Seeking God beyond the wall: Evangelicals, social justice, and the rise of Nones

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Abstract

Ongoing research into the rise of religious Nones, people with no particular religious affiliation, demonstrates a rapid growth in this segment of American society (Hout 2017, 53; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017, 64; Twenge et al. 2016, 64-65). According to the Pew Research Center, one-fifth of the U.S. public, and a third of all adults under the age of 30, were religiously unaffiliated in 2012 (Pew Research Center 2012). Studies by Pew showed that in the five years preceding 2012 unaffiliated populations grew by 5% across the United States from 15% to just under 20% of all American adults (Pew Research Center 2012; Henao, Asiedu and Crary 2021). Of this, the largest group were people who held no particular religious affiliation, also called religious Nones, with nearly 33 million people falling into this category (Pew Research Center 2012; Windmueller 2015). For this study, the Nones refer to the increasing number of people who either associate themselves with being "spiritual but not religious," agnostic, or having no particular choice when it comes to religion (Woodhead 2017, 247; Vernon 1968, 220-223; Drescher 2016, 53-88).

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Chapter I.

The Present Investigation

The primary purpose of this study is to examine whether there is a correlation between people's interpretation and commitment to social justice causes and their decision to disassociate with organized religion, particularly Christianity. Previous studies have determined that religious congregations have the potential to promote norms for social justice and group-based beliefs and offer opportunities for social justice action (Todd and Rufa, 2013, 317). This study builds on the findings made by Todd and Rufa. I will examine how local beliefs coupled with the pastoral role of local pastors is sometimes at odds with denominational guidance (nationally) and how these local beliefs conflict with a larger social justice focus, leading to alienation among some members of the congregation, notably those inclined towards social justice causes (Todd and Rufa 2013, 325-326). This study will explore and seek to expand upon the findings from the Todd and Rufa study. Specifically, I will explore Todd and Rufa's conclusions that people with a social justice bent often find barriers within the congregation because of a desire to maintain the status quo. This friction leads to deep frustration among some church members. Finally, this study will explore Todd and Rufa's conclusion that a commitment to social justice ideals and initiatives often leads to participants feeling isolated, alone, and like an outsider within their church communities which causes them to question whether they fit in their current religious congregation, and leading others to seek homes or communities beyond the walls of their churches (Todd and Rufa 2013,

325). Along this journey, I will challenge the idea that a concern for suffering animates organized religion and compels its followers to act for social justice in the secular world (Powell 2012, 200-202). Finally, this study will use the concepts and findings from Todd and Rufa's study to investigate if social justice played a role in Nones seeking God outside the Church's walls.

I first sought to identify a mismatch between how Christian churches, holistically and individually, view social justice ideas and how Nones view those ideas within their value systems (Schwadel, Hardy, et al. 2021, 875-877). To properly situate this identification, one has to understand the theological and historical foundations that lead churches to believe and act as they do concerning social justice causes, a concept rooted in the understanding that churches can influence their congregants (Pargament 2008, 495; Cadge, Olson and Wildeman 2008, 190-203) and that congregations by default hold particular theologies which help create norms for how individuals, within those churches, engage with social justice (Pargament and Maton 2000, 495-522). At the same time, it is essential to remember that churches are neither stagnant nor homogeneous (Barna Research Group 2005). There are hundreds, or even thousands, of different points of view on any given social justice subject within the broad universe of "Christianity," so this study focuses largely on easily identifiable groups and denominations like the Baptists, Presbyterians, Non-denominational Evangelicals, and Catholics to get an overall sense of the "Church" perspective. Similarly, there are millions of different perspectives among Nones, some of whom are militantly anti-Church, others who still drift in and out of a relationship with Christianity, and others who are non-practicing skeptical Christians (Barna Research Group 2015). As such, this study addresses broad and more universal

themes, leaving the important work of nuanced and specific identification of differences to future studies.

There are several limitations that are important to keep in mind about this study and are explained in more detailed at the end of the study. First, this study was conducted among participants who self-identify as being non-religious or even anti-religious. Nones did not emerge in a vacuum (Drescher 2016, 53-88), nor did they emerge solely out of a Christian tradition (Jeung, Esaki and Liu 2015, 895-896) and not all views may be reflected among the participants. Secondly, the parameters of social justice in this study are limited to items that may be considered left-leaning on the political spectrum and it is critical to note that these are not the only social justice issues that may or may not affect Nones. Finally, there are numerous church denominations and often a variety of theological perspectives within those denominations making for a plurality of views all of which cannot be captures by a study like this one.

Literature Review

Prior to exploring the impact of social justice and the impact churches have on their members decision to choose no religious preference, it is essential to note that there are numerous theories about why religious participation is declining in the United States, so while the overlap between social justice consciousness and Noneness is not novel, there are significant bodies of work that suggest that other possibilities may explain this shift away from religion: secularization theory (Dhima and Golder 2021, 50; Casanova 2006, 23-42); generational religious decline (Pew Research Center 2013; Brauer 2018, 654-655; Whiteley 2010, 196; C. Smith 2005, 259-264); and globalization (Haynes and

Ben-Porat 2010, 126). To situate the study appropriately, I begin with an examination of these theories and examine why, alone, and collectively, they do not paint a complete picture.

The decline in religious participation has often been discussed within the context of secularization theory. Secularization theory proposes that as society advances scientifically, politically, and culturally, the need, and hence the demand, for religion decreases (Dhima and Golder 2021, 50), with each generation becoming less religious than the last. The secularization paradigm attempts to explain one of the most powerful shifts in the evolution of human thought as religion is gradually displaced from the center of human existence (Bruce 2011, 24-56). According to secularization theory, this modernization process has occurred previously in Europe (Casanova 2006, 23-42), and we are now witnessing the same inevitable move towards secularization that modernization brings in America. However, starting in the late 1980s, secularization theory was overwhelmingly discarded (Stark 1999, 269-270) and rejected by serious scholars when disconfirming information emerged to challenge this particular theory (Greeley 1989, 116). The theory was described as a hodgepodge and a collection of loosely employed ideas (Hadden 1987, 598). Further, the relatively high participation in religious activities in America, and their impact on the socio-political landscape (Haynes 2013, 175), was instrumental in casting doubt on the theory of secularization (Dawson 1998, 131-132).

