses based on the experiences a person wants to approach or avoid. “When we achieve goals related to our ideal self (our promotion focus), we feel pleasure. When we achieve goals related to our ought self (the prevention focus), we feel relief. There are certainly individual differences in whether we typically focus on the ideal self and approach motivations, or the ought (or undesired) self and avoidance motivations.” The discrepancies that we experience every day impact our self-awareness and thus our identity based on whether we seek to approach or avoid them. That means that the way the world impacts us, indeed the way we expect the world to impact us, dramatically changes our emotional response, our self-awareness, and, thus, our identity. Defining how the world has impacted us in the past and how the world impacts us now and in the future will be critical to identifying the ways in which we can shape religious identity.

The Buffered Self

Now that we have considered the modern psychological theories on self-awareness, we have come to acknowledge that self-awareness and identity are impacted by a complex and nuanced relationship between internal and external forces.

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94 Pychyl, “What’s.”
The hope of this research is to shed light on the shifting religious identity of modern Americans to positively affect the formation and reformation of religious identity in the future. If identity is indeed shaped by internal and external forces, and we know that modern religious identity has been shifting, most dramatically in recent generations, how can we explain the shift? In other words, what happened to those influential forces to change our religious identity so dramatically?

In Chapter Two, we examined the work of philosopher Charles Taylor and his work on the secularization of our culture. Secularization continues to shape our culture, but the impact on the individual is now our focus. According to Taylor, in addition to shaping our macrocultural sensibilities, secularization has had a direct impact on shaping identity and self-awareness. At the very foundation of Taylor’s argument is the shift of what is our assumed construct of reality. Taylor is not focused on our awareness or what it is that we think but rather on what we assume and take for granted. For Taylor, the question is not about intentional ideas or thoughts but about what is believable.

To explain the shift that has taken place, Taylor begins by laying out an explanation of the way “secular” functions today. The commonly held idea regarding the secularization of our culture is that secular equates to an absence of God. Yet for Taylor, secular does not mean the absence of God but the addition of an alternative way of seeing the world.95 In other words, before the Modern Age, there was no viable option to view the world except for one that is grounded in forms of religious beliefs. Taylor

95 Smith, How, 26.
describes the premodern world as “enchanted,” where spirits and moral forces weighed in on everyone’s experience of daily life. This enchanted world is not necessarily a Christian one, because “people who live in this kind of world don’t necessarily believe in God, certainly not in the God of Abraham, as the existence of countless ‘pagan’ societies shows. But in the outlook of European peasants in 1500, beyond all the inevitable ambivalences, the Christian God was the ultimate guarantee that good would triumph or at least hold the plentiful forces of darkness at bay.”

The enchanted world was one based on the superstition that spiritual forces were very real and broke into the human world regularly. Those forces could help or harm at their whim. This kind of belief in the reality of the supernatural can be seen in ancient mythological traditions where gods and other spirits spoke with, fought with, and even procreated with humanity. The enchanted way of seeing the world is the philosophical perspective that allowed Christianity to thrive in the Roman Empire after Constantine won the Battle of Milvian, because he believed that the Christian God had delivered him in battle. The idea that spirits weren’t real, or the idea of atheism, was practically inconceivable. This enchanted idea was so powerful because ancient peoples had a specific kind of self-awareness, which Taylor describes as the porous self.

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97 Constantine’s conversion after the Battle of Milvian “consisted in the fact that he had come to regard the High God of the Christians, rather than the traditional gods, as the proper recipient of religio (political religion). Worship of the Christian God had brought prosperity upon himself and would bring prosperity upon the empire.” Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000, (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 60-61.
In the enchanted premodern world, one lived in a fluid state, affected by the unseen. “The enchanted world was one in which these forces could cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical.” The way humanity understood the world around them was as a part of a larger whole that included a spirit realm. “By definition for the porous self, the source of its most powerful and important emotions are outside the ‘mind.’” One would not have rationalized away fear or doubt or random phenomena. Instead, one would have understood that the unexplainable was an intersection of the unseen world with physical reality. This way of being created fertile ground for religion to thrive. “Just as premodern nature is always already intermixed with its beyond, and just as things are intermixed with mind and meaning, so the premodern self’s porosity means the self is essentially vulnerable...open to blessing or curse, possession of grace.” The porosity of life in the premodern world is one of the primary features of disenchantment that has shifted as our culture has secularized.

The disenchantment of our world was a change of sensibility, not a subtraction of identity. Our modern experience of the world, what Taylor calls the “modern imaginary,” has lost its fluid connection to the world of spirits, the world that is unseen. Gradually, humanity began to build thought walls around their experience.

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102 Taylor, “Buffered.”
and identity that kept the enchantments of the premodern world from entering into the experience of the modern world. Those boundaries started in small ways but have grown and expanded into the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries. This growth in boundaries has been one of the most important factors that has contributed to the secularization of our modern world. Today, American adults are, as Taylor writes, “buffered” from the outside world. Modern Americans live “insulated and isolated” from the world around them, creating meaning and order from their own autonomy.¹⁰⁴

“Modern Westerners have a clear boundary between mind and world, even mind and body. Moral and other meanings are ‘in the mind.’ They cannot reside outside, and thus the boundary is firm.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, our identities have been reduced to what is inside our minds. In some ways, this shift has been a welcome change. The buffered self is no longer vulnerable to the unseen forces from the outside. “The buffered self can form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary…. The absence of fear can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.”¹⁰⁶ Self-direction offers a very real sense of security, a highly attractive feature of the buffered self. As moderns, we have defined identity within the bounds of rationality and predictability, desiring to be in consistent experiences from day to day. However, the dark side of the buffered self is the isolation it brings.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, “Buffered.”
The secularization of our culture – the disenchantment of our world, the reformation of Christian theology, and the individualization and personalization of religion – culminates in what Taylor terms “the Great Disembedding.” Early religious life had a collective functionality, grounded in the social structure of the community. That social structure embedded identity into its members. One was defined and guided by a communal identity, not an individualized one. Religion was, first and foremost, social. “The primary agency of important religious action: invoking, praying to, sacrificing to, or propitiating Gods or spirits…was the social group as a whole…. In early religion, we primarily relate to God as a society.” This ritualistic social unity defined what it meant to be human. Every important action was done in groups and performed in certain ways as to create identity in the unity. Acting alone as an independent person was not only a foreign concept, it was also a dangerous one. The tribe or clan or group with which one associated was the most important and sustaining relationship one had. Taylor calls this total and complete connectedness to one another social embedding. Further, he argues that the root of secularization is the great disembedding of individuals from social groups.

As Taylor outlines, the world of old is grounded in the embedding of identity within social connections. These connections provided physical and spiritual security to premodern humanity. Indeed, only those who linked together in social bond could survive over time. Yet our modern world has invited each person to imagine a

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107 Taylor, Secular, 146.
108 Taylor, Secular, 148.
disconnected lifestyle anchored in the idea that the individual has opportunity and responsibility separate from the social group. Modern identity is formed, shaped, and defined by these individualistic forces. However, modern influence away from social connections does not negate the desire, deep within, for humanity to remain deeply connected. This desire for connection, a fundamental need in our nature, can be what is tapped to encourage the growth of social religious identity.

**Influencing the Buffered Self**

In the Twentieth Century, religious identity in the United States began a significant change, precipitated by the disenchchantment and disembedding of our experience of the world. We have seen how our porous selves once experienced an unseen world but that modern boundaries have been established that buffer us from that enchanted experience. Today, we are seeing that slow and steady shift come to fruition in the radically declining number of those who identify as being “spiritual but not religious.” The decline of religious identity has also been fueled by ineffective techniques to educate and form adults employed by mainline religious institutions. Those institutions have not been able to identify how individuals can be formed effectively and with modern sensibilities.

We are made for community, made to relate to one another in deeply vulnerable ways. That desire for community, embedded in an enchanted world, manifested itself in connections to institutions throughout the ancient and premodern world, particularly religious institutions. Those same institutions thrived because they were able to
facilitate enchanted experiences. Put another way, religion was able to define itself as
the best and most consistent way to experience the enchanted world. However,
religious institutions began to lose ground as our self-awareness began to shift behind
the buffer of modernity. Some religious institutions have begun to recreate themselves,
focusing on very small, intimate relationships that remind individuals that they were
made for connection to one another. But although some congregational groups have
begun to live into this new model, mainline Protestant groups have lagged behind.

Institutions in general have continued to lose control over modern Americans.
The secularization of America has formed a culture of individualism that can no longer
be formed by the institutions that once had control. Instead, the modern way to impact
the way modern, buffered individuals experience the world is through other modern,
buffered individuals. We are now in a time when our individual identity can be shaped
only by other individuals in community, making the formation of intentional
communities a critical need for any system hoping to form identity, such as mainline
Protestant churches. The isolation of individualism that creates a negative experience of
the world can be changed into a positive experience if it is transformed through
relationships with others.

In the next chapter, we will consider how humanity has been and remains
fundamentally communal. “Humans are small group beings... For 200,000 years, humans
lived in small hunting and gathering groups. For 10,000 years, humans lived in small
farming communities. It is only recently, the past 100 years or so, that large cities have
become the rule rather than the exception.¹⁰⁹ The modern age has brought a lot of changes to our self-awareness and identity, but what we are on the inside, at the deepest part of our created self, has not changed. We are made for community, made for relationship, and it is through those relationships that we can be reformed in the future.

Chapter 4: Group Dynamics

History of Human Groups

Throughout time, dating back hundreds of thousands of years, humans have
worked in groups, specifically small groups. As a species, *Homo sapiens* developed
differently than did other *hominini* in our genus.¹¹⁰ “During the time the Cro-Magnon’s
(sic) overlapped with the Neanderthals, our ancestors developed highly sophisticated
cooperative effects characterized by social organization, group hunting procedures,
creative experimentation with a variety of materials, sharing of knowledge, divisions of
labor, trade, and transportation systems.”¹¹¹ These cooperative behaviors created social
connections that allowed early humans to organize themselves and become stronger
because of their groups. As individuals, and even with evolutionary advancements like
larger brains and reasoning skills, humans would not have had the capacity or strength
to survive and ultimately thrive without the natural preference for group life.

