

faithful



INTRODUCTION

To what are we faithful?

In an era of rapid change in religious identity and practice, institutional leaders across America are asking this question. As affiliation declines and new communities emerge,¹ we are torn between loyalty to what has been and a desire to be part of what is next.

In January 2017, senior leaders of Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist denominations came together to explore this tension. Our report builds on that gathering, offering frameworks to help make sense of a new reality and five case studies that illustrate institutions attempting to adopt a faithful stance toward change.

The purpose is three-fold:

- *To stimulate the thinking of religious leaders about the future of our institutions*
- *To offer common language for shared experiences*
- *To inspire those who are leading change from within*

It is written for three groups of readers:

- *Those inside religious institutions who know things need to change, and are figuring out how*
- *Those leading innovative communities at the edge of religious traditions who distrust institutions*
- *Those interested in America's changing religious landscape, including students aspiring to religious leadership*

We hope that institutional leaders will embrace the task that lies before us, even if it goes unrewarded by our own systems. This is a time for courage and clarity of purpose.

This project was born out of friendship, shared exploration, and a common trust in the ever-changing shape and enduring faithfulness of religious life. Thank you for reading, and please be in touch to share your reflections.

Casper ter Kuile, Angie Thurston, Sue Phillips, Lisa Greenwood, and Gil Rendle

1. This report refers to changes in the American religious landscape. Among Christians and Jews, religious affiliation is declining. Although Buddhism, Islam, and other traditions are growing, younger generations are less institutionally engaged and more likely to have hybrid practices and identities. See the Pew Forum's *'Nones' on the Rise* and *Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones'* in the bibliography for more detail.

WHERE WE ARE

Institutional religious leaders live in the dance between past and present. We are stewards who carry the great traditions of song and story, theology and practice, and wisdom and ritual from generation to generation. We are called to maintain the integrity of religious leadership: training, placing, and supervising clergy; enabling congregational vitality; safeguarding resources; and upholding core principles, values, and creeds.

We also enforce ecclesial rules. This means we know better than anyone how these rules can sometimes get in the way of God's work in the world. It also means we can become the locus of projection from all sides—our bosses, our boards, our teams, and those we hope to serve.

It is not easy work.

And in a time of anxiety about relevance and survival, we must engage confounding and age-old questions: What makes “us,” us? Where are the boundaries between us and everyone else? How are those boundaries still serving us? And, are we caretakers of tradition or stewards of potential? Do we accept the role we have been given, or embrace the role of midwifing what might be?

We must each make a choice.

This report proposes that a faithful response is to shepherd emergence. To look not only at the edge of our tradition, but beyond it. To see a new generation of leaders—often the products of our own summer camps, youth programs, and congregations²—and find ways to support their, and their communities', flourishing.

Stewarding potential demands a different approach than many institutions cultivate, measure, or reward. We must imagine and lead beyond our given authority. This work requires creativity, courage, and faith.

It is also rich with opportunity.

The rise of new communities of purpose and meaning, together with the decline of institutionalized religious life, offers us a ripe moment for unexpected collaboration, new partnerships, and startling and beautiful invention.

2. Sid Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003).

HOW WE GOT HERE

This report is one example of unexpected collaboration.

A few months after publishing *How We Gather*,³ Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile received a phone call from Gil Rendle and Lisa Greenwood at the Texas Methodist Foundation. Gil articulated a growing sentiment among Methodists that the United Methodist Church as we know it will not exist in 20 years—and TMF's firm commitment to shepherding the evolution of the Wesleyan⁴ movement. Angie, Casper, and Sue have learned that this is typical of TMF's visionary approach.

Conversations flourished, and in January 2017, the team brought together senior leaders from 11 denominations⁵ across the Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist ecosystems. The purpose was to engage in a non-problem-solving conversation around the reality that being better at what we already do is not a useful strategy for serving those who are not involved with organized religion. As each generation becomes less religiously affiliated, we asked: What are the possible roles for established faith traditions? And how might we work together across traditions and generations?

TMF wasn't always convening partners to ask these big questions. Denominational foundations usually serve congregations and church-related organizations by providing some combination of investments, loans, grants, and life-income gift administration for individual members and families. This was true of TMF. Around 2003, however, they acted on the clear correlation between vital congregations and strong leaders by adding leadership resources to their financial offerings.