Another theory that accounts for the rise of religious Nones is that religious changes occur organically from generation to generation as the level of religious participation dwindles with each progressive generation (Pew Research Center 2013). In

this theory, future generations are raised by parents who are already less religious than their own parents (Brauer 2018). Parents that identify as religious and participate more heavily in organized religion are likely to be more successful in transmitting their religious beliefs to their children (Whiteley 2010, 193-203). Essentially, the role of parents in their own religious systems, the importance placed on religion (Smith 2005) by the parents, and the social structure of friends and companions around children also play a key role in influencing how religious an adult a child might grow into (Cheadle and Schwadel 2012, 1209). In a sense, the concept of generational religious decline is a branch of secularization theory that can function without having to take on all the elements of secularization theory that made the former untenable. The concept of generational replacement is directly tied to this idea (Brauer 2018; Whiteley 2010). According to the Pew Research Center, as younger millennials, who were previously ineligible to participate in the research due to their age, replace older generations, specifically the World War II-era Greatest Generation, the number of Nones increases. This increase is because only one-in-ten members of the Silent Generation (9%) and one in twenty (5%) of the Greatest Generation represent themselves are religious Nones. On the other hand, one-third of millennials (34%) represent themselves as Nones (Pew Research Center 2012).

However, even in this generational decline theory, the influence of contemporary society, with the heightened influence of globalization and modernization in education, society, economics, and politics, plays an important role (Hout and Fischer 2014, 437-444). As people are exposed to elements outside of the enclosing nest created by their religious parents, they can see the world through a different social, scientific, and

political lens which lends itself, potentially, to moving away from deeply held religious beliefs passed down generationally (Whiteley 2010). In the 2012 Pew Research Study, for example, 15% of Baby Boomers and 21% of Generation X also described themselves as religious Nones. This was a statistically significant increase in those same demographics, since in 2007, Pew found that just 12% of Baby Boomers and 18% of Generation Xers represented themselves as Nones (Pew Research Center 2012). These changes were intergenerational over a period of 5 years which appears to challenge the idea of generational decline.

While not contrary to either secularization theory or religious decline due to generational apathy, the influence of outside factors, like the lower social barriers between people of different faith groups (Brauer 2018) and the influence of social justice awareness that is made possible by modernization, poses serious challenges to the idea that simple lower engagement generation to generation is more than one of several possible explanations for the rising population of Nones in the United States.

Nones Did Not Emerge in a Vacuum

From a situatedness perspective, this study must note that religious Nones do not see themselves as having emerged in a vacuum (Drescher 2016). Instead, religious Nones see themselves as having taken a journey (Drescher 2016) towards creating their own identity and spiritual story. Drescher describes the narrative of the religious Nones as one that is punctuated with terms like "discovery," "freedom," "enlightenment," "self-realization," "insight," "knowledge," and "awareness" (Drescher 2016). These terms are similar to the language study participants used to describe their own shift toward being a religious none, agnostic, or even an atheist. These ideas also agree with some of the

factors that are identified as contributing to the growth of the religious None category presented in "Becoming a Religious None," which includes social acceptance of the irreligious, negative reactions to religious fundamentalism, intellectual disagreement with religious beliefs and practices, and a rejection of the fusion between religion and politics (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017, 65).

Past research has established that Nones tend to be younger than those who affiliate with a religion, called affiliated people in this study (Strawn 2012). Research from Pew confirms that this trend has been consistent (Pew Research Center 2012). Prior studies have also shown that Nones tend to be somewhat more liberal in their political beliefs than affiliated people (Strawn 2012). Other studies have found a direct correlation between the sanctification of social justice[1], which positively predicts interest in social justice, whereas religious conservatism negatively predicts interest in social justice (Todd, McConnell and Suffrin 2014, 112). Studies have demonstrated that evangelical, conservative religious beliefs tend to emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ for salvation, place a strong value on individualism and a pull yourself up by your bootstrap's mentality, and placing a belief that social structures are not important in shaping racial inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000, 94-104).

Emerson and Smith (2000) found that religious belief might shape understanding of the systemic nature of racial inequality. Given that clergy, through the positions they take and the sermons that they preach, directly influence their congregant's sense of

[1] "Sanctification of social justice" references a common observation in literature reviews that working for social justice is often motivated by a connection to a larger moral, spiritual, or religious framework (Todd, Houston and Odahl-Ruan 2014)

obligation on pressing social issues (Brown 2008, 227), understanding the potential relationship between a church's stance on social issues, ranging from the environment to racial justice and from immigration to homosexuality, and Nones desire to leave the Church becomes important. David Hodge writes, "For individuals for whom spirituality is central to their personal ontology, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate social justice from spirituality. Indeed, social justice cannot be understood apart from spirituality" (Hodge, 2012, 32-50).

Social Justice

While the concept of social justice predates Christianity by several hundred years, dating back to the time of Socrates and Plato, the term "social justice" has its roots in Christianity, having been coined by Jesuit priest Luigi Tparelli in 1840 (Burke 2010, 92). Social justice is a learned response that is built on an understanding of inherent human dignity and involves working together to establish a just society (Brady 2010, 8-11). Community psychology describes social justice as providing equal access to resources through just social structures (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010). A desire to be involved in social justice stems from a need to advocate for justice in society and a desire to help others develop advocacy skills (Brady 2010). For some, the drive for a socially just society springs from an understanding of the spiritual interconnectedness between individuals and an understanding that all people are part of a collectively beautiful creation (Talen 2018, 62-69). This individual desire to express and internalize a cultural demand to care for others, combined with the internal desire to demonstrate acts and attitudes consistent with benefiting others, has been studied as a means by which adults derive meaning and fulfillment in their lives (Brady and Hapenny 2010, 162).