In addition to our natural preference for groups, humans prefer that our
connections be in small groups. “For 200,000 years, humans lived in small hunting and
gathering groups. For 10,000 years, humans lived in small farming communities.”¹¹² It is

¹¹⁰ The genus *Homo* comprises many species, including *Homo sapiens* (modern humans),
as well as other ancient human ancestors, such as *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, and *Homo
neanderthalensis*. (Steve Jones, Robert Martin, and David Pilbeam, eds., *The Cambridge
¹¹² Ibid.
only in the last century that humanity has begun to gather in incredibly dense metropolitan areas at such high rates; and this life style is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Many scholars believe that this shift has detrimentally affected individual human identity. Our great evolutionary strength, and indeed the rootedness of our psychological health, is our capacity to connect and be formed by one another. That fundamental formation has always taken place in small groups. “It is within our family and peer groups that we are socialized into ways of behaving and thinking, are educated, and are taught to have certain perspectives on ourselves and our world. . .. As humans, we have an inherent social nature: our life is filled with groups from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death.”113 As our culture shifts away from small groups and the sense of connection they provide, we are losing the most advantageous human quality.

Large urban areas have effectively disconnected individuals from their natural small groups. Instead of seeing a small group of people in our day-to-day lives, more and more Americans live in proximity to thousands of people, yet don’t have deep connections with any. Although we tend to live a more disconnected life than ever before, this disconnection has not changed our natural desire to connect with others. According to some psychological theories, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the need (not want) to connect and to belong is incredibly important to our human condition. The need to belong is more important to us that almost anything else, falling in line immediately after the compulsion to satisfy our physiological and safety needs.

113 Johnson, Joining Together, 6.
This natural desire has manifested itself in the modern world through the exponential growth of personal technology, most specifically social media. Although people use social media in many different ways, social media “allows millions of people to connect, form groups, share ideas, collaborate on projects, and join collectives in unprecedented ways. These technologies are satisfying a primal need that already lies within us.”

Social media are providing a platform and a method for modern humans to satisfy their ancient desire to connect in small groups, but the impact of social media has changed our social structure forever.

Our human identity is defined by our relationships, and relationships, as shown in previous chapters, have been radically changed in recent decades. Yet the desire to connect in historic ways remains inside us. Considering the sociological and psychological evidence of the effectiveness and health of groups will allow us to move toward a model of group dynamics that can be employed in churches to reshape our individual identity. An effective model to form individual identity, that employs our natural desire to connect in small groups, will help mainline churches restore religious identity. “Groups have always been a major part of human existence, and recent trends in many of the areas mentioned show that they will play even greater rolls in people's

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lives in the future." Our task is to be as intentional as possible to use proven group theories to ensure that our institutions survive and thrive.

**Group Dynamics**

The history of group dynamics research is rooted in multiple disciplines, but one assumption is made among them all: a group is more than the sum of the individual members. Individual identity is shifted when an individual is connected to other individuals within the structure of a group. The dynamics of the group begin to shape and change the identity of each individual member toward something new. Group dynamics theory and research have sought to identify how an individual is changed, as well as how a group itself changes. Knowing how groups function and how groups change the identity of individual members can help mainline churches design systems that support the connections of individuals in dynamic groups to form and reform their identities.

In scientific research, the term “group” has a specific set of definitions and boundaries. One cannot simply call a gathering of individuals a “group”. There is a point at which a gathering of individuals becomes a technical group. Social science researchers have identified “four features of group life [that] typically emerge as a collection of individuals develops into a group:

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1. The members share one or more motives or goals and this helps to
determine the direction in which the group will move.

2. The members develop a set of norms, which set the boundaries within which
interpersonal relations may be established and activity carried on.

3. If interaction continues, a set of roles becomes stabilized, and the new group
becomes differentiated from other groups.

4. A network of interpersonal attraction develops on the basis of the ‘likes’ and
‘dislikes’ of members for one another.”\textsuperscript{116}

Putting all of this together, we can come to a relatively clean set of criteria with which to
define a group: a collection of individuals who interact with one another, share a
common goal, fill certain roles, and create a network of attraction. Beyond those
characteristics, researchers have commonly defined small groups as consisting of more
than one and less than twenty members.\textsuperscript{117}

In the late Nineteenth Century, as social science fields such as psychology and
sociology began to differentiate themselves from one another, they became interested
in the way groups function. Each of the fields approached the study of groups in its own
unique way. For example, sociologists studied religious groups, anthropologists studied
tribal groups, and political scientists studied public engagement.\textsuperscript{118} The interests of
these individual fields grew into more formal research, with the seminal and more

\textsuperscript{116} A. Paul Hare, \textit{Handbook of Small Group Research}, (New York: The Free Press, 1976),
4-5.

\textsuperscript{117} Hare, \textit{Handbook}, 5.

\textsuperscript{118} Donelson R. Forsyth, \textit{Group Dynamics, 5\textsuperscript{th} Ed.} (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010), 15-16.
influential work coming at the turn of the century. “In 1895, Gustave Le Bon... published *Psychologie des Foules* (Psychology of Crowds), which describes how individuals are transformed when they join a group. Willhelm Wundt (1916), recognized as the founder of scientific psychology, [published] *Volkerpsychologie*, translated as ‘group psychology’. These works began to influence a new study of group dynamics that created a significant amount of debate. Researchers began to wrestle with the fundamental question presented at the beginning of this chapter: Are groups different than the sum of their individual members? In other words, are groups, as a separate entity, real?

As the twentieth century progressed, researchers continued to argue the merits of each side of the debate. Some of the most important research of that period was done by Emile Durkheim who, for example, “argued that individuals who are not members of friendship, family, or religious groups can lose their sense of identity. ... [He] strongly believed that widely shared beliefs—what he called collective representations—are the cornerstone of society.” Durkheim’s research was concerned primarily with the phenomenon of suicide. He noted that suicide rates were not consistent between different social groups, occurring more frequently in higher social classes. Durkheim developed the theory of “social integration,” which described the group forces that weigh on individual thoughts and actions. Berkman asserts, “Durkheim challenges us to understand how the patterning of one of the most psychological,

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119 Forsyth, *Group*, 16.
120 Ibid.
intimate, and, on the surface, individual acts rests not upon psychological foundations but upon the patterning of ‘social facts. . . . Durkheim goes on to theorize that the underlying reason for suicide relates, for the most part, to the level of social integration of the group.”^121

In 1932, Marjorie E. Shaw published a seminal work on small groups and their ability to solve problems. An accomplished social psychologist, “Shaw demonstrated that groups were considerably better problem solvers than were individuals.”^122 She concluded that individuals connected through groups were better able to identify and correct the errors of each member, thereby improving the ability of the whole. The results of her experiments ushered in a new focus on group theory. “Before Shaw’s study, research had addressed either social influences on individual performance or individual performance versus group performance in rather simple motor tasks. . . . [Shaw] was one of the first to systematically investigate the cooperation of participants in small groups . . . and to compare this group performance to individual performance.”^123 Shaw was able to influence the direction of social psychology toward the focus of groups as unique from their members. Her research was the culmination of a shift toward a new branch of research focusing on group dynamics and identity.

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Group Identity

The debate between focusing on individuals within a group or the group itself continued into the mid-twentieth century, but began to wane as most scientists coalesced around the idea that groups have an important and independent identity of their own apart from each individual member. In 1951, Kurt Lewin, considered the father of modern group dynamics, published a theory of groups termed “field theory”. His theory is “premised on the principle of interactionism, which assumes that the behavior of people in groups is determined by the interaction of the person and the environment.” In other words, and in a phrase Lewin himself used, the sum total of a group is greater than its parts.

Field theory became a critically valuable contribution to the study of group dynamics. Field theory synthesized early debates, pointing clearly to the unique dynamism individuals create as they relate to one another. Lewin proposed that individual identities and personalities, combined with situational variables, resulted in behavior that was measurably different, giving groups a unique identity separate from its members. This concept is grounded in the theory of interdependence, which purports that behavior is the result of interdependence. According to Lewin, interdependence concludes that “it is probable that nothing satisfying the criterion of existence in a given life space can be completely independent of anything else in the same life space.” Lewin’s field theory defined a group by its commonality of purpose.

124 Forsyth, Group, 18.
and shared goals. This approach ultimately allowed Lewin to theorize the ability to predict group behavior based on collecting small, specific pieces of data within the context of the relationships in the group. “Instead of picking out isolated facts, and later on trying to ‘synthesize’ them, the total situation is taken into account and is represented from the beginning. The field-theoretical approach . . . means a method of ‘gradual approximation’ by way of a stepwise increasing specificity.”

For Lewin, the theory of interdependence defined the most important characteristic of a group: “a change in the state of any member or subgroup changes the state of any other member or subgroup.” This idea stands in stark contrast to the ways in which our culture typically defines unity. As shown in Chapter 1, the United States, over more than a century, has sought to define groups of adults. Yet the demographic boundaries used in census surveys do not have any true resonance when trying to define the characteristics of a group. According to Lewin’s theory of interdependence, unity can come through a high level of diversity when a common goal or value is placed at the center of the relationships. For example, “a man, wife, and baby within one family may show much greater dissimilarity than each of the members of this group shows to other individuals (babies, men, women) outside of this group,” but their unity comes from an emotional connection defined by their common goals and

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126 Lewin, Field, 149.
128 Lewin, Field, 147.
sense of belongingness. Love and loyalty are only a few of the many different ways that interdependence can be expressed, but in each way, “the perception of goals in conjunction with the joint motivation to achieve them is the source of interdependence among group members.”  

One of Lewin’s students, Morton Deutsch, extended his research and further defined the theory of interdependence to focus primarily on social structures. Deutsch’s theory, called social interdependence, is based on the premise that “the structure of the goals of the people in [a certain] situation determines how participants interact and the interaction patterns determine the outcomes of the situation.” Social interdependence theory is based on two fluid systems of interdependence based on goals and actions. He proposed that goals could be positive or negative, producing actions that could be effective or, using his terminology, bungling. “Positive interdependence exists when there is a positive correlation among individuals’ goal attainment; individuals perceive that they can attain their goals if, and only if, the other individuals with whom they are cooperatively linked attain their goals.”  