But as the assets of the foundation continued to grow and the church continued to decline in numbers and influence, TMF was compelled to answer the question, "If our assets grow while we serve a lesser church, have we been successful?" TMF's leadership clarified that the client of the foundation was not the *institution* of the church, but the *purpose* of the church. So it shifted from providing financial and leadership resources to congregations, to also supporting leaders in defining their purpose. This meant engaging stakeholders from across the system, especially those at the edge. In doing so, TMF became a host for important conversations within the United Methodist Church, and, in January, for the wider institutional religious landscape.⁶

So when Gil and Lisa picked up the phone to call Angie and Casper, TMF was simply inviting another edge-voice into conversation. In writing this report together, the five of us are inviting a larger conversation about how religion can be faithful to its purpose today.

3. Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather*, (Cambridge, MA, 2015). See www.howwegather.org.

4. John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement.

5. The United Church of Christ, the Union for Reform Judaism, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Episcopal Church, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the Alliance of Baptists, and the Jewish Reconstructionist Communities.

6. Information gathered from Buzz Reed, *Serving at the Threshold* (Indianapolis, IN: Indianapolis Center for Congregations, 2013). To learn more about TMF, visit <https://www.tmf-fdn.org>.

TWO ORDERS OF WORK

Anxiety is palpable in denominational offices. Congregations are shrinking, while new forms of community, which emerge at the edge or just outside of our traditions, don't fit into existing categories of religious expression. Confusion is compounded by the two different audiences for our work: First, the affiliated, or those who claim a religious institutional identity. Second, the unaffiliated, or those who do not claim a religious institutional identity but often participate in new communities and movements.

Improving vs. Creating

Institutional leaders must address both if they are to thrive. If they serve only the affiliated, innovative micropower communities will continue to challenge and even threaten existing institutions.⁷ Religious institutions therefore have two concurrent and vital jobs that need doing: improving and creating.⁸

Type of Work	Requires	Serves	Capacity
IMPROVING	Learning new ways to do what we already know how to do	The Affiliated: people we already know how to relate to	Within the scope of established institutions
CREATING	Learning new ways to do what we don't yet know how to do—and may be disallowed to do by existing polity and practice	The Unaffiliated: people we don't know how to relate to	Beyond the scope of established institutions

Many leaders are learning that you can't do both orders of work under the same institutional rubric. And crucially, calling something "the work of creating" does not make it more than "improving" if it is some variation of what we already know how to do!

By definition, it may be impossible for institutions to create decentralized communities that thrive beyond institutional edges. But we don't have to. It is already happening. New communities, programs, and projects are blossoming just outside the denominational landscape. True, they don't look like the forms of faithful community that we're used to, but their leaders are reaching out for connection with mentors, wisdom teachers, and some denominational leaders. To continue building these relationships, and the necessary trust that goes with them, we must learn to come alongside these emerging community leaders in a spirit of generosity.⁹

7. Moises Naim, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used To Be* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2013) p.13.

8. Gil Rendle, *Waiting for God's New Thing: Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time – or – Why Better Isn't Good Enough* (Austin, TX: Texas Methodist Foundation, 2015).

9. Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, *December Gathering: Notes from the Field*, (Cambridge, MA, 2017). See www.howwegather.org.

POLARITY MAPPING

Life is full of equal but diametrically opposed truths that cannot be held together. These tensions are known as polarities. Polarity mapping can make visible the tension between religious institutions and innovative communities in America today.¹⁰

For example, is it good for an organization to be orderly, have clear channels of decision-making and communication, and let everyone know the part they play? Yes! And is it good for an organization to be quick and agile, responsive to the immediate context in which it works, and equipped to make changes as it learns? Again, yes! Is it possible to be centralized and decentralized, fully organized and also agile at the same time? Unfortunately, no.

Each polar truth is a positive expression (+) until practiced too long in a stagnant culture, at which point it begins to exhibit its negative side (-). On a map, the dynamic looks like this:



10. Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, Inc, 1996).

POLARITY MAPPING CONTINUED

Long-standing organizations naturally privilege their own preferences and priorities, thus making it increasingly difficult for new paradigms to emerge.¹¹ They lose their permeable boundary and, in the process, their capacity to change. Hence religious institutions now find themselves in the giant hairball of the lower left quadrant, looking longingly at new communities in the upper right quadrant.