There is a common understanding that the concept and the desire to be involved in social justice causes do not develop in a vacuum (Todd and Rufa 2013). Studies have shown that awareness of social inequality and the move from unawareness to sustained social justice action is a multifaceted developmental process that happens over time (Watts, Williams and Jagers, 2003, 185-194). Diane Goodman theorizes that there are three distinct developmental sequences of moral reasoning that reflect the distinctions in how people make moral judgments (Goodman 2011, 125-142). Goodman believes that spiritual beliefs fall within one of these three developmental sequences or may have their own framework (Goodman 2011). Researchers and scholars agree that spirituality, whether stemming from a religious basis or not, has a direct and positive correlation to people's concern for others (Dillon, Wink and Fay 2003, 429). Most American adults (56%), in a Pew Research Survey taken in 2017, believe that it is unnecessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values (Smith 2017). There are, however, social justice movements, such as the efforts to end slavery and the civil rights movement in the United States, which have often demonstrated the importance of spirituality within the struggles for social equality (Powell 2012). The influence of religion, particularly organized religion, is readily and clearly apparent in the values of individuals who self-identify as being associated with a religious sect (Rokeach 1969, 24-39).

Religion and Evangelical Christianity in particular, also has a complicated relationship with social justice and participation in social justice engagement. One study showed that religious attendance in worship services predicted a higher level of participation in social justice activities through the congregation within that setting (Todd and Houston, 2013, 274-275). However, the same study found that average attendance

was associated with lower levels of social justice engagement outside of those specific settings (Todd and Houston 2013). Conservative congregations are conducive to bonding internally; they limit the ability of members to form bridges of social capital that can connect the Church members to those outside the Church (Schwadel 2005).

For some within American Evangelical Christianity, the emergence of social justice movements has been seen as a threat to both Christian orthodoxy and American nationalism. Among some groups of American Christians and Evangelicals, in particular, the perception of social justice movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, ranges from a Marxist attempt to overthrow American capitalism (Allen 2020, 5-6) to a subversive gospel that is attempting to replace the true message of Jesus Christ (Baucham Jr. 2021, 207-209). At its core, Evangelical opposition to social justice revolves around two basic concepts. First, that social justice supporters and promoters seek to change the cultural world order through revolution and replace American capitalist values with Marxist ideologies. To this end, Allen writes in his book, "Karl Marx, of course, was a committed revolutionary. His great aim was to tear down the oppressive capitalist system and build his communist utopia. Social justice ideology takes it a step further – make that several steps! It seeks the overthrow of systemic white supremacy, the patriarchy, and Judeo-Christian morality. This revolutionary zeal drives one side of our ongoing culture war" (Allen 2020, 70).

The "Culture War"

The idea of a culture war raging in America's churches has been significantly debated among academic circles both in terms of the magnitude of the divide between Americans on religious and cultural grounds (Davis and Robinson 1996, 780-782; Smith

2010; Hartman 2016, 1-7) and the context of these wars with reference to political behaviors (Layman and Green 2006). This alleged culture war is described as a war that has "often raged most virulently around issues of family life including abortion, birth control, sex education, premarital sex, pornography, and—perhaps most contemporarily debated—homosexuality and related policy concerns about gay rights and gay marriage" (Thomas and Olson 2012) (Smith 2010). What is apparent in the reading of literature by popular Evangelical authors and scholars is that many in the evangelical/Christian world consider themselves under attack, marginalized, and at war with those seeking social justice reform (Hartman 2016, 70-101). Voddie Baucham Jr., an African American evangelical pastor, characterizes social justice as being at war with the Evangelical Church. He issued a dire warning to pastors and congregations that support social justice, that they will risk fracturing the Church itself and will inevitably damage the Churches (Baucham Jr. 2021, 151-176). His use of language is telling in how Evangelicals view social justice movements and, more importantly for this study, how they view people who embrace or support those movements, even those within their own churches. Baucham writes, towards the end of his book, "we are at war … As we wage this war, the apostle's [Paul] words will be our guide, and the kingdom of God, His rule and reign in our lives and our world will be our guide" (Baucham Jr. 2021, 206-207). Baucham's description of a culture war echoed Pat Buchanan's 1992 speech at the Republican National Convention when he declared that Christians were fighting an intense culture war for the "soul of America" (Hartman 2016, 1-7).

There is significant literature suggesting that Christians, in general, and Evangelicals, in particular, have a view of social justice that is not only shaped by their

perceptions of social justice being the antithesis of Christianity but also within the framework of an in-group/out-group ideology that is inherently hostile to out-groups (Marsh 2021, 538). American Christians, studies have found, tend to be overly concerned with the idea that white people are being asked to check their privilege by social justice activists and that tomorrow, Christians will also be asked to do the unending work of antiracism (Baucham Jr. 2021, 129), thereby turning their culture war into a war of race and religion in addition to culture. These groups are often politically and socially motivated to defend the status quo with its socio-economic, racial-ethnic, and religious hierarchies (Marsh 2021). The status quo for this group is a set of normative American behaviors that conform to strict gender roles within the confines of a traditional (one man wed to one woman) marriage, where men work outside the home and women raise children (Hartman 2016, 134-136). In an attack on Black Lives Matter, Baucham accuses the organization of being founded on bearing false witness, openly pagan, being a Marxist-Leninist organization, being openly feminist, being pro-LGBTQ+, being "anti-male," and being "anti-family" (Baucham Jr. 2021, 218-221).