Members of the same sports team would be an example of positive interdependence: the individuals are bound together in a way that motivates each member to help each other member succeed individually, because individual success equals group success. “Negative interdependence exists when there is a negative correlation among individuals’ goal achievements; individuals perceive that they can obtain their goals if

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and only if the other individuals with whom they are competitively linked fail to obtain their goals.”\textsuperscript{132} An example of negative interdependence might be colleagues completing for the one and only promotion in their company.

In addition to positive and negative goal achievement, the actions that are taken by individuals in the group complete the continuum. \textit{Effective} actions improve the likelihood that an individual will obtain the goal, while \textit{bungling} actions decrease the likelihood that an individual will obtain the goal. These two separate types of actions can be further defined by three psychological processes: sustainability, cathexis, and inducibility (the openness to being influenced and to influencing others). Put simply, each of those psychological processes is a sliding scale of energy that individuals put into the life of the group. \textit{Sustainability} “is the degree to which actions of one person substitutes for the actions of another person.”\textsuperscript{133} For example, if a member of the group does not keep up his end of cooperative work, such as in a school project, other individuals in the group may increase their efforts to make up the difference. \textit{Cathexis} “is an investment of psychological energy in objects outside of oneself, such as friends, family, and work.”\textsuperscript{134} This process affects attitude formation. For example, an individual may forgive the negative actions of a family toward the individual, when he would not forgive the same negative actions of a coworker. And, finally, \textit{inducibility} is the give and take of energy, both positive and negative, that members of a group share with one another. For example, one friend may be able to influence the negative emotional state

\textsuperscript{133} Johnson, “New,” 290. 
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
of another friend by identifying a new, happier goal that redirects negative attention toward something positive.

For the purposes of this chapter, the primary focus will now turn to the theory of cooperation and competition, first laid out in Deutsch’s research. Although Deutsch focused on many perspectives of social interdependence, his research into the cooperative and competitive natures of group dynamics is most helpful. This line of research was greatly expanded by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson in the 1980s, culminating in the publication of their foundational work, *Cooperation and Competition*. Johnson and Johnson focused their efforts on showing how cooperative and competitive group experiences impact the formation of the individuals within the group. Most critically, their research on how groups impact the learning potential in classroom settings can inform our understanding of how groups can impact individual identity.

**Cooperative Learning**

The priority of this research is to identity the best ways to influence individual identity, and group dynamics theories have shown that perhaps the best way to do so is through group learning. Identity is a complex idea, understood in many different ways. As the study of group dynamics has grown, research has considered the function of groups as a major contributing factor in the formation and re-formation of individual identity. Formation occurs when one way of being is challenged by another way of being. Put another way, knowledge growth, whether intellectual or experiential, is critical to changing one’s identity. Studying students in the classroom is one of the best
ways to experiment and record differences in learning. When individuals take action to accomplish a goal, such as classroom work, those efforts influence others in the group in positive, negative, or neutral ways. Johnson and Johnson, along with their colleague, Karl Smith, characterized those three distinct ways students can influence others as cooperative, competitive, and individual.135 These definitions relate back to Deutsch’s work, who defined this relationship as a state of interdependence. Cooperative learning is positive interdependence; competitive learning is negative interdependence; and individual learning is, as one might infer, individualistic. Of these three learning structures, the great majority of social science researchers advocate for the benefits of cooperative learning over the other two. Cooperative learning has been proven, time and time again, to maximize the potential of individuals’ learning.136

Social interdependence theory, as described above, has an incredibly long and well researched history within social psychology. According to Johnson and Johnson, the quality of the theory has been defended in over 750 research studies over more than four decades and has been the source for countless other branches of research.137 The theory has been fundamental to understanding influence and group dynamics, and the research that has been built on the theory reveals similar results over time. Although

there are three basic ways in which individuals can influence others in a group, research clearly shows that the effects of cooperative interaction lead to higher achievement and greater psychological health over time. Cooperative interaction helps groups succeed over the long run, but it also creates a critically valuable quality in each of the individual members: cohesion. Group cohesion is one of the greatest measures of individual transformation over time.

Group cohesion is a measure of the degree and intensity to which members of a group are attracted one to another or to the shared goal of the group. In social science language, cohesion is a “process variable,” or a moving target, that changes over time. However, the level of cohesion within a group is one of the greatest predictors of group success and the shift of individual identity among members of the group. More than 150 studies have been conducted “comparing the relative efficacy of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning on the achievement of individuals 18 years or older,” and have shown that cooperative learning is the best indicator of achievement. When groups are defined by strong cohesive attraction, they are more likely to stay together, to achieve their goals, and, perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this research, to remain within the boundaries of groups norms.

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When group norms are clearly identified and the individuals in the group are nurtured in their cohesion, the group functions as a formative crucible for individual identity. This can be seen in the extensive studies done on students in classroom settings. “The more effort students expend in working together to achieve, the more they tend to like each other. The more they like each other, the harder they tend to work to learn. The more individuals work together to learn, the more socially competent they become, the higher their self-esteem, and the greater their psychological health . . . the healthier individuals are psychologically, the more able they are to form caring and committed relationships.”\textsuperscript{142} The healthy impact of cooperative learning is apparent, especially when there is high social cohesion, but no group is without conflict.

Johnson and Johnson argued that individual members of a group must learn and properly employ healthy and effective small-group skills to succeed. “To coordinate efforts to achieve mutual goals, participants must (a) get to know and trust each other, (b) communicate accurately and unambiguously, (c) accept and support each other, and (d) resolve conflicts constructively.”\textsuperscript{143} Conflict is natural in any group. “Every form of social conflict implies a perception of divergent interests—whether or not they are divergent in reality.”\textsuperscript{144} Conflict can rise out of competition for resources that are perceived as scarce, the perception of differences in beliefs or values, or even the way each party perceives the relationship that exists between individuals. Research has

\textsuperscript{142} Johnson, “Cooperative Learning: Improving University Instruction,” 102-103.
\textsuperscript{143} Johnson, “New,” 320.
shown that conflict is present even in highly cohesive, cooperative groups. How a group resolves conflict often shows whether the members are cooperative or competitive.

In competitive groups, conflict is seen as weeding out the weak. When groups seek to achieve competitive goals, individuals most often engage in “self-promotive strategies” such as self-worth protection (withholding individual effort to bring the group closer to failure), self-handicapping (impeding one’s own performance, such as procrastination), and defensive pessimism (placing a very low value on the task at hand).\textsuperscript{145} In a competitive context, conflict causes the group to live into a win-lose strategy. In this context, when the individual perceives that the likelihood of personal achievement has diminished, actions turn toward preventing achievement by the group.

Cooperative groups, on the other hand, turn conflict into an advantage. In cooperative groups, the relationships between group members function to build up the individual, creating a positive effect termed “promotive interaction.” When groups with positive promotive interactions experience conflict, that conflict is meant to increase individual capacity and achievement, thereby making group success more likely. For example, members of a group may challenge each other’s reasoning, yet the “intellectual controversy promotes curiosity, motivation to learn, reconceptualization of what one knows, higher quality decision making, greater insight in the problem being considered, and many other important benefits.”\textsuperscript{146} A cooperatively interdependent

\textsuperscript{145} Johnson, “New,” 322.
group uses conflict to grow toward achieving higher goals rather than bringing one another down. Achieving the goal, rather than seeking to achieve unanimity among the members, allows conflict to have a positive effect.

Acceptance

How groups function to impact individual transformation is critical to this research. Social judgment theory is a branch of social interdependence theory that focuses on the ways in which individuals access groups, specifically the relationships they develop. Individuals make judgments about others in a group, and those judgements result in a process of acceptance or a process of rejection. “The process of acceptance is based on the individuals promoting mutual goal accomplishments as a result of their perceived positive interdependence.”

When the interaction is cooperative, members of the group communicate effectively, accurately, and with each other’s good in mind. “The process of rejection results from oppositional or no interaction, based on perceptions of negative or no interdependence.” Members of these groups do not communicate well and put their individual interests above the interest of the group.

The process of acceptance impacts the formation of each individual in surprising, and often measurable, ways. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a psychological process of intervention that calls into question the habits and behaviors of

\[^{147}\text{Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 19.}\]
\[^{148}\text{Ibid.}\]
individuals and compels them to transform those behaviors through positive interactions with others in small groups. “The goal of ACT is to create a rich and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that inevitably goes with it.” Some of the most common therapy programs are based on the simple idea that one must accept one’s behavior and commit to making a change. Twelve-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, are examples of this therapeutic theory put into action. In AA and other twelve-step programs, participants are “accepted at face value, no questions asked, no censure raised.” That kind of blind acceptance of anyone in any situation is a proven way of establishing healthy, cooperative behavior within groups to effectively transform individuals.

Unfortunately, there is a stigma to participation in groups such as addiction recovery programs, keeping necessary therapy from taking place. “One detailed study of the affiliation process with AA found that those alcoholics who affiliated with it differed significantly from those who did not in that (1) they regarded themselves as persons who could easily share their basic emotional reactions with others, and (2) they also believed that they easily adapted themselves to the casual give-and-take that develops before and after AA meetings.” Those who find affiliation easy make connections that can help change their lives. For those who cannot affiliate with ease, the process of

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connecting is an obstacle to achieving lasting change. Furthermore, those who had trouble affiliating with AA groups reported social hurdles, such as the bad reputation of the group, the hypocrisy of its members, or judgment from others who may learn of their participation. That stigma is obviously specific to AA and other recovery groups but can be applied to any group that challenges its members to make significant changes in their lives, such as religious groups.

This begs the question: What is an effective social group? In the next chapter, we will examine the role of social relationships within groups, how social scientists define effective groups, and how churches can use those techniques for the benefit of their membership.
Chapter 5: Effective Groups

The Nature of Groups

As noted in the previous chapter, social science has defined a group as individuals in a specific kind of relationship, not simply as a gathering of people. It is imperative to understand how groups are defined in order to help create a method of establishing healthy and effective groups. If there is a method of establishing effective groups, religious institutions will have the tools to reinforce our natural, human desire for communal identity and, in the process, transform our individual religious identity.