Naturally, anytime an organization slips into the negative quadrant of its dominant pole, it sets its sights on the positive quadrant of the opposite pole. So as institutions seek to form relationships with innovators at the edge, there must be total clarity about the motivation for this move. Are we reaching out to encourage, mentor, and resource leaders of new communities who have their own paths to forge? Or are we trying to fix our own stuckness by attaching ourselves to initiatives with energy, agility, and new people?

Energy (decentralized) and experience (centralized) need each other at this time of ferment in the religious landscape. New expressions of community need support, stability, and access to the wisdom of our traditions. Established religious institutions need the joy of nurturing new expressions of our own highest values. Working across this polarity map could unlock powerful crossover collaborations and shape America's religious future.

11. Robert Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

CHALLENGE:

Grants being directed toward the work of improvement rather than creation.

CHOICE:

To launch a large-scale listening campaign, resulting in redrawn funding boundaries.

The United Church of Christ is famous for its belief that God is still speaking—a testament to its progressive theology. Under the leadership of incoming General Minister Rev. John Dorhauer, numerous efforts have been made to ensure that the denomination is hearing that speech. While leading the Southwest Conference, Dorhauer had already tested boundaries by ordaining ministers and funding spiritual communities that were aligned with UCC values but did not claim its identity. That ethos now informs his new role.

The first step was a listening campaign to hear from over 3,000 people under 40 on the question, “What does a relevant UCC look like in 10 years?” The response led to a vision of an institution that would be a nimble and credible source of support and focused on partnerships with communities engaged in deep justice work.

These new priorities demanded structural changes. Every role in the denominational system had its job description reviewed while a new process for funding ministries, with new metrics, was developed. “Churches and their members change lives weekly. I just don’t think we pay much attention to it. We have gotten stuck imagining that our health and vitality are measured by money donated and members active,” explains Dorhauer.¹²

One crucial facet of the new process is that funding applicants no longer need to prove long-term sustainability to receive investment. “What about spiritual communities that come into being after particular movement moments, in response to a deep communal need? It would be a sin not to fund that!” argues Rev. Chris Davies, who has led the implementation of the new metrics.

A focus on partnership now means that some investment will go to communities that are not formally UCC affiliated, yet that maintain a living relationship with a UCC congregation or association. Such elements of the new UCC vision demonstrate an institution looking beyond its own boundaries to ensure impact.

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If we are to be true to our purpose, to build a just world for all, then it would be a sin not to fund that—even if it is outside of our traditional boundaries!

— Rev. Chris Davies

Coordinator for Congregational Assessment, Support, and Advancement

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12. John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015) p.105.

JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST COMMUNITIES

CHALLENGE:

Competing and overlapping denominational institutions locking up energy and resources.

CHOICE:

To merge the denomination and seminary into one organization.

Called by its progressive theology and pragmatic, modern interpretations of tradition and Jewish law, Reconstructionist Judaism has evolved continuously since its inception in the 1930s. Rabbi Deborah Waxman describes Reconstructionist congregations as “the research and development arm of the Jewish community.”

The youngest Jewish denomination in the United States, Reconstructionist congregations were the first to recognize patrilineal descent, support interfaith marriage, and ordain LGBTQ leaders. This edge position among Jewish denominations both reflects and creates a deep sense of urgency—and theological imperative—to adapt to new social realities.

Reconstructionist Jews were initially cautious about creating institutions, but the need to train leaders, support congregations, and connect rabbis—in other words, to do what virtually every denomination needs to do for its constituents—prevailed. Twenty years ago, the congregational union and the rabbinical school served only 100 Reconstructionist congregations. They found themselves competing for scarce resources and struggling to demonstrate impact. Institutional maintenance sometimes impinged on mission, resulting in diminished value to congregations and insufficient engagement with a changing landscape.

In a bold and sometimes painful process over the last decade, the congregational union and seminary have merged under coordinated leadership, allowing for greater clarity of mission, increased relationship between students and congregations, and cross-pollination of ideas among the religious leaders of this generation and the next.

As seminaries close and denominations continue to cut programs and staff roles, how might we create shared value across organizational boundaries? What might it look like for religious institutions to merge creatively?