All of these positions resonate with Evangelicals who believe that they are engaged in a culture war, just like they were once engaged in a cold war against an alien system of culture and ideology (Hartman 2016, 69). During and after the cold war, even those who were traditionally locked out of normative America by virtue of being non-white, female, homosexual, or not being Christian felt compelled to conform to the status quo (Hartman 2016, 5-6). However, that compliance and conformity fractured as a culture war broke out between those who saw America as perfect and those who saw it as far from perfect (Hartman 2016, 7). The culture wars came to a head with the election of

America's first black president and the birth of the cons (Walker 2011, 126). A coalition of Christians, most notably Evangelicals, considering themselves under attack from ongoing demographic changes, the election of America's first black president, globalization, growing LGBTQ+ rights, and the loss of "White Christian America" has led to a long-standing symbiotic relationship between Evangelicals and the Republican Party (Marsh 2021). Republicans have traditionally opposed globalism, challenges to traditional hierarchies, LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, immigration, and civil rights for minorities, and have promoted a powerful message of making America great again that resonates with many Christians, especially Evangelicals (Margolis 2020, 91).

Under the general umbrella of the culture war, critical race theory (CRT) has become a hot-button issue (Heffernan 2021, A.11) that has further polarized the nation over civil rights, American history, and education, three issues at the heart of the culture wars (Hartman 2016). CRT is the study of persistent racial inequality despite the formal legal changes born in the civil rights movement (Christian, Seamster and Ray 2019, 1731-1740; Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 3-18) that seeks to provide a more accurate definition of race relations in the United States (Christian, Seamster and Ray 2019; Bell 1980, 518-533) and challenges liberalism by arguing that whites are the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings 1998, 7-21). CRT grew out of and became a separate entity from an earlier movement that focused on political and doctrinal analysis, known as critical legal studies (Gordon 1990, 413-425), by challenging the idea that civil rights are obtained by a long and steady march towards social transformation (Crenshaw 1988, 1331-1334).

For some Christian denominations, CRT is viewed as an unsettling, unwelcome, Marxist horse ridden by a jockey of identity politics that demonizes anyone who is opposed to its communist-centric agenda (Trueman 2021, 1-10). The ideas of critical race theory, including its claims of a different path toward freedom and liberation for all Americans, are a mirage, promoting views that are antithetical to Christians across the world (O'Connor 2022, 9). For the most part, Christian leaders in the majority of denominations have opposed critical race theory as being unbiblical, anti-traditional, and heretical, having no place in the Churches' or religious school teachings (Schroeder 2020; Bible Presbyterian Church General Synod 2021; Donohue, 2021; Baucham Jr. 2021).

When the beliefs of those with social issue awareness clashes (Marsh 2021) with the beliefs of their fellow congregants who believe they are under attack from social justice warriors and causes (Hartman 2016), one of the groups is inevitably going to feel isolated. Research shows that it is most often those who have and those who have a strong social justice inclination that are in the minority and experience a sense of isolation (Todd and Rufa 2013). The literature shows that while there are strong cases to be made for secularization theory (Dhima and Golder 2021; Casanova 2006); generational religious decline (The Age Gap in Religion Around the World 2013; Brauer 2018; Whiteley 2010; Smith 2005; Wittberg 2021, 476); and globalization (Hartman 2019; Haynes and Ben-Porat 2010, 126-130), there may also be a case for how culture wars, perceptions of being excluded or targeted by social justice towards congregants (Baucham Jr. 2021; Marsh 2021), and the isolation of those within churches who feel the urge to support social justices(Todd and Rufa 2013), often by the congregations

themselves, plays a role in increasing the number of Americans claiming no religious preference (Pew Research Center 2012; Henao, Asiedu and Crary 2021).

The Issues

Regardless of their religious orientation, everyone has a concern with social justice at some level (Hatfield, Salmon and Rapson 2011, 102). However, social situatedness plays an essential role in how people view social justice and what constitutes social justice. Ideas and concepts like capitalism, fairness, and equity are all influenced by social status and, in turn, influence people's view of social justice issues (Hatfield, Salmon and Rapson 2011, 116). Religious texts and their call to action are often interpreted within the context of an individual, or church, situatedness, with some religious and spiritually oriented people arguing for the brotherhood of man and universal social justice, while others believe that as believers, they are called by God and are entitled to the earth's bounty (Hatfield, Salmon and Rapson 2011,102).

Given the vast number of causes that could fall under the umbrella of social justice, this study focused on four, controversial, and often interconnected, issues where each side can have clear and articulate positions on the issues. The four social justice issues used in this study are: women's rights, particularly as they relate to the issue of reproductive rights; civil rights and equity, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement and critical race theory; gay rights; and environmentalism or environmental justice. For each issue, I examined various churches' stated theology, the practice and practical application of that theology, the way in which Nones view both the theology and its application, and the effect those had on the Nones.

Method

This study sought to understand individual and group-based reasoning for Nones choosing to disaffiliate with religion. To do so required speaking with individuals who had made a choice to become Nones at some point in their life. First, I sought out groups of people who had disaffiliated with religion and considered themselves to be religious Nones in the local community and online. Several Facebook groups were formed by people who were formerly religious and now consider themselves religious Nones, agnostics, and atheists. It should be noted that the nature of these groups makes this sampled biased in that they actively self-selected into non-religious groups on social media. It should also be noted that there are a variety of groups on Facebook that are differentiated by their beliefs, and I recruited participants among these groups with an active social media presence. The groups I used to source participants include groups like "Recovering Evangelicals," "Ex-Religious Discussion Group," "Spiritual but not Religious," "Recovery from Fundamentalist Religion" and "Recovering from Religion." Recruiting from these groups and from the dozen local people who volunteered for the interviews involved making the announcement, supplying a registration form, and scheduling participants into group sessions.