Social scientists have worked for generations to define the essence of a group. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a group as “a number of people or things that are located, gathered, or classed together.” This simple definition can make defining what is and is not a group seem easy, but from a social science perspective, groups are more than simply people sharing physical space. To further define what is and is not a group, consider (1) a collection of 9-year-old boys walking down the sidewalk, talking loudly to one another, compared to (2) a collection of adults waiting at a bus stop staring at their smartphones. Both are collections of people, and even in the second example, they may share a very shallow unity, such as waiting to ride the same bus. Yet both collections are not groups. This distinction is important to make in order to refine the definition of

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group for our purposes. Our participation in groups can be for many reasons: we are attracted to people in a particular group or to the purpose of their group, we simply want to connect with others outside our current sphere, or perhaps because we are seeking a reward for participation. No matter the reason, a majority of people seem to be drawn to groups.  

Recent social science research has used a number of perspectives to define groups specific to their own research purposes. This distinction has caused the definitions of groups to become far too myopic. Qualities such as common goals, interdependence, relationships, perception of membership, influence, and motivation can all be important factors that define groups. Johnson and Johnson have culled those perspectives into a definition that is more specific than the dictionary definition, yet broad enough to encompass modern social science research: “A small group is two or more individuals in face-to-face interaction, each aware of positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals, each aware of his or her membership in the group, and each of the others who belong to the group.”

Medical research has also brought a new perspective to the value of membership in groups. Study after study, in many different disciplines, show a strong correlation between health and involvement in groups. Participation in groups has

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154 Johnson, Joining, 12.

155 “Many types of scientific evidence show that involvement in social relationships benefits health. The most striking evidence comes from the prospective studies of mortality.
shown positive, measurable impact on behavior, psychology, and physiology, proving that social participation can be a powerful tool for change. As noted earlier, our culture is shifting away from social connections and toward more individualistic patterns of social behavior. These trends not only undermine the religious identity of individuals, but negatively affects their physical and psychological health. The proven health benefits of social connections, as well as their ability to positively affect and form identity, necessitates a look at how groups form, develop, and become effective over time.

**Group Performance**

How groups affect individuals is one of the earliest social science research interests. In the late 19th century, Indiana University psychologist, Norman Triplett observed that cyclists rode faster when they rode with a group than when the rode on their own. His observation that individuals change their behavior in groups became the foundation for what would later be termed the social facilitation effect. That observation spurred decades of study into the effect of that social connection on performance, asking the basic question: does the reality of social facilitation hurt or harm group performance?

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across industrialized nations. These studies show that individuals with the lowest level of involvement in social relationships are more likely to die than those with greater involvement.” Debra Umberson and Jennifer Karas Montez, “Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, Vol. 51* (2010), 55.

156 Wilke, “Group,” 442.
When considering the effect of social facilitation, researchers identified two basic types of groups, ones that act together (coaction) and ones that observe the actions of some (audience).\textsuperscript{157} No matter how individuals acted in a group, whether in coactive tasks or audience tasks, their performance was affected simply by being around other people. Early research showed a divergence in performance quality that was very puzzling. When subjects in research studies performed relatively simple tasks, either coactive or audience tasks, their group performance improved over their individual performance. However, when subjects performed relatively difficult and complex tasks, either coactive or audience tasks, their group performance was worse than their individual performance. These results seemed contradictory, and the study of social facilitation declined until the 1960s when Robert B. Zajonc published a paper that identified the reason why.

Zajonc’s research focused not on the differences between individual and group tasks, but rather on the differences between dominant and non-dominant responses to those tasks. It is important to define the two kinds of responses so that we do not conflate an emotional or judgmental quality to either. A dominant response is one that is the most natural way of acting for any given subject. Dominant responses “are located at the top of the organism’s response hierarchy, so they dominate all other potential responses.”\textsuperscript{158} Nondominant responses “are part of the organism’s behavioral

\textsuperscript{158} Forsyth, \textit{Group}, 270.
repertoire but [are] less likely to be performed.\textsuperscript{159} Put another way, these responses are either most common or least common reactions. His research showed that “the presence of others increases our tendency to perform dominant responses and decreases our tendency to perform nondominant responses.”\textsuperscript{160} Later research showed that simple group tasks activated dominant responses, but that those dominant responses actually increased performance. However, as the group tasks became more and more complex, requiring the employment of nondominant responses, the activation of dominant responses became a hindrance to performance.

Recent research has shifted focus from the proof of social facilitation to the employment of that theory to predict and facilitate the success of individuals within groups. The focus has now shifted to the study of the effectiveness of groups and how group participation can positively or negatively impact the individual members of the groups. Not all groups are effective groups. How a group performs affects many things, including the identity of its members. By measuring performance, researchers can identify qualities within groups that should be encouraged in every group in order to attain the most effective formation. Recent research by Johnson and Johnson has identified four of the most common types of groups: pseudogroups, traditional work groups, effective groups, and high-performance groups.\textsuperscript{161} Each of these groups have characteristics that impact our life experience, and describing each will help identify ideal group function for religious groups.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Forsyth, \textit{Group}, 270.
\textsuperscript{161} Johnson, \textit{Joining}, 16-17.
A pseudogroup is the kind of group many people are familiar with, especially in classic school settings. The members of this group are assigned to work with one another, but their desire to participate in the group is extremely low. “They interact but do not want to work together or help each other succeed. Members often block or interfere with each other’s productivity, communicate and coordinate poorly, mislead and confuse each other, loaf, and seek a free ride.”\(^{162}\) The hallmark of this kind of group is that the group dynamic negatively impacts the individual members, making this kind of group extremely unattractive to those outside of it. A pseudogroup is extremely ineffective and unproductive.

A traditional working group is one step up from a pseudogroup and is typical of many businesses. The members of a traditional working group work together by choice, but the individual benefit of working together is not apparent. Member typically do not share common group goals, but rather seek their own individual goals first. “The work is structured so that members do very little if any joint work. Members do not take responsibility for anyone’s productivity other than their own ...interacting primarily to complete tasks.”\(^{163}\) Members of this kind of group are typically evaluated and valued as individuals who just happen to be working together, not as a unit. The effectiveness of the group is low, although the productivity of each member is higher than that of the pseudogroup.

\(^{162}\) Johnson, *Joining*, 17.
\(^{163}\) Ibid.
An effective group is made up of individuals who share a common purpose and work together to achieve that goal by maximizing individual efforts. An effective group can be defined by four specific characteristics. “Each member takes responsibility for the performance of him- or herself, all teammates, and the group as a whole; ...group members hold themselves and each other accountable for doing high quality work; ...they not only meet to share information and perspectives, but they produce discrete work through members’ joint efforts and contributions; ...[they] analyze how effectively they are achieving their goals and how well members are working together.”164 Their effectiveness comes from the connections each individual makes in the formation of the whole.

A high-performance group is like an effective group, except their productivity exceeds all reasonable expectations based on the members’ individual capacity. “What differentiates the high-performance group from an effective group is the level of commitment members have to each other and the group’s success.... Members’ mutual concern for each other’s personal growth enables high-performance groups to perform far above expectations.”165 An example of this kind of group might be a particularly productive fire station. Unfortunately, most effective groups never achieve this level of performance. The relational strength and commitment necessary to maintain this level of productivity is far too unusual.

164 Johnson, Joining, 17-18.
165 Johnson, Joining, 18.
These four types of groups show that productivity and effectiveness is not a given for a group. Although group productivity most often exceeds individual productivity, one cannot simply throw a collection of individuals together and expect them to function as an effective group. However different groups are from one another, the fundamental structure of groups that are effective in any way can still be defined.

**Group Structure and Development**

As groups develop, they go through a series of stages from formation to adjournment. Each stage builds on the previous stage and contributes to the overall effectiveness of the group. The structure of a group is based on the interaction of the group’s members with one another, and identifying the “stable pattern of interaction among members”\(^\text{166}\) helps to predict the effectiveness of the group over time. The structure of a group is based on two primary qualities: roles and norms.

Within a group, individuals rarely (if ever) perform the same functions. In any given group, individual roles but come together in the group to fulfill the necessary responsibilities in order to achieve the common goal. Therefore, roles are relational concepts that help define the way members of any given group interact with one another.\(^\text{167}\) As groups grow in size and complexity, individual members will naturally begin to specialize their efforts based on the needs of the group and their own abilities,

\(^{166}\) Johnson, *Joining*, 19.

developing an informal structure.\textsuperscript{168} Although members of the group may fill roles in functional ways, the structure of roles, once established, remains largely independent of the person occupying the position.\textsuperscript{169} “Often, such roles are assigned in a relatively formal manner, such as appointing a president, secretary, treasurer, and so on. Other times, individuals drift into various roles on the basis of their interests and skills.”\textsuperscript{170} Different roles can be associated with the status of the individuals in the group. Typically, group status is associated with the value of the individual to the success of the group. In other words, the individuals with the most value to contribute to the function of the group will typically receive the highest group status, while those with the least valuable abilities will not. In most groups, once a role is assumed, that individual is expected to perform that role for the good of the group.

While roles define individual functions within groups, norms define the rules by which individuals function.\textsuperscript{171} “Group members tend to form and conform to norms.”\textsuperscript{172} Norms place boundaries around the expectations of how members of the group function in relationship to one another. “The norms of a group are the group’s common beliefs regarding appropriate behavior, attitudes, and perceptions for members.”\textsuperscript{173} Although norms may be set either formally or informally, few groups will ever explicitly define them. They are, by definition, generalizations of how individuals are expected to

\textsuperscript{168} Hare, Handbook, 131.  
\textsuperscript{169} Wilke, “Group,” 468.  
\textsuperscript{170} Johnson, Joining, 20.  
\textsuperscript{171} Wilke, “Group,” 478.  
\textsuperscript{172} Hare, Handbook, 19.  
\textsuperscript{173} Johnson, Joining, 21.
act in relationship to one another. Norms are critical to the health and function of
groups because they equalize individual behavior. The most common group norms can
be defined in four forms: prescriptive, proscriptive, descriptive, and injunctive.
Prescriptive norms are those that are socially acceptable behaviors, such as saying
please and thank you. Proscriptive norms are actions that are prohibitive by group
members, such as drinking exorbitant amounts of alcohol at a formal party. Descriptive
norms are physical actions that members of a group follow, such as clapping after a
theater performance. And finally, injunctive norms are behaviors that members of a
group perceive as acceptable or unacceptable. “[Norms] provide a basis for predicting
the behavior of other members and serve as a guide for a member’s own behavior.
Norms thus help each group member anticipate how the other are going to behave in
repetitive situations, and they reduce ambiguity concerning appropriate behavior within
the group.”