Reconstructionist leaders know it's on them to demonstrate relevance in this shifting environment, and that allowing their institutional structures to flex provides essential fuel as they run faithfully toward that edge.

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We're not being chased to the edge. We're running toward it. The edge is always in front of us.

— Rabbi Deborah Waxman

President of Jewish Reconstructionist Communities and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

CHALLENGE:

No system to keep track of, or support, emerging communities that didn't look like traditional congregations.

CHOICE:

To create the category of "covenanting communities" and design new infrastructure to support these communities and their leaders.

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The Lucy Stone Cooperative, SunPoint Farm Sanctuary, and Sacred Fire UU are all spiritual communities that bring people into life-giving relationships. They all have strong ties to Unitarian Universalism. But as of 2010, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) could not support them.

Like many denominational bodies, the UUA historically defined its member organizations as place-based congregations. But as more and more communities emerged that were neither brick-and-mortar nor congregational, the UUA's membership criteria and support structures no longer fit the need. So the denomination chose to adapt. In 2011, the UUA eliminated the requirement for member organizations to have a physical location. And in 2015, it created the new category of "covenanting communities."

Covenanting communities are described as those that "claim a UU identity and advance UU values," but "look and feel different from a traditional congregation." They include small meeting groups, missional communities, intentional living cooperatives, national networks, and other entrepreneurial ministries. Since officially welcoming these communities into the family, the UUA has now begun walking the slow and often arduous path from theory to practice.

Supporting covenanting communities means reimagining programs, resources, instructions, and guidelines that were created under a set of assumptions and that no longer apply. Moreover, it means fielding questions like tax status and insurance eligibility, which the federal government still bases on a congregational model. Then there is the internal debate about finances: Covenanting communities are currently expected to contribute at the same level as congregations. On the one hand, this eliminates any financial incentive for existing congregations to switch categories. On the other hand, it requires covenanting communities to pay what is often beyond their means for services that are not always well matched to their needs.

Despite these and other challenges, Outreach Director Carey McDonald believes the process is worth continuing. "This really matters to people," he says. "We keep getting new applications."



The whole journey is an intersection between what is theoretically possible and what is culturally defined in the DNA of everything we do. It's like pulling something apart thread by thread and knitting it back together.

— Carey McDonald
Outreach Director, Unitarian Universalist Association



COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

CHALLENGE:

No young people joining the order.

CHOICE:

To form a partnership with a millennial-led organization.

The Community of the Holy Spirit is an order of Episcopal nuns, a handful of whom live in an eco-feminist community at Bluestone Farm in Brewster, New York. Like many religious orders, theirs is aging and shrinking. Yet the community at Bluestone Farm has actually grown in the last four years, thanks to an unlikely partnership with the millennial-led collective, Prime Produce.

The partnership began through a mutual relationship. Rev. Leng Lim and Dr. Home Nguyen, of the MindKind Institute, had gotten to know the nuns and invited Chris Chavez and Jerone Hsu of Prime Produce for a visit. They were enamored.

Chris remembers bonding with Sister Helena Marie over how to fix a water feature that was flooding the chapel at the bottom of the hill. “I wanted more intergenerational apprenticeship,” he says. Jerone agrees. “We didn’t know how much we were missing until we were in this wonderful relationship with the sisters here.” Prime Produce, a 21st-century guild for slow entrepreneurship and intentional service based in New York City, has now hosted monthly group salon retreats at the farm since January 2014, which are mostly attended by millennials.

The partnership also includes shared farm labor, renovation projects, and contemplative practice. After four years of collaboration, the three organizations — Community of the Holy Spirit, Prime Produce, and MindKind Institute — are exploring how to partner for the long term. While there has been no shortage of personal and organizational growing pains in the process, all parties remain committed to putting the relationships first.

None of this would be possible, if not for the sisters’ openness to change.

“This is not a certain, steady period for monasticism,” says Sister Helena Marie. “It’s a break-open-and-into period. It can be painful, but it’s necessary: the patience and love and the willingness to break open.”

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With all the challenges we’ve faced coming together, the most effective thing has been getting to know each other on a personal level. That is the key to going forward.