Over the course of several weeks, I met with seventy-five individuals who self-identified as having left organized religion. Approximately sixty-five were formerly associated with, and some are still loosely associated with, Protestant Christian churches. Around seven were formerly associated with, or still loosely associated with Catholicism, one was formerly Jewish, and two were raised atheists but drifted in and out of Evangelical Christian beliefs until they decided that they wanted no part of the Church.

Two-thirds of the participants were women, and the ages ranged from the early twenties to the late sixties. Most of the study consisted of ethnically white participants, with a few black participants and one Korean. From a demographic standpoint, the participants were from all over the United States, from Florida to upstate New York, with a significant portion in the mid-west. Socioeconomics in the group varied, but one consistently high identifier is that other than a small handful of participants, most of the participants had college degrees, and a number had advanced degrees.

The Interviews

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, and the questions were posed in a way that promoted dialogue. Participants were invited to take part in a group discussion about their experiences with the Church, social justice awareness and engagement, and their reasons for leaving the Church. The questions focused on key social justice initiatives and inclusivity and were designed to elicit a three-pronged response from the individuals.

The first was identifying how their former, and sometimes current, Church would deal with a specific segment of society or how the Church would respond if confronted with a particular set of options pertaining to social justice. An example of this was asking if the Church would prefer to use surplus funds to pay for the technical education of Latina or black single moms or if the Church would spend the funds constructing a new building on its property.

The second was to identify how the participants felt about their Church's response to the question. For instance, in the example above, if the Church would have built a new

structure, how did that choice make the participant feel, and what were their feelings on the overall choices of the Church leadership?

The third was to explore how the participants would have reacted in the same situation if they had been in charge of their Churches. This final prong allowed the researcher to dig into whether conflicting levels of social awareness and responses to social need factored into the participant's decision to leave the Church.

Finally, during the interview, the participants were offered the opportunity to share their personal stories of interactions with the Church, how they felt about the state of the Church today, and their reasoning for leaving the Church. These open segments were often the most informative as participants revealed biases, their awareness of social issues, and genuine emotion regarding their decision to leave organized religion.

The information sessions were recorded on video and audio and then transcribed. The text was used to analyze patterns and responses and to identify areas in which the participants displayed particular passion or deviated strongly from their Church's point of view.

Chapter II.

Results

Women's Rights (Abortion)

As this study was being conducted, Americans were alternatively shocked, angered, delighted, and uplifted (Winger 2022) by the Supreme Court's decision to overturn fifty years of precedent and roll back the federal protections for women seeking an abortion in *Dobbs* (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 2022). As such, this quickly became a hot topic for my convenience study group, 90% of whom discussed abortion and women's rights as part of their disconnect with their Churches.

All Churches have an element in common when it comes to the right to an abortion, starting their belief system from a place of believing all life is sacred (Church 1988; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2006; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2022; Evangelicals 2010; Dearborn Covenant Church 2004). From here, they diverge.

In 1984, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) met in Kansas City, Missouri and passed a resolution affirming the SBC's opposition to abortion, characterizing it as a national sin and stating its commitment to seeking a constitutional amendment or appropriate legislation that would make abortion illegal in the United States, except in cases where the mother's life was at risk. There was exemption for cases of rape and incest (SBC 1984). In 2021, the SBC was calling for a complete ban on abortion, with no exemptions (Wingfield 2021). In its own resolution passed in 1988 by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches, that body chose to take a strikingly different tone in that it advocated for the sanctity of life as a gracious gift from God but made no condemnation or proclamations about abortion itself (Church 1988). In 2019, at its annual

meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, the SBC passed a resolution calling for the Supreme Court of the United States to overturn Roe v. Wade so that the decision on abortion legality could be decided on a state-by-state basis (Carter 2019).

The Presbyterian Church U.S.A.'s 217th General Assembly met in 2006 and issued the Church's official position on abortion, which generally accepts abortion and women's rights. The declaration, which is published on the Presbyterian (U.S.A.) mission web page, on what the Church believes, states that humans are empowered by God to make prayerfully significant moral choices, including having an abortion. The declaration alludes to the fact that choosing to have an abortion should not be made in a moral vacuum and should be based on spiritual, faith, and Christian ethics (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2006).

The Methodist Church takes a similar stance to Presbyterian Church U.S.A., stating the Church cannot support abortion because the Church believes in the sanctity of unborn life but that they also value the life of the mother and, as such, understand that there may be a need for an abortion at any point in the pregnancy. Their site points out a difference between life-based ethics, which places value on human life, and choice-based ethics, which places value on every sovereign person's right to choose. Finally, the Methodist Church offers to counsel any woman who has had to undergo the trauma of an abortion (Ask The U.M.C, n.d.). After the Supreme Court ruling in Dobson v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the Methodist Church was more vocal about the end of Roe than other denominations, with the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (“GCSRW”) lamenting that the ruling created gender, racial, and economic inequality, and that the GCSRW grieved this injustice (GCSRW 2022).

The Catholic Church, on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website, asserts a position that abortion ends the life of a child and offends God (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2022). The site further states that each life is entrusted to the mother or father from the moment of conception and quotes the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 51, which states that "life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002).

The National Association of Evangelicals, in a 2010 resolution, affirmed that it had pledged to protect the sanctity of life and safeguard its nature (Evangelicals 2010). The Evangelical Covenant Church (E.C.C.), which counts numerous large mega-Churches among its ranks, passed a resolution in 2004 that deplores abortion as an alternative to abstinence or within the covenant of marriage (Dearborn Covenant Church 2004). The resolution used the Book of Ephesians (Ephesians 5:3) to warn that no hint of immorality should be found amongst believers (Dearborn Covenant Church 2004).

While Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, and Catholic Churches were the most strident against the idea of abortion, the doctrine of different Christian Churches varied greatly, as did the opinions of everyday Christians who attend those Churches (Barna Group 2010). A February 2010 nationwide tracking survey conducted by Barna Research Group found that 78% of Evangelical Christians believed that the practice of abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. They found that non-Evangelical born-again Christians favor making abortion illegal (55% illegal versus 39% legal), as did active Churchgoers (60% versus 33%) and non-mainline Protestants (58% versus 34%) (Barna Group 2010). Those faith segments that prefer keeping abortion legal were self-identified

Christians who are not born-again (54% legal versus 31% illegal), Catholics (53% versus 36%), mainline Protestants (53% versus 40%), and faiths other than Christianity (54% versus 42%) (Barna Group 2010). It should be noted that the number of Evangelicals who opposed abortion in all cases was down 16% from a similar poll conducted by Barna Group in 2001, which found that 94% of Evangelicals opposed abortion under all circumstances (Barna Research Group 2001).

Roe v. Wade gave women the unencumbered right to abortion in the United States (Dowland 2009). Beginning with the moral majority in (Harding 2009), several denominations of Christians, most notably Evangelicals, banded together with an expressed desire to overturn *Roe* and became one of the uniting factors between the Church and conservative politicians, many of whom are deeply committed religious adherents (Harding 2009). As a result, women, especially religious women, have traditionally faced stigmatization for their decision to get an abortion (Cockrill and Nack 2013). One study found that there was a direct correlation between religious affiliation and the internalization of abortion stigma in women who had had an abortion, resulting from women's deeply held belief that they would be harshly judged by their friends, family members, and religious communities if it became common knowledge that they had had an abortion (Frohwirth, Coleman and Moore 2018).

The position that many Christian groups' take in support for stricter abortion laws is out of sync with mainstream American views on the subject. Barna explored this difference in a 2016 study where they found that 64% of all Americans, absent any religious qualifiers, believe that abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances

(Barna 2016). Among the groups and individuals I interviewed, there was nearly unanimous agreement that abortions should be legal in one form or another.

Abortion and women's rights were a contentious and reoccurring theme amongst the people that participated in this study and emerged as one of two significant divides, the other being gay rights, that caused Nones to walk away from their churches. When it came to social justice issues, women's reproductive rights were the number one mentioned issue, with 75% indicating that it was or is a major concern they have with the Church. Given the timing of this study, these results may have been unduly influenced by the political landscape; however, on the issue of abortion, roughly 98% of the participants brought it up and expressed strong pro-choice views on the subject. The other 2% of participants were non-committal on abortion because of personal moral beliefs outside of Church teachings or chose not to discuss their views on the subject. Virtually all the participants, from various Christian denominations, agreed that to be a Christian, one had to be pro-life.

Said P1 from Minnesota, "I've been pro-choice for a long time. You don't say that out loud. In an Evangelical Church, you don't say that out loud." Through a show of hands vote, I determined that this was the universally accepted position of these Nones who genuinely believed that you could not be part of the Church and be pro-choice. Another participant added, to many nods, "abortion, if you get one, you are automatically excommunicated." Abortion was seen as a major woman's rights issue, deeply tied to social justice, and this group matched a Gallup poll's findings that only about 5% of religious Nones say that abortion should be illegal (Newport 2022). One participant from Colorado took it a little further stating, “You cannot be pro-choice. Even if you don’t call

yourself pro-choice but talk about the intricacies and the complexities surrounding sexual assault and poverty (in the context of abortion); you cannot have those conversations or conversations about women being empowered without being judged or ostracized."

Abortion was one area where the group agreed, Churches have put aside their differences in universal condemnation of the practice. P8, a Catholic from South Carolina, who spent time as an Evangelical and a member of the Orthodox Church said, "Abortion tends to be where Evangelicals and Catholics made friends basically. You know that Evangelicals are still pretty anti-Catholic because they believe we are not saved but they put that all aside for abortion." She added (later in the discussion), "A single voting issue that they will come at you with (Catholics) is abortion. It is a bludgeon that they (the congregants) bully other people with calling them not Catholic if they vote for democrats."

Aside from the obvious political value in opposing abortion, which about 50% of participants referred to, an interesting piece of nuance emerged during the discussion about abortion. Among the Nones, in the largest group, through affirmation and agreement, the majority agreed when P17, from Wisconsin, who described herself as a product of several Protestant traditions said that she was pro-choice but that she would never have an abortion. The issue that most of the Nones I spoke with had with the Churches stance on abortion was that it ignored the realities of the reasons why women have abortions and disempowering of women at its core.

While many Christians see abortion as a symptom of an unsaved society (Mason 2018, 119) that needs saving (Emerson and Smith 2000), for the Nones, the Evangelical and Catholic stances on abortion were more aligned with what they saw in their Churches

every day and, from their perspective, the issue was not one of a sinful society. For the Nones, the abortion issue highlighted that the Church was using mortality and theology as a weapon to control its congregants by using language that indicated dire consequences for getting an abortion (Evangelicals 2010; Church 1988; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2022). One participant stated (about abortion), "It's completely ridiculous and has nothing to do with children, absolutely nothing to do with children. It has to do with controlling women."

Civil Rights and Equity

Three-quarters of Americans (73%) believe that Christian Churches play an important role in racial reconciliation (Barna Research Group 2017). While many practicing Christians believe that the Church has a role to play in racial reconciliation, only 42% of white Christians believe that the effects of slavery can still be felt today, and 34% believe that the country is beyond the fallout of slavery (Barna Research Group 2019). In addition, only four in ten practicing white Christians believe that America has a race problem (Barna Research Group 2019). Based on the research done by the Barna Group, the teaching of social justice plays a critical role in how congregants view the Churches' role and complicity with the historic mistreatment of African Americans (Barna Research Group 2019).