Following the structure of groups, how groups change and develop over time can
strongly impact their effectiveness and the formation of individuals. Researchers
suggest that groups progress through phases as they develop. One of the earliest
theories posed by sociologist Theodore Mills, argues that groups go through five distinct
phases: the encounter, testing boundaries and modeling roles, negotiating an
indigenous normative system, production, and separation. Modern research has

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174 Sherif, Outline, 170.
175 Johnson, Joining, 22.
176 A. Paul Hare, Handbook of Small Group Research (New York: The Free Press, 1976),
104.
refined this multi-phase theory into what is now termed the sequential-stage theory. This theory is contrasted by an alternate theory of group development: the recurring-phase theory. These two theories, although different, are not contradictory. They can work in tandem as groups develop. Most groups go through developmental phases that alternate back and forth between each theory.

The sequential-stage theory identifies five specific developmental stages in healthy, effective groups: forming, storming,norming, performing, and adjourning. Each stage focuses on a specific facet of group dynamics in time. “In the forming stage members become oriented towards each other, being accepted, and learning more about the group. In the storming stage members often confront their various differences and the management of conflict becomes the focus of attention. In the norming stage the group develops some consensus regarding a role structure and a set of group norms and increases group cohesion. In the performing stage the group works as a unit to achieve the group’s goals. In the adjourning stage the group disbands.”¹⁷⁷ In each stage, the group is participating in a deepening of unity and identity as they work to achieve their common goals. As groups move through these stages, the roles that each member takes can be fluid, shifting with each stage. The transition from one stage to another can also bring with it a new set of norms that define how members relate to one another.

As mentioned above, the recurring-phase theory posits a different perspective on group dynamics, but is not a contradiction of the sequential-stage theory. The

¹⁷⁷ Johnson, Joining, 23.
recurring-phase theory specifies that the most dominant issues that face a group will recur again and again. For example, one study showed that “an equilibrium had to exist between task-oriented work and emotional expressions to build better relationships among group members,”\(^\text{178}\) and that the members of the group went back and forth between those two phases as they progressed. These dynamics shape group identity in more and more complex ways over time. One theorist proposed that “group development occurs as members concern themselves with three issues – affection, inclusion, and control.”\(^\text{179}\) As groups move through this process, their individual relationships are deepened, along with their capacity to function effectively.

**Basic Elements of Group Effectiveness**

Anyone who has worked in groups or led groups knows that one cannot simply gather individuals together, tell them they are a group, and expect that they will function as a group, certainly not effectively. Researchers have identified the most important elements that contribute to the health and function of effective groups. The most important qualities of effective groups can be broken down into five basic elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability/personal responsibility,
promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing.\textsuperscript{180} Each element contributes to the effectiveness of the group in unique ways and defines a group as cooperative.\textsuperscript{181}

Positive interdependence, as discussed earlier in this research, focuses on the relationship between individuals in a group. When the success or failure of the group is based on the work done by and between the individual members, there is highly positive interdependence. Team sports are excellent examples of this relationship. On a football field, the success of a passing play depends on the quarterback and the receiver. But, of course, if the linemen do not block the opponent, the quarterback and receiver are prevented from executing their roles. Each individual player must execute their task well, either throwing or catching or blocking, but the success of the play is dependent on the effectiveness of each individual in relationship to one another. Without each player accomplishing their individual task as well as their joint task at the same time, their play will not succeed. The effectiveness of the whole is dependent upon the effectiveness of the individual, and vice versa. This is what constitutes a team, or in our case, a group. “Group members have to know that they ‘sink or swim together’; that is, they have...to maximize their own productivity, and to maximize the productivity of all other group members.”\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{180} Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 24.
\textsuperscript{182} Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 25.
In order to strengthen the positive interdependence within a group, “joint rewards, divided resources, and complementary roles”\(^{183}\) can be employed. Within group structures, there are two major categories of positive interdependence: outcome interdependence and means interdependence. “When persons are in a cooperative or competitive situation, they are oriented toward a desired outcome, end state, goal, or reward. If there is no resulting interdependence (goal and reward interdependence), there is no cooperation or competition.”\(^{184}\) The goal that is set before a group affects both individual motivation and the way those individuals relate together. The way in which those goals are accomplished, “the actions required on the part of group members,”\(^{185}\) increase the positive interdependence within the group. Additionally, positive interdependence has a significant effect on individual performance within groups, leading to much greater effectiveness of the group as a whole. When individual members perceive that their efforts are integral to the success of the group, their energies increase.

Individual accountability is another important element in effective groups. Put another way, “the purpose of cooperative groups is to make each member a stronger individual.”\(^{186}\) Although the work of the group is the top goal, individual effort is critical to collective success. When individuals receive feedback on their performance directly and within the group, they are most likely to strengthen their efforts. That evaluative


\(^{184}\) Johnson, Joining, 25.

\(^{185}\) Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 25.

\(^{186}\) Johnson, “Making,” 71.
feedback loop identifies the weaknesses of the group by focusing on the performance of the individual. This feedback accomplishes two important tasks: support and responsibility. “It is important that the group knows who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing their work. It is also important that group members know that they cannot ‘hitchhike’ on the work of others.”\textsuperscript{187} When the emphasis is only on the performance of the theoretical group, the individual members of the group can feel disconnected and ultimately perform below expectations. However, when those individual members receive clear feedback on their performance as it relates to the work of the group, members feel a stronger connection to one another and to the identity of the whole.

Face-to-face or promotive interaction is the third basic element of effective groups. Promotive interaction goes beyond the basic level of communication and encourages group members to support one another in their work and especially in their success. There are certain dynamics that only grow when promotive interaction occurs. “Accountability to peers, ability to influence each other’s reasoning and conclusions, social modeling, social support, and interpersonal rewards all increase as the face-to-face interactions among group members increase.”\textsuperscript{188} Additionally, extensive social science research has shown the importance of promotive interaction for the health and success of groups, including the imitation of highly effective individuals that increases the likelihood of group success. And finally, “it is the interaction involved in completing

\textsuperscript{187} Johnson, \textit{Joining}, 26.
\textsuperscript{188} Johnson, “Making,” 71.
the work that allows group members to get to know each other as a person, which in turn forms the basis for caring and committed relationships."  

The fourth element of effective groups may seem like a given, but cannot be underestimated: social skills. Placing a group of individuals together when persons in the group lack decent social skills is a recipe for failure. “Interpersonal and small group skills form the basic nexus among individuals, and if individuals are to work together productively and cope with the stresses and strains of doing so, they must have a modicum of these skills.”  

Research shows that these skills can be developed over time, but the intentionality of that development must be present in order to help a group succeed. Leadership, trust-building, communication, conflict management, and decision-making are all skills that should be brought to the group or developed once the group is formed.  

These higher level social skills not only create a more effective group, but the relationships among the individual members of the group become more positive and reinforcing over time.

Group processing is the final element inherent in effective groups. As noted above, a feedback loop is important to strengthen the performance of group members, but the group itself also needs a collective feedback loop. A process is a clear sequence of events that leads to a predictable goal, and group processing allows groups to monitor and evaluate their performance over time. “Group processing exists when

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189 Johnson, Joining, 28.
190 Johnson, Joining, 28.
group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships.”¹⁹² Put another way, groups become more effective over time when they take a critical look at how effective they have been. Studies have shown that “groups that spend time processing their functioning (compared with groups that do not process and individuals working by themselves) have higher achieving members . . . . . and more positive relationships among members . . . . .”¹⁹³ In fact, group processing has shown that individuals are more likely to achieve a sense of self-efficacy (the expectation of success) when they sense a higher level of responsibility for their success. When individuals engaged in monitoring their experiences as part of a group, especially their positive experiences, they were “more attracted to the group, had greater motivation to remain members, and felt . . . . . more prepared for future group experiences.”¹⁹⁴ This kind of experience deepened the connectedness individuals felt for their group and encouraged members to champion the participation of others.

Case Study: Alcoholics Anonymous

Substance abuse and addiction has plagued humanity for generations. Treatment for and recovery from addiction, especially alcohol and drug addiction, has become more and more popular in the 20th century. In the 1930s, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith began meeting together in Akron, OH. They knew themselves to be alcoholics and

¹⁹² Ibid.
¹⁹³ Johnson, Joining, 29.
¹⁹⁴ Johnson, Joining, 30.
through their friendship, they began to encourage and support one another in their recovery. They quickly understood that their close personal connection to one another allowed them to turn away from the substance that had controlled them for so long. They also discovered that they wanted to help other men recover as well. By 1939, Wilson and Smith had attracted many others to join their group and start other groups. That year, they published their first textbook, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which outlined the small group focus they used to help individuals into recovery.\(^{195}\)

In many ways, A.A. is an ideal case study to show the effectiveness of small groups on transforming individuals. The mission of A.A. is to gather together “men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others recover from alcoholism.”\(^{196}\) The foundation of the A.A. community is vulnerability, honesty, and a clear desire to reach the common goal of sobriety. That shared goal and the willingness to submit to the unusual level of intimacy that A.A. groups require, differentiates participation in those groups from most other groups. Submitting to that kind of differentiation allows an individual, through the relationships developed in the small group, to deeply transform the way they understand themselves and the way they live their lives.

Initially, A.A., along with other 12-step facilitation (TSF) programs received very little scientific scrutiny. Results have been measured, but well-designed trials to study

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the effects of participation in TSF programs have only recently been executed. Clinical results that clearly establish causation are still unclear as to how effective these programs are on individuals, but studies have been done on the longevity of their effects, including a recent clinical review that “argued that there was a consistent, rigorous body of evidence supporting A.A. effectiveness.” These reviews show clearly that there is a greater benefit of participation in groups over the long-term. Yet that effectiveness is not always clear at the beginning.

