

# RESEARCH NOTES

*Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

## OF CULTURE OR AGAINST CULTURE? A DILEMMA FOR CONGREGATIONS

A perennial question over the past three decades, especially among Protestant denominations, is whether some congregations have become transactional and instrumental versus transformational and relational. The framing is intentionally provocative. Much traditional religious practice in America resists elements of secular culture that elevate individualism, consumerism, and competition—traits we usually consider transactional or instrumental. Sometimes this resistance is framed as therapeutic, sometimes as communitarian, sometimes transformational—and these are not mutually exclusive categories. But there is always a sense that traditional religion stands in judgment of dominant secular orientations that fall short of guiding people, or societies, toward their highest good.

At the same time, there are many empirical reasons to believe that spiritual practice in America has become increasingly individualistic. Each person constructs her own narrative and chooses from ideas found in books, websites, movies and television, and of course from scripture and from religious communities, though the percentage participating in those communities continues to decline. This individualistic model looks very much like secular consumerism. This creates a tense relationship between spirituality, usually a category describing individuals, and faith communities grounded in tradition.

The juxtaposition of the earthly kingdom, and the Kingdom of God is as old as western religion. Seventy years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr gave us the distinctions “against culture, of culture, above culture, in paradox with culture, and transforming culture.” These distinctions were important tools in the middle 20th century, but the critical framing of the past several decades have taught us that reality is even more complex. We now understand that what counts as secular or worldly, even what counts as culture, depends on the viewpoint of the observer and their social context.

### **Down to Cases**

Far from an obscure academic distinction, this contextual relativism affects the way we understand religion, whether we are observers or practitioners. For many of our congregations and their members, sin is primarily a matter of personal, individual failure. Sexual immorality, racism, and greed are character flaws, even if they are born into us. We are separated from God. Correct belief and practice, sometimes prompted by a conversion experience or profession of faith, reunite us with God. The path to right living is given in the Bible, which transcends all other forms of human wisdom.



For these evangelicals, the faith community is usually a gathered community—individual believers come together to worship God, to study God’s word, to support one another in the walk of faith, and to do God’s will by helping others. The greatest need for non-Christians is to be pointed toward God’s love and grace, so evangelism is part of every other form of ministry. In some versions of this theological worldview, the earthly kingdom can be healed when enough people choose the life of faith. In other versions, only God’s eventual intervention can overcome the world.



For evangelical congregations heavily invested in individual professions of faith, there are many means toward that end. Some remain highly traditional—even old fashioned—but others are prepared to embrace many of the methods of popular culture in the interest of making connections and immersing their members in a Christian lifestyle.

These congregations know that many people define their spirituality individually, so they create multiple opportunities, located in small groups, to fit different desires and preferences. The largest congregations in America, including most megachurches, are highly skilled at professional music, elaborate staging, audio-visual techniques, and digital engagement with their members, but they are also expert at creating a wide range of opportunities for engagement and for service. Some of these congregations do not even use the word “members;” one Indianapolis megachurch refers to everyone who is not staff as “guests.” Their attendees are generally much younger than at the average congregation, and thus much more likely to take the “individually spiritual” view. Some guests are deeply involved, others are merely affiliated, which is another consumer choice they get to make.

To outsiders, these congregations appear to be very much “of culture,” in Niebhur’s terms. They are seeking to match secular performance quality and technical ability note-for-note. They provide something for everyone, a multitude of programs designed to fit every taste. But of course, leaders in these congregations do not think of themselves as “of culture.” They see themselves transforming culture. They may use the world’s techniques, but they are using them for a higher purpose.

Indeed, to evangelicals, progressive congregations are the ones who are captive to culture. The progressive emphasis on social, systemic justice (economic, racial, feminist, LGBTQ) often looks like secular politics, though obviously this varies from issue to issue and congregation to congregation.

For mainline Protestant congregations, as well as to Catholics and the Orthodox, the situation looks very different. They usually define doing God’s will in terms of community formation, either internal to the tradition or within the larger society. They emphasize personal character or morality, but they are much more concerned about the social body and its systems and institutions. (Such distinctions should always be thought of as more or less, not all or nothing.) They see themselves as resisting culture, and they hope to transform it, because they are critical of what they see as overreaching individualism and the commodification of human goods in the larger society and sometimes in other forms of religious community.