In 1995, at its annual meeting, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution on racial reconciliation and racism generally which condemned historical racism, apologized to African Americans for the SBC's previous support of individual and systemic racism, and committed the SBC to work to eradicate racism from all walks of Southern Baptist life and ministry (Southern Baptist Convention 1995). The resolution

concluded with a call to the Great Commission to make disciples of all men (Southern Baptist Convention 1995). In 2020, while recognizing the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the Council of Seminary Presidents of the SBC dismissed Critical Race Theory as an unbiblical ideology that was incompatible with the Baptist Faith and Message and that such advocacy had no place within SBC seminaries (Schroeder 2020). CRT is an intellectual tradition that recognizes racism as an enduring and pervasive part of life in the United States and works towards eliminating racial oppression (Rogers and Mosley 2006).

On June 25, 2022, the Presbyterian Church's (U.S.A.) Committee on Race and Gender Justice approved three resolutions. These included resolutions recognizing disparities experienced by black women and girls, a resolution framing racism as a public health crisis, and a resolution on violence and hatred against Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (Tangeman, Committee approves resolution on racism as a public health crisis 2022). At that same conference, the Race and Gender Committee passed a resolution condemning slavery and its legacy as a sin and offering an apology to African Americans (Tangeman 2022). In sharp contrast, the Bible Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Synod passed resolution 84:03 on Critical Race Theory on September 6, 2021, which denounced CRT as being apart from and opposed to scripture, rooted in a godless ideology of Marxism, and calling on Christians to reject the empty deceit of CRT (Bible Presbyterian Church General Synod 2021).

The Methodist Church has a charter for racial justice policies in an interdependent global community that denounces racism and specifically calls out the United States for having outlawed racist practices in theory, while in practice, little has changed. The

charter challenges the widespread belief that Americans live in a "post-racial" world. The charter ends by reaffirming the pronouncement of its own General Conference in 1967, which reaffirmed that the Methodist Church aims for nothing less than an inclusive Church in an inclusive society (United Methodist Church 2016). Methodists have traditionally expressed a concern for racial justice which began with the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who produced a pamphlet in 1773 titled "Thoughts Upon Slavery," in which he decried the evils of slavery and called on slave owners to free their slaves (Wesley 2002).

Like the Methodists, Catholics have a history of confronting certain forms of racism. In 1938, Pope Pius XI issued a set of instructions on the dangers of racism which is widely cited (Connelly 2007). The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a statement supporting an ad hoc Committee Against Racism, called racism America's original sin that remained a blot on the lives of everyday Americans and caused acts and attitudes of hatred. The statement condemned white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and racism as demonic ideologies (Public Affairs Office of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2017). On the issue of CRT, an article in the Catholic World Report offered a perspective that CRT was a misguided effort to counter racism and bias that was written to restructure perspectives away from traditionally understood truths (Donohue 2021).

On May 29, 2020, in the wake of the extrajudicial killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, the National Association for Evangelicals released a statement addressing these incidents and calling for action in which it lamented the recurring trauma experienced by African Americans, condemned racism, called for justice for the victims, and exhorted Churches to combat attitudes and systems that

perpetuate racism (National Association of Evangelicals 2020). Evangelical leaders like Billy Graham have long denounced racism as a sin and claimed that unequal treatment is unacceptable in a Christian America (Stephens 2016). It should be noted that in the same speech that Billy Graham denounced the sin of racism, he offered a solution to the "race problem" that would come about by changing the hearts of men (Stephens 2016). Christianity Today magazine described critical race theory as something to be afraid of because of a worldview connected to Marxism (Lee 2021).

Christian Churches and denominations have all condemned racism and embraced the idea of racial equity. Interestingly, the response to racial movements like Black Lives Matter, particularly among Evangelicals, has been to deride the ideology as Marxist (Allen 2020), which echoes earlier American Christian fears of communism (Stephens 2016). Churches in all denominations have been cautious of CRT Many have equated the teaching of critical race theory to that of a subversive gospel that is attempting to replace the true message of Jesus Christ (Baucham Jr. 2021). Similarly, an air of fear that Christians will be asked to check their religion, or their privilege at the door, dominates much of the discourse around race and equity, with abiding fears that eventually, Christians will be marginalized and sidelined (Baucham Jr. 2021). The response within congregations has ranged from apathy towards racial injustice to an in-group/out-group mentality that is inherently hostile to "others" (Marsh 2021). This in-group/out-group mentality often leaves those with a strong desire to be engaged in social justice causes to feel lonely or like an outsider (Todd and Rufa, 2013). Some sought to educate their fellow congregants, while others transitioned to new religious homes. For most, community and support for their causes came from outside the Church beyond the local

congregations (Todd and Rufa 2013). In his book, "*Woke Church*," Pastor Eric Mason joins Bryan Loritts in criticizing the failure of minority Evangelical Church leaders to speak up on social justice issues for fear of becoming part of the out-group. He writes (quoting Loritts), "I'm tired of the silence of other minority leaders who, in their pursuit of climbing Mount Significance, are scared to speak the truth for fear of not being invited to some conference, missing out on a book deal, and not having their brand established or extended" (Mason 2018).

With the participants of this study, the same trends Todd and Rufa found emerged. Participants described an increasing sense of isolation as their views departed from what they perceived as the Church's views on race and equity. P22, a younger white woman from Virginia, told a story of being raised in an evangelical Church and questioning the Church's teachings and its commitment to humanity when one of her close friends was subjected to immense pressure for dating a black man.

P7 from the Midwest was blunter in his assessment of how the various Churches he participated in, which ranged from Presbyterian to Methodist to Evangelical congregations, viewed racial and economic integration within their walls. He said, "I think if you were to bring in poor homeless people that lived on the street, and you sat them down in the middle of a whole bunch of white middle-class people (in Church), there would be a lot of discomfort. If they were black, a woman or they were Hispanic, that would make it even worse because, you know, it's a very homogenous population that sits in most of these Churches. It's white and upper-middle-class people who don't want to be disturbed by that [social justice]."