Early studies that claimed the effectiveness of A.A. have been criticized for their lack of scientific rigor, particularly for not establishing a methodology to prove causation. Criticism pointed to the seemingly anecdotal claims of efficacy without controlling for the true impetus behind those results. However, recent studies have shown that although participation in TSFs (such as A.A.) did not show any short-term difference than other forms of treatment, including medication, long-term results proved the value of small group recovery programs. In the beginning of treatment, the kind of treatment sought did not predict success. Those who entered a phase of recovery remained statistically similar no matter which path was chosen. Yet as the years progressed, those who remained connected to A.A. showed lasting change. The meta-analysis of research that followed individuals for more than 16 years showed the

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TSFs provided long-term support and continued recovery at a higher level than other forms of treatment. “The results support the benefit of extended engagement in A.A., in that longer duration of participation in the first year, and in the second and third years, was independently associated with better 16-year outcomes.”

In addition to the statistical support to show that TSFs produced a higher rate of recovery, the research looked to draw conclusions as to why recovery was more successful in those groups. Different reasons were postulated for why groups helped more people recover for longer periods of time, but one reason was more notable than the others. The researchers wrote, “For some individuals, involvement with a circle of abstinent friends may reflect a turning point that enables them to address their problems, build their coping skills, and establish more supportive social resources.” In fact, the researchers went on to describe the mutual support of small groups that enhance and amplify the changes that individuals hope to make, giving them the best chance for long-term, successful change.

In the same way as these TSFs, small groups that take seriously the need for shared goals and intimate connections will help shape and transform individuals over the long-term. Participating in groups, especially effective groups, makes a significant impact on the life of the individual. “Working cooperatively with peers, and valuing cooperation, results in greater psychological health, higher self-esteem, and greater social competencies than does competing with peers or working independently.”

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199 Moos, “Participation,” 742.
200 Moos, “Participation,” 742.
201 Johnson, “Making,” 73.
Groups encourage strong social skills, promote success, increase self-confidence, and deepen connections to others and to institutions. These benefits prove that institutional investment in groups is not only beneficial to the individuals who are part of the institution, but necessary for the continued growth and health of the institution itself. The following chapter will outline ways in which investment in group processes can and should be the most important priority for institutions looking to transform individuals and increase their own relevance.
Chapter 6: Church Groups

Declining Religious Identity

Since the premodern era, churches have played a significant role in the social structure of human life, particularly in the West. That influence has risen and fallen in waves over time, but the fundamental influence has not changed in a statistically significant way until the 20th Century. Studies and surveys now reflect a massive shift in the way religion impacts the lives of modern adults in the West, particularly in America – showing a consistently declining influence on individual identity and social life from religious institutions. This research has explored the philosophical changes that have dramatically impacted the ways in which modern adults view themselves and the world and that have contributed to the sharp and continued decline of religious identity.

Researchers have also explored the decline in connectedness among individuals, a decline that has contributed to the loss of relationships and identity in general. We are learning that the best ways for individuals to shape and form identity is through relationships with one another, and that intentional group relationships are most effective. This final chapter will focus specifically on the Episcopal Church (TEC), a traditional, mainline Christian denomination in America, and set forth a process by which TEC can move forward in shaping the individual identities of American adults and resulting in the renewed growth of church communities.
The Episcopal Shift

Since 2005, the demographic trends in the Episcopal Church have been downward.\textsuperscript{202} The total baptized membership of TEC has declined from 2,372,592 in 2005 to 1,917,182 in 2015, a drop of more than 19% in just 10 years.\textsuperscript{203} As if the decline in membership isn’t discouraging enough, the decline in Sunday attendance is even more dramatic, dropping from 826,984 in 2005 to 614,241 in 2015, down more than 25%.\textsuperscript{204} This shift has been caused by a confluence of factors, some of which have been explored in this research. Others have been noted by TEC leaders over the last few decades, including reports to the governing body of TEC, the General Convention. In 2006, C. Kirk Hadaway, Officer for Congregational Research for TEC, reported that “the explanation is complex and that the decline mirrors decline in all mainline churches over the last two years . . . . . . Perhaps the [greatest] consequence is the fact that The Episcopal Church has the lowest birth rate and highest mean age of any mainline denomination.”\textsuperscript{205} Over the last decade, his analysis has continued to refine the perspective on the shift in TEC.

\textsuperscript{202} Although based in the United States and drawing its members primarily from within the 50 states, The Episcopal Church has dioceses around the world, including US territories and non-US countries. References to “The Episcopal Church” or “TEC” will include all dioceses unless otherwise noted.


A recent publication from the Episcopal Church, written by Hadaway, looked specifically at the dynamics of growth and decline based on surveys conducted in 2014. The report took a large data sample and analyzed for different levels of correlation that may or may not be able to predict growth and decline. Although many variables showed no substantive correlation, a few did. Hadaway wrote, “Looking first at background characteristics and congregational composition, we note that regional location has a strong, independent effect on church growth and decline among Episcopal congregations . . . . Churchgoing is more normative generally in the South and in western states religious bodies flourish within subcultures of interest.”

The location of churches connects with trends in culture that lead people toward or away from institutional identity, especially religious identity. In addition to location, Hadaway noted that “one of the strongest correlates of growth, or the lack of it was the presence or absence of conflict. Compared to other denominations, the impact of conflict was greater because conflict was more widespread as the Episcopal Church dealt with issues related to sexuality along with the usual congregational disputes over leadership, finances, worship and program.” This makes clear that the decline in TEC cannot be pinned on a single factor. Instead, the decline in TEC is representative of all mainline Christian denominations and is very similar to the stagnation (and, in many contexts, decline) of nondenominational churches.

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This national trend away from religious identity and social connections and toward individualism and spirituality (spiritual but not religious) has not gone unnoticed by the leaders of TEC. Hadaway’s report at the 2006 General Convention caused the leadership of that convention to declare the need “to prepare congregations to receive people and to know what it means to be part of Christ’s body and a reconciling force in the world...[and] to welcome new members and help them become formed in the church’s theology, spirituality and liturgical tradition.”\(^{208}\) The intentionality behind their statement, acknowledging the strategic need to bring new people into the church and offer them clear formative opportunities to develop identity was, unfortunately, new. However new the initiative of growth might have been, the desire to make a strategic shift toward growth was very necessary.

Following the 2006 General Convention, the Episcopal Church began to strengthen its language around growth and evangelism. At the next General Convention in 2009, leaders had begun to ask an important and fundamental question: Who is the Episcopal Church? That question is a critical one to answer, especially in a catholic church, and a question that had been left too implicit in the past. The convention report concluded that the Episcopal identity is “grounded in the traditions embedded in our Book of Common Prayer; in our Baptismal Covenant and in our common sacramental life; in our Constitution and Canons, in our church’s polity and in how we operate as a

church; and, finally, in the way we live our lives.”\textsuperscript{209} The clarity of our Episcopal identity, as well as the energy for growth, is important for the future of TEC. This chapter will look at the ways in which access points for nonmembers are created and how churches can use strategic processes to welcome, connect, and form nonmembers into the life of Episcopal communities.

**Episcopal Strengths and Weaknesses**

To identify a strategic growth plan for the Episcopal Church, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses in the tradition will be important. For some, denominationalism is the fundamental problem of Christianity. Without a clear sense of identity as followers of Christ, those outside the fold, as it were, have trouble understanding what Christians stand for. That is made even more complicated in our modern age as participation in Christian churches becomes less common. Even though we still live in a country where the majority of the population identifies as Christian, determining that identity is a significant challenge.

The Episcopal Church is the American branch of the Worldwide Anglican Communion, the inheritor of the Church of England’s colonial network. After Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglican Christians are the largest Christian group

in the world.\textsuperscript{210} That fact provides some distinct advantages and disadvantages in regard to evangelism and growth, particularly in postmodern America. Yet the Episcopal Church has chosen to take a hopeful look at the future. In the most recent report to the General Convention (2015), leaders of the House of Deputies observed that “the Episcopal Church is already a new Church in many ways—some ways are challenging, and some bring joy. We are, above all, a Church that is filled with hope . . . . . . We’ve been tested, and we are being tested. Perhaps, because of this and by the grace of God, we are being made stronger for the Mission ahead of us.”\textsuperscript{211} There are clear strengths in the Anglican tradition.

From the beginning, Anglican theology has sought to find a middle way in the world. That \textit{via media} has often been described as a bridge between two realities. In the beginning, Anglican leaders sought to bridge the theologies of Roman Catholicism with those of the Protestant reformers, to establish a stable social structure that would be free from the restrictions of medieval theology without losing the ancient mystery.\textsuperscript{212} Although there are many varied ways to categorize Episcopal advantages, one clear set of advantages was observed by author and teacher, Brian McLaren. As a non-Episcopalian, McLaren’s outside perspective offers a unique view of how those outside

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Diarmaid MacCulloch, \textit{Thomas Cranmer: A Life} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 179.
\end{itemize}
the Episcopal Church view what is most attractive about the tradition and will likely prove most helpful. McLaren identified three advantages of the Episcopal Church based on the historic Anglican practice of *via media* (seeking the “middle road”). Though any one of these qualities may be found in other traditions, McLaren argued that no other tradition combines all three practices: dynamic tension, compromise, and beauty.²¹³ A brief look at each of these three practices will provide a foundation for how TEC can use these strengths in the future.

Seeking to find a middle road between two seemingly opposing ways necessarily requires the Episcopal Church to hold ideas in tension. The practice of dynamic tension that McLaren identified is one that is intentional, not accidental. Episcopal practice is grounded in the incarnational truth that God is in the world and in each person. That truth means that we seek to find the good in every person and to honor that truth. Episcopalians hold that in tension with the truth of scripture and tradition, coming together to form what Anglican theologians call “the three-legged stool.” The three legs—scripture, tradition, and reason—come together to form our theological foundation. The tension between each theological leg is a distinct advantage in the modern world. As modern Americans seek spiritual identities (what Taylor called transcendent experiences), they hold those in tension with modern knowledge. The middle way holds those two desires in tension with integrity, allowing the deep truth of God to resonate in fresh ways.

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Similar in many ways to dynamic tension, the practice of compromise has proven difficult at times in Anglican history, not least of which has been in the 20th and early 21st centuries. The practice of compromise acknowledges that individuals have different opinions, and rather than seeking to force everyone to abide by the same set of rules, Anglicans seek to keep everyone at the table. In theory, this is a well-intentioned goal. However, in practice, this has proven very messy. Over time, as the dynamic tension of theology has pointed the Episcopal Church in new directions, conflict has arisen. The desire to keep everyone at the table, while also staying true to new ways of being, has caused Episcopalians to stumble more than once. In the 20th Century alone, significant moments of conflict can be easily identified (e.g., issues surrounding gender and sexuality). By leaving room for the other, for those who disagree in substantive ways yet seek to virtuously follow Christ, the Episcopal Church again feels closer to a postmodern sensibility than to the strict, doctrinal traditions of the past.