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## The Problem

Over the past 18 months, we have seen many congregations move quickly toward practices they had long avoided: Live worship streaming, online giving platforms, digital communication, virtual meetings, and even archived services to be viewed later. In short, we have seen congregations take on the technological trappings of the megachurches who had already moved in this direction. Many congregations were uncomfortable making this transition. It is time to consider why.

These digital practices smack of consumerism, which in turn highlights individualism and market-based strategies that some academics call “neoliberalism.” These innovations make traditionalists uncomfortable for obvious reasons—imagine hymns on an organ being replaced by guitar songs that do not rhyme. But the innovations make communitarians uncomfortable because practices that feel market-based grate against their desire to emphasize the importance of community.

In a nutshell, communitarian religious traditions resist the turn toward the individualism implied by contemporary business practices. Religious traditions that are more individualistic are more comfortable with marketing. And not to put too fine a point on it, the marketers are growing while most others decline.

## Some Examples

It would be irresponsible to leave such a broad statement unguarded, so here are some specific examples:

### SIZE

The headline number here is clear: Of all the people who attend congregations, 70% of the people attend 10% of the congregations. Although we don't have survey numbers yet to support it, our observations suggest this characterization fits Indianapolis as much as it does other American cities. The large congregations keep getting larger, the small, and even medium sized, keep getting smaller. In fact, the percentage of people who attend the largest 1% of congregations has risen for several decades now and continues to rise. For some, this is a clear indicator that growth is the way forward.

Why are large congregations getting bigger? They can offer multiple programs designed to meet a wide range of preferences and expectations. They can provide a high level of quality in music, teaching, and programs for children and adolescents. They have professional staff with specialized skills capable of addressing a variety of needs.

This kind of congregation, even this kind of community, is not for everyone. It is, after all, a very Protestant model not well-suited to sacramental groups. There are others who find comfort in worshipping with those who share their ethnic traditions. (And most sacramental congregations have deep ethnic roots, so the overlap is significant.) Still other traditions are theologically bound to communitarianism; not surprisingly, they are also more communitarian in their views of the larger society. To them, the idea of religion measured by growth smacks of individualism and capitalism (yes, neoliberalism).

The late Nancy Eiesland wrote about the Walmart effect of large, suburban churches outside Atlanta in her book, *A Particular Place*. The large congregations were good at what we now call “customer service” or “user experience.” The kind of people living in the Atlanta suburbs were likely to be unmoored from their traditional roots, whether those roots were in American small towns or in other countries. These new suburbanites found this form of spiritual community appealing for many reasons. It is not surprising that in Central Indiana, Northview, Traders Point, Greenwood Community Church, and other megachurches are located in prosperous suburban communities.





The growth of big-box congregations pushed other congregations toward becoming niche providers that met specific theological or cultural preferences. (The Walmart example is apt here.) More recently, megachurch scholar Scott Thumma talked about vitality being either in the very large congregations or in the smaller ones that filled such a niche. At the furthest end of the niche scale were “emergent” congregations—“house churches.” People could find what they sought either in the multiplex of programs offered by the very large congregations, in the direct intimacy offered by the very small ones, or in a tradition, often linked to ethnicity, that felt like home. In our study of Indianapolis, we see several very large congregations thriving—to the point that they are now sustaining other congregations that were previously failing. And we see several smaller congregations succeeding because of their tight ethnic ties.

### CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

The language used here is intentionally market-based. It frames people as consumers of religion and congregations as providers of customer experience. Communitarian congregations resist this characterization and the practices associated with it. We have seen many attempts by these congregations to reorient their members’ vision outward, to make their theological purpose service and giving, often to a local neighborhood or geographical area, as Second Presbyterian has done with its [Northside Mission Ministries](#). They emphasize the congregation as a community and urge their members toward engagement with the wider community around them. Whether they are confronting poverty or alienation

or racism or gender identity issues, they believe they are modeling good religious behavior as they seek to challenge the assumptions, and results, of individualism in the wider society.

One downtown, mainline congregation we are studying had re-doubled their communitarian efforts since the pandemic (which notably coincides with George Floyd’s murder). Their recent sermons have focused on global hunger and anti-racism. They long ago settled the question of gender identity. Nearly all their activities are aimed at some form of social justice. In a United Methodist congregation on the west side, a conservative male pastor was recently replaced by a much more progressive female one. The sermons shifted from moral strictness to emphasizing how we are “all in this together,” including a renewed emphasis on unity with other Christians and even with people of other faiths.