— Sister Helena Marie
Community of the Holy Spirit, Bluestone Farm

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THE FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

CHALLENGE:

Fewer people attracted to old ways of doing church, while tremendous denominational energy pours into keeping marginal congregations afloat.

CHOICE:

To proactively reduce the number of congregations from 650 to 500, while seeking 500 new expressions of faith that serve new people in new places.

With great clarity, Bishop Ken Carter and his team understand that the Florida Conference needs to engage the work of creation, not improvement.

As fewer people seek out traditional church communities, denominational staff are leading two concurrent efforts. First, they are actively engaging struggling congregations in their end of life plan through The Nehemiah Project. This has enabled congregational leaders to recognize that their legacy can be a beautiful, life-giving thing—particularly when explored through theological exploration of death and resurrection. Rather than the slow attrition of 5-6 congregations closing a year, staff leaders aim to see at least double that number every year before 2025.

Second, significant investment has been made to support new missional communities. These projects must be highly relational and nearly always take place outside of church buildings. Naturally, energy around a new idea leads to the temptation to recategorize existing work into the fashionable language, so leaders had to draw clear boundaries about what constituted a “Fresh Expression.” No contemporary worship services, no Bible study group, no food pantries. These are safety nets—things we already know how to do—not fishing nets that engage new audiences. The slogan “New People, New Places, New Ways” has been central in this effort.

Crucially, there is no expectation that these new communities will support a full-time pastor, so existing clergy must work with laity to seek out third spaces in the area where they might be a listening presence. As well as supporting grassroots leaders in creating something new, there have also been efforts to come alongside existing, non-affiliated communities to explore if there is value for them in having a pastoral presence. So far, conversations have been had with communities including social justice groups, cafes and gyms. Finding and nurturing the right leaders is now a key priority.



What if, instead of spending our time trying to keep all our current congregations working, we spent energy growing fresh expressions of faith?

— Rev. Alex Shanks
Assistant to Bishop Ken Carter



WHAT NOW?

Could Blockbuster have become Netflix? Nearly always the answer is “no.”¹³

This may be a relief. In a time of rapid change, institutions need not become their own next iterations; those are emerging with or without us. But if we are to be loyal to such fledgling expressions of faith, we are called upon to lend all we have learned to their efforts.

Millennials are the largest generation in American history, and more than a third of them are unaffiliated. Yet, they are creating remarkable new communities of meaning and belonging all over the country.¹⁴ In this time, established leaders are called to come alongside this emerging landscape of religious innovation, to listen to its needs, and to offer the treasures of our traditions within the bonds of trusted relationship and *kedushah*.¹⁵ To steward the potential of this new ecosystem is to believe in the faithfulness of our own children and grandchildren.

This generation is hungry for spiritually mature mentorship, encouragement, perspective, and practical support. Together with a group of Millennial leaders, Casper and Angie experienced an extraordinary form of “eldering” in the presence of seven Catholic nuns who gathered to share the stories of their religious life together—the struggles, the joys, and lessons learned. These women religious came to the table completely comfortable in the knowledge that their particular expression of religious life was coming to an end,¹⁶ and thrilled to learn about emerging forms of what they called “God’s work.” That conversation has led to an ongoing effort to pair elders with Millennial community leaders across and beyond faith traditions.

Inspired by that experience, we invite you to open two conversations:

1. With colleagues in your organization or—even better—across organizations or denominations, knowing that this transition cuts across faith lines.
2. With leaders of innovative communities at the edge—whoever that may be in your context.

You might ask:

- Where would you place yourself on the polarity map right now? What are you experiencing that leads you to that conclusion?
- What is the picture of your preferred future? If constraints weren’t a limitation, what would it look like for your organization to live out its fullest purpose?
- What do you need to learn in order to live into that future?
- What would it mean to open yourself to that learning?

Every fruitful example of stewarding potential seems to be grounded in relationships of trust. This has been our experience, and this is our invitation as you explore these questions.

13. Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997).

14. See *How We Gather, Something More*, and *December Gathering: Notes from the Field*. www.howwegather.org.

15. Sacred purpose (Hebrew).

16. Carol Zinn, SSJ, *Speech at Dominican University*, 2016, <https://livestream.com/dominicanuniversity/events/4769537/videos/112623032>.



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www.howwegather.org

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