Finally, the third practice that provides a valuable advantage to the future of the Episcopal Church is the practice of beauty. The idea of beauty is powerful, encompassing so much of how we live, yet it succinctly describes the Anglican approach to life. Beauty is all around us, because God is present in everything. The belief that the kingdom of heaven is something to be realized now, and now the pot of gold at the end of a long rainbow of life, changes the way Episcopalians choose to live. The practice of beauty permeates every aspect of Anglican identity, especially in worship. There is a fundamental appreciation for the beauty of the world around us and a desire to articulate that beauty in tangible ways. That appreciation is linked to a very ancient way
of understanding the world that connects our modern sensibilities to our natural-born roots. Once again, the choice to practice beauty and mystery prepares Episcopalians to connect with modern Americans in a unique and powerful way.

Meeting Needs by Defining Identity

In multiple books, scholar Robert Bellah and his colleagues, have argued for the necessity of articulation as a key dynamic in forming identity. The languages we speak are rooted in core identity. When we learn to root our articulation in a common language, “secondary languages” that provide utilitarian support to our lives do not have the capacity to divide us. Put another way, when we confidently define ourselves in a shared set of beliefs, the way those beliefs function in the world, although divergent, will not be divisive. Bellah developed this idea through a story in his book, *Habits of the Heart*, where he introduced four, normal American adults. Although all four adults root their identities in different traditions, their unity, what Bellah terms “first language,” is that of American individualism. Their story, as presented by Bellah, is apropos to the argument that identity is key to building community, which in turn is key to shaping identity. In this first passage, Bellah shows that the implicit first language of Americans is often subconscious, but is powerfully influential:

*Brian found the chief meaning of his life in marriage and family, Margaret in therapy. Thus both of them are primarily concerned with private life. Joe gives his life coherence through his active concern for the life of his town; Wayne finds similar coherence in his involvement in political activism. Both of them have integrated the public world deeply into their lives. Whether chiefly concerned with private or public life, all...*
four are involved in caring for others... Yet when each of them uses the moral discourse they share, what we call the first language of individualism, they have difficulty articulating the richness of their commitments. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than...they actually are.\textsuperscript{214}

Following that passage, Bellah continues to unpack the way in which their first language defines their priorities for a good life. Seeking “the good life” is common to all four characters, but how they define the good life is radically different because their first language is focused on their individuality and not on their relationships in community:

*For Brian, the goal of a good life is to achieve the priorities you have set for yourself. But how do you know that your present priorities are better than those of your past, or better than those of other people? Because you intuitively appreciate that they are right for you. For Joe, the goal of a good life is intimate involvement with the community and family into which he happens to have been born. But how do you know that in this complicated world, the inherited conventions of your community and your family are better and more important, and, therefore, more worthy of your allegiance, than those of other communities and families? In the end, you simply prefer to believe that they are better, at least for you. For Margaret, the goal of a good life is liberation from precisely the kinds of conventions that Joe holds dear. But what do you aim for once you have been liberated? Simply what you yourself decide is best for you. For Wayne, the goal of a good life is participation in the political struggle to create a more just society. But where should political struggle lead us? To a society in which all individuals, not just the wealthy, will have power over their own lives. But what are they going to do with that power? Whatever they individually choose to do, as long as they don’t hurt anybody.*\textsuperscript{215}


\textsuperscript{215} Bellah, *Habits*, 21.
The struggle of our American culture is gently articulated by the hopes and dreams of each of these four characters. In each case, we can likely identify people in our lives who share similar lifestyles and perspectives.

In each of the characters described by Bellah, there is a shared desire to live a good life, a desire shared by the great majority of Americans. How that desire is put into action, however, differs significantly from person to person because their first language is self-centered. The individualism that is the ground of their being causes their shared desire to be manifest in unique ways. Individualism, the result of a massive shift in worldview, is a key component of our American identity that must be challenged if we expect to meet our spiritual needs, as well as to grow our religious connectedness. Christianity is first and foremost a communal way of life, one in which individualism cannot be the foundation of being. This problem of identity is one that must be addressed through intentional investment by churches to move us in a healthier direction.

Modern American adults have very specific, spiritual needs that have largely gone unmet in modern religious groups. As this research has sought to identify, those needs are based on deep truths that have shifted over the last few centuries, reaching a tipping point in the 20th Century. The need for re-forming identity is very real, and religious groups have a significant opportunity to address those needs. As shown above, I believe that the Episcopal Church has perhaps the greatest inherent strengths to tell the story of God through Christ to adults who have disconnected from a religious identity. Instead of holding fast to a traditional way of understanding God in the world
that has ceased to resonate with the majority of Americans, we can use modern scientific research to create those structures that will invite and reconnect adults, reforming their identities in religious ones.

A mountain of evidence points to a radically shifting cultural identity in America. In the last century, religion and religious identity have taken a very steep dive away from authority and influence. As Chapter 1 outlined, our declining connection to religion has and continues to fall exponentially year over year. In addition to declining religious identity, we are also moving farther apart. Community is no longer placed above the individual. Individualism has caused a rift in our common life, exacerbated by technology, that pushes us more and more toward a lifestyle that has no place for civic and community efforts, certainly not religion. That decline has been the result of many different influences, not least of which is the secularization of our worldview. One can argue that secularization is the primary motivator for all of these shifts. Rooted as far back as the pre-enlightenment, secularism has had a broad and profound influence on our common life. What is more hopeful, however, is the evidence that shows how profound Americans still desire a spiritual identity. Understanding secularism is critical to knowing how to turn that desire for spirituality into a new religious identity.

The 20th Century assumption that our world will move more and more close to a fully secularized reality has been challenged with great vigor at the beginning of the 21st Century. That challenge to the assumption of a permanent, global shift is what can bring new life into religious groups. As shown in Chapter 2, the secularization of our world has not resulted in a loss of desire for a spiritual life, it has only redefined it. We have
reached a statistical tipping point. Although the shift away from religion has been
growing slowly, today, our youngest adults no longer yoke religion with spirituality, just
as they no longer see themselves first and foremost as an inseparable part of a whole.
Indeed, they have become comfortably separate from one another. For most adults,
secularization has removed superstition from the truth of God. Adults still seek our God,
still seek that spiritual truth, but the freedom to find God anywhere and on one’s
individual terms has become pervasive. Religion, once able to claim the truth of God
entirely, has, through its own reformations, pushed the truth of God’s presence out into
the world. The hallowed halls of churches and other religious institutions no longer
contain the greatest truth, yet those same institutions have not figured out a new way
of being. Rather than ignoring the shift and hoping it will just be a small valley in an
otherwise growing religious identity around the world, I believe churches in America
need to reevaluate what they offer people and not assume that the old offerings will be
enough in the future.

To address the needs of modern Americans, a careful consideration of
psychological research in the last century is very helpful. The individuality of spiritual life
has become and will continue to be problematic to shape our identities in the way
scripture indicates. As shown in Chapters 3, our self-awareness is changing in significant
ways. Before secularization, our worldview and identity were inextricably tied to those
around us and spirits that we could not necessarily see. We believed that, as individuals,
we were connected to others and could be affected in very real, tangible ways by the
supernatural world. This reality allowed for religion to root itself in the spiritual world by
claiming supernatural truths and abilities separate from those same individuals. Religion was the way to access and remain secure from the unknown of the supernatural. As our world became more and more secularized, our belief in and fear of the supernatural world diminished, yet the church remained firmly planted in the economy of the supernatural. As individuals began to understand the world as secure individuals, that economy of the supernatural had less and less appeal at best, and was an outright untruth at worst. This gradual separation of what has become “reality” (the secular worldview) and the economy of the church has finally taken hold and manifest in a massive decline in religious identity.

In addition to the changing identity of individuals, our connection to one another in social groups has also shifted in significant ways. The most effective way to shape awareness of the world, and thus form identity, is through relationships in small groups. In Chapter 4, the complex and formative dynamics of groups was shown to be fundamental to what makes us human and integral to our identity. In groups, we find shared purpose and a higher sense of being. Chapter 5 showed that the purposeful truth of groups is also where we become most effective as people. Through groups, we exercise the best of who we are, who God made us to be. Through groups, not through individual effort, we realize our true potential, identity, and mission in the world. This truth extends into any group, especially churches.

We are most healthy when we are connected to one another in groups, and that is the fundamental strength of Christianity. Our identity is rooted in the simple words of Jesus: *follow me*. Those words, spoken to so many, first shaped a small group of
disciples whose lives inspired the spread of the Gospel around the world. Our biblical example of Christian community is small groups, and it is my belief, backed up by modern scientific research, that God’s intent is for those small, intimate relationships to properly shape us from who we are into who God hopes us to be. By acknowledging the changing landscape of our world and by using psychological and social science research, the Episcopal Church can lead religious groups from every part of the Christian world toward a new future.

**Episcopal Small Groups**

The shift in our culture, especially in the way we fundamentally understand the world, has brought about a new opportunity for religious institutions to invite and engage new members. As this research has shown, formation happens most effectively in relationship with others, especially in small groups. The opportunities that small groups present to religious groups are significant. Small groups provide better connections between members, allowing them to share life together and to care for one another along the way with authenticity. Small groups provide the accountability and mutual challenge that increase individual self-awareness, along with shifting individual and corporate identity closer to the transformative hope of the Gospel. Ultimately, small groups, within the framework of traditional, ancient theology, can promote the necessary shift into a new future for Christian churches.

In the Episcopal Church, as with most Christian religious groups, there is a need to form and re-form the identity of members and nonmembers alike. The argument for
investing in small groups has been given lip service in many Episcopal churches in America but has not materialized. Instead, old paradigms have remained too powerful to shift. However difficult that shift might be, Episcopal churches are in a moment of opportunity, perhaps for the next decade or two, when real, significant investment in small groups can change the trend of decline in the church and help to usher in a new phase of growth. To that end, the next section will focus on a small example of success in relational and small-group formation at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, TN.