Little wonder, then, that these congregations are hesitant about adopting practices that feel like customer service. For one thing, such practices put the focus on the individual members and their needs rather than on the needs of others. For another, this reinforces the idea that moral problems, or sin, are characteristics of individuals rather than of social systems.

Again, congregation sit on a continuum, so this is not an either/or question. Often, it is but/and. Many large evangelical congregations engage in significant community service, including programs designed to alleviate poverty or homelessness or addiction.

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The question is more about focus—is the goal to transform individuals or to address inequalities in social systems? (Any attempt to transform systems is, by definition, political, a distinction congregations ultimately cannot avoid.)

Both growth (size) and customer experience have worked for some congregations, but they are not going to work for most. Any attempt to characterize all these other congregations as simply resistant to change usually misses the point—these congregations explicitly do not want to change in this direction. They are not just dragging their feet. In fact, the social forces that move America toward individualism and commodification of goods is precisely the thing they most want to transform.

### **DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT**

This brings us back around to digital engagement, streaming, and archiving services. Each of these is undoubtedly beneficial to some members of any religious organization. These options offer greater consumer choice. They engage people who might otherwise not be able to engage. We have heard multiple stories of people who were able to attend funerals or weddings, to experience worship, and to stay connected in multiple ways, because of the use of video, social media, and other communication apps. We know digital giving helped many congregations survive the pandemic and is now a regular part of their practice.



But we are also hearing from congregations who are questioning the wisdom of all-access digital community. Sacramental congregations cannot truly conduct worship virtually. Among our study congregations, Catholic and Orthodox congregations were the least likely to shut down completely during the pandemic and, when they did, they were among the first to return to in-person worship. But other congregations are also now wondering what is lost when members can access services from elsewhere, maybe even at different times. At least one of our study congregations has said clearly that “from now on, tithes and offerings will be brought into the church,” likely a signal that digital giving and virtual attendance was starting to take a toll.

The question is not whether technology changes and organizations change with it. This is undoubtedly true. It makes no sense to print a newsletter that can be posted online or to use surface-mail for information that can be delivered via email. The question is whether certain kinds of technology fundamentally change what congregations are trying to do and to be? And if their resistance goes beyond the practical to the philosophical—if they are resisting not just new techniques but an entire way of thinking about human relationships, then the problem is multiplied.

### ***Habits of the Heart***

Thirty-five years ago, Robert Bellah and his coauthors described the fraught relationship between individualism and commitment, between liberalism and communitarianism, in American life. Many Americans have a deep faith, or at least an intuition, that there is something more important than themselves, that their highest purpose is larger than self-realization. But the *Habits* authors noted that many Americans had trouble putting that larger good into words.

Most of us are familiar with *Habits*' Sheilism, the idea that we each have our own spiritual philosophies cobbled together from various sources. In the thirty-five years since *Habits*, this religious individualism has become much more widespread. And more to the point, commitment to faith communities has dwindled. For the two youngest generations in America, commitment to religious organizations has fallen off the table. There is plenty of resistance to individualism and neoliberalism in America, to be sure, but this often takes political rather than religious forms.

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Some religious organizations have embraced the methods of the secular marketplace with great success. They have become spiritual clearinghouses where everyone can find something that fits them. By any measure of membership or money, these groups are winning. Other religious organizations have resisted, consciously or unconsciously, by curating their niche identity. Still others have resisted by going extra-small, essentially creating faith communities that function like extended families.

But what happens to the rest? The story of their adjustment to a landscape shaped by individual spirituality and addressed by technology and customer experience is one of the most important ones our project will tell.

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# Questions

- This Research Notes juxtaposes two tendencies within congregations—individualistic and communitarian. To what degree do these tendencies divide American religion into conservative and liberal? Are there instances where both tendencies exist in the same congregation? How does this work?
- Given that each of these tendencies is critical of some aspects of secular culture while borrowing heavily from other aspects, how do clergy deal with tensions among them in their own congregations?
- 3 Many congregations—right or left—see themselves as counter-cultural. All congregations mean to be transformative, but how do they decide what or who needs transforming? At what point do they make a decision to be actively counter-cultural (“against culture”)?