When I arrived at Calvary in the summer of 2012, the congregation had experienced a decade-long season of decline. Incorporating new members was necessary to grow the church and help it thrive in the future. As I considered the inherent opportunities for growth, I was introduced to a very simple, three-step paradigm of incorporation that was being taught at Episcopal gatherings around the country: Invite-Welcome-Connect. This program, developed in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, summarized the process of incorporation so simply that it seems fool-proof. Members invite their neighbors to join them at church; when those neighbors show up, the community welcomes them, and after that welcome, there is a clear and intentional process to connect them to the community. As I reflected on Calvary’s strengths and weaknesses, I realized that we were very good at welcoming people but were very weak at inviting and connecting. Fortunately for us, visitors frequently attended our Sunday

216 “Invite-Welcome-Connect” is a newcomer ministry program that helps connect individuals to a faith community. More information can be found here: http://www.invitewelcomeconnect.com/.
services given our downtown location. Because visitors were already coming through our doors, we began work on developing a clear and thorough connection process.

The connection process that developed used much of the truths that have been outlined in this research: shifting identity in the modern world and our deep desire to be connected in groups. We created an integration pipeline in which we tracked individuals through a process of connection to groups that ended, after approximately 2 years, in a deep rootedness in the community. The flowchart for this process is below:

**Invite • Welcome • Connect**

**Newcomer Ministry at Calvary Episcopal Church**

We will invite the seeker, welcome the visitor, and guide the newcomer into a deeper relationship with God through a committed parish membership that empowers, equips, and affirms everyone for ministry.
As this chart shows, the process of integrating and forming new members focuses on connecting them with current members more than anything else. It is through those connections that true re-formation occurs. At Calvary, that is exactly what happened.

Calvary is a medium-sized Episcopal Church, with approximately 1,000 members. Some leaders subscribe to the maxim that unless you are growing by 10% a year, you are actually shrinking. To that end, and with that hope in mind, we began to use this process of connection in specific ways, with small steps along the way. First, we welcomed those who visited. In generations past, a visit to a church was not a monumental moment. When most adults attended church on Sundays, a visit to another church might be caused by many things but did not necessarily indicate a search for a new church home. Today, due to the rapidly declining religious identity in America, a visit to a church is a highly significant moment. People no longer happen upon churches; instead, they do their research, most often digitally, to find a church or small set of churches that appeal to them. When they visit, those visits are very intentional, and by recognizing their presence with equal intentionality, we honor their search and make an explicit invitation to them to join our community.

The first visit began the connection process. Each individual was placed into the pipeline and tracked along the way. Although we live in a highly-individualized world, becoming more so each day, those walking through the doors of a church are looking for community and connection. We sought to intentionally connect a visitor to at least six other members within the first 6 weeks. To help facilitate those connections, visitors
were connected with greeters on their first visit and each subsequent visit until the
visitors participated in a welcome class. Welcome classes were held monthly and
allowed those who made more than one visit to meet other visitors and receive a broad
look at the specific church community. New visitors were invited to attend the welcome
class directly, not in a generalized way. Once they attended, they were introduced and
connected with current members of the community to better deepen their experience
in the group.

The next step in the connection process was a multi-week class in which the
visitors were introduced to a mixture of new and old members of the community. In
each class, connections were paramount. Although there was always a teaching
involved, the individuals were challenged to create a small community in their table
groups, learning about one another during the class and praying for one another during
the week. Over the weeks together, their relationships deepened and they were
encouraged, through training and teaching, to begin to create “holy friendships” that
would sustain their spiritual identities, not just their social identities. Those friendships
helped to accomplish the goal of new members knowing at least six other members
within the first six weeks. At the end of the course, new members felt more connected

\footnote{I use the idea of “holy friendships” here as found in an article by L. Gregory Jones, in
which he writes, “Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are
afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream…. They help us repeat
new activities as we lean into a new way of living our daily life, because it takes time to unlearn
sin, to learn to claim gifts and to cultivate big dreams. And they offer paradigmatic new forms of
relating that enable us to discover the hope to which we have been called.” – Jones,
“Discovering hope through holy friendships,” \textit{Faith and Leadership} (Duke University, June 18,
discovering-hope-through-holy-friendships.}
and ready to invest themselves in the life of the community, which made the next step so critical.

Many churches have programs that look similar to the steps outlined above, even if those steps are less intentional. However, once the class is over and the membership box has been checked, many churches then shift the responsibility of activity in the community up to the new members. Instead, we developed a ministry of spiritual guidance that connected newly invested and energetic members with the groups that would become their “small church” within the larger whole. What we at Calvary called the Shepherd Society was a group of highly invested, committed members who were trained to guide new members into the ministry life of the community. Each of the shepherds participated in formal training sessions, led by a licensed spiritual director, to learn how to be spiritual listeners. These shepherds were already good conversational listeners, but we sought to identify and develop techniques that allowed them to listen to the voice of the Spirit that speaks between two people in an intimate relationship. During those intimate, intentional conversations, shepherds helped identity the giftedness of the new members and how those gifts could be used to the glory of God in their new church community. Then those shepherds facilitated the connections between the new members and the ministry in which they wanted to serve.

Although the connection to active ministries was important, both shepherds and new members reported that the true value of these conversations was the depth of relationships that were formed. Throughout the formation process, relationships were being formed with new friends who, we hoped, would become holy friends within the
church community. However, nothing was as deeply intimate and profoundly spiritual as the conversations between the new members and their shepherds. The shepherds became mentors to these new members, encouraging and guiding them far beyond the structure of the integration program, because they had such a unique knowledge of, and relationship with, each new member. Furthermore, the one-to-one relationships with the shepherds began to blossom into new small groups based on the shepherd’s experience with each new member. These groups were organic, redefining the new member’s status from one that was formal and legal to one that was deeply spiritual. The community rose up not only to welcome the stranger and offer formative guidance, but the community incorporated those new members in ways that allowed all parties to be re-formed into new images of the Body of Christ.

The Next 30 Years

The religious identity of Americans has changed dramatically in the past 30 years as our culture has shifted toward higher levels of disconnection. Where churches had historically played an important role in the formation of individual and corporate identity, they have become less and less important in that formation. We are at a point in the history of the church when we can stem the tide of decline. However, if we continue in the same direction, choosing the maintenance of traditions over creativity and innovation, the church in 30 years will be unable to turn the ship around with any ease, having passed the metaphorical point of no return.
We have seen how individual identities can be shaped by small group relationships and how the Episcopal Church has an opportunity to connect people to God’s truth in ancient ways that will resonate with adults of the future. Yet the bottom line is perhaps a purely social one: going to church is good for us. A recent article cites studies that show that “those who don’t regularly attend church are more likely to suffer from divorce, addiction, and financial distress.”\textsuperscript{218} The relationships that are formed in religious communities, regardless of political persuasion, are the relationships that sustain healthy, hopeful adults.

The church of the future must meet the needs of adults in the future. As this research has shown, adults are shifting toward an ever-higher level of disconnection. Their identity is grounded more in their self-centeredness and less on the transcendent reality of God. However, our human condition desires the presence and experience of the transcendent in relationship with one another. Our identities are shaped by our relationships and, when rooted in religious communities, can provide a deep and sustaining connection with God. The Episcopal Church is grounded in ancient, sacramental theology, with the flexibility to evolve with human experience. Although there is a great benefit in theological flexibility, two common qualities of Episcopal communities stand in the way of future growth. Both the rigidity of Episcopal communities and the fact that Episcopalians are, on average, highly-educated, are very

\textsuperscript{218} Peter Beinart, “Breaking Faith: The culture war over religious morality has faded; in its place is something much worse,” The Atlantic (April 2017) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/.
often hurdles few are willing to jump in order to experience the transcendence of God in our tradition.

Episcopal Churches have historically been more focused on corporate worship than on evangelical growth. Our traditional way of worshipping together is an attractive expression of faith that will resonate with young adults, yet most Episcopal congregations allow the rules of worship to create a rigid way of relating to one another that is difficult for outsiders to crack. Many Episcopal churches, indeed the Episcopal Church national body, has sought to proudly and loudly include all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. That inclusivity is highly attractive. However, when a visitor shows up to most Episcopal churches, those who are “in the club” of membership rarely seek to help others join in.

In addition to the rigidity of most Episcopal communities, research shows that American Christians are becoming far more divided along educational lines. A recent study showed that “religious attendance among moderately educated whites has declined relative to attendance among college-educated whites.” This trend is especially challenging in the Episcopal Church, because of all Christian denominations in America, the Anglican Christians, including Episcopalians, have the highest levels of education. That high-level of education, coupled with rigid communal identities,

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220 According to a Pew Research Center study, adult Anglican and Episcopalian Christians in the U.S. had the highest percentage of members with college degrees, with 59% and 56% respectively. – Pew Research Center. “The most and least educated U.S. religious groups.”
makes it extremely difficult for those on the outside of religious communities to break in.

By employing simple organizational techniques to create effective small group ministries, Episcopal churches can form individual and corporate identities without the anchors of unattractive and ineffective religion, that are and will grow into the full stature of Christian disciples. As I learned from the experience of the Shepherd Society at Calvary Episcopal Church, the simple act of establishing intentional relationships can help bring someone from the outside in. Although we can get wrapped up in the complexity of theology, we are fundamentally human. Our common humanity yearns to connect, to connect with one another and with God. As our world has gotten busier and the demands of our lives have shifted focus away from true, physical, non-digital interactions, we have lost the capacity to seek after God and one another. The future of the Episcopal Church and the Christian church in general is ready to be cast, and we have the chance to shape it if we can muster the courage to act. The future of the church will not be made by accident, but by intentional structure and reformation of our behaviors. Intentional, well-organized small groups may not be the silver bullet to rescue our dramatic decline, but it is a good, proven way to start.

Bibliography


Biography

Christopher D. Girata is an Episcopal priest and currently serves as Rector of Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Dallas, TX. A native of Florida, Chris previously served as Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, TN, as Associate Rector at Saint Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, AL and as a seminarian at The National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Chevy Chase, MD. He is a graduate of Stetson University, Emory University, and the Virginia Theological Seminary. Chris and his wife, Nicole, have three children, Brayden, Layna, and Annemarie.