In each session, we discussed the racial and ethnic makeup of the Churches the participants had attended. In all of the cases, the congregations were largely homogenous, with white people attending white Churches, black people attending black Churches, and the Korean American participant attending mostly Korean Churches. Even though many of the participants moved from Church to Church, 90% of them agreed that it was unlikely to find more than a token minority in their Churches. The remaining 10% came from significantly more urban, liberal areas of the country like Minneapolis, Minnesota and spoke of active efforts in their Churches, or former Churches, to integrate congregations. Among participants, 60%-70% mentioned "white saviorism" as a driving force in the Church's ideas on race, in that their Churches felt compelled to fulfill the Great Commission (Southern Baptist Convention 1995) and change the hearts of men (Mason 2018) by saving the souls of the "other" (Stephens 2016). Conversion, this group contended (with 100% unanimity), was the driving force behind racial justice initiatives in the Churches they attended because these Churches truly bought into the idea of the miracle motif (Emerson and Smith, 2000).

P13 from the Midwest said, "My view on this is that African Americans, Hispanics, and any people of color are welcome, so long as they can be objectified for the Church's purpose." P23 added that there was one black family in his family Church growing up, and they were extremely uncomfortable and felt out of place. P16 from Florida, an atheist who attended numerous Churches in numerous denominations, said, "It's rare to find one (a mixed congregation Church) that's really a mixed bag of people. (When you do) It's almost always black, Latino, or Korean Churches, but by and large, there are different Churches for different ethnicities. It's all pretty much separated,

segregated." P9 added that one of the reasons she left years ago was the fact that her Church was “very efficient, large, white, middle class, non-affirming, and non-inclusive.” As part of her story on why she left the Church P9 added, “When I walked out of the door it was because while I was singing (on the worship team) I was looking across the room at hundreds of people in our town which has a number of poor and people of color, but I could not see one person of color or one of those poor people.”

The group was split 65% to 35% on how speaking about racial issues would be received in their Churches. The Catholics and Presbyterians in the group were open about their Church's acceptance of minorities and conversations about racial justice. In contrast, those who had emerged from Southern Baptist and Evangelical Churches tended to agree that their Churches would view conversations about black equality as divisive (Mason 2018). In answering a question on whether a Black Lives Matter speaker would be invited to speak at their Church, the groups were more united, with roughly 80% agreeing that their Church would never allow a BLM speaker to present, while 10% stated that it would depend on the message and level of respect the speaker showed to the Church and venue. About 10% were completely convinced that their Church would let anyone speak. The split was about the same - 80-10-10 when the group was faced with the idea of a right-wing nationalist or someone who had participated in the Capital Insurrection of January 6, 2021 (Rapoport 2021), being invited to speak. At least two participants stated that though their Church wouldn't allow those individuals to speak at a public forum, there would be many invitations to dinner from the congregants.

P17 shared that the Church she grew up in was not active in social justice and that it was mentioned on rare occasions. She found this odd because, at the inception of the

civil rights movement, the black Church was deeply involved with social justice, but she added, "not so much anymore since the Church became more commercial, since it became more of a business." Her assessment of black Churches was that there are hundreds of black Churches, but the communities in which they sit are blighted and that the Churches should be taking a more active stand on social justice issues because justice is in the Bible "a bunch." She ended by saying that the Church tells people who are hurting to pray, but that is not enough for people who have come there looking for comfort and action, and in the absence of social justice action, the Church is not fulfilling part of its mission.

Interestingly, while there was minimal conversation about BLM being contrary to Christianity or a Marxist doctrine, there was a feeling amongst participants that engagement in the Black Lives Matter movement was discouraged in some Churches. P19 from Illinois described a time when she was told that she was brave for wearing a Black Lives Matter t-shirt to Church even though the Church publicly professed support for the movement. When it came to BLM itself, responses were varied, with roughly 65% of people saying that their Church passively opposed BLM and 35% stating that their Churches actively supported BLM, which was roughly aligned with Barna Research Group's findings that 73% of American's believe that the Church has an important role to play in racial reconciliation (Barna Research Group 2017).

Like many activists, these participants found themselves frustrated with the Church's unwillingness or inability to speak truth to power regarding black lives and causes (Braxton 2016). Racial issues have never been far from the surface in American Churches, lingering like unsettling, unwelcome, and somewhat passive guests in the pews

(Trueman 2021). Despite significant public awareness of Black Lives Matter, only two in five (38%) practicing white Christians believe that the United States has a race problem, while 78% of black Christians believe that the United States has a race problem (Barna Research Group 2020). Many Black Lives Matter leaders associate themselves as religious Nones, and the movement itself has distanced itself from mainstream religious leaders and Church-based movements (House 2017). The participants also found that despite what may have been spoken from the pulpit, congregants tended to have their own views on race, and often these views were to take an individualized approach to matters of racial inequity (Barna Research Group 2020).

Similar to findings that the local community's culture can significantly impact how congregations view LGBTQ issues (Cage and Olson 2008; Becker 1999; Ellingson et al. 2001), local culture had a huge impact on how congregations treated race. With some open hostility towards racial justice (Allen 2020) (Stephens 2016) and a predominate fear of being sidelined or marginalized lingering beneath the surface (Baucham Jr. 2021), local Church congregations have tended to adopt an in-group/out-group mentality where people of a different race, and those who support them, are in the "other" category (Marsh 2021). This, in turn, has caused isolation and loneliness amongst members of congregations that are inclined towards racial justice and equity (Todd and Rufa 2013). When the leaders of local Churches failed to speak out for fear of financial loss (Mason 2018), the incompatibility became clear to these Nones. For many, like the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement (House 2017), the answer lay outside the walls of the Church and away from their local congregations (Todd and Rufa 2013).

LGBTQ Rights

In 2001, Barna Research Group conducted a telephone survey of 1,003 adults on questions of abortion and gay rights. That study found that among self-professed Born-Again Christians, only 34% agreed that gay marriage should be legal, and 66% of Christians portrayed homosexuality as an unacceptable lifestyle. Eighty-five percent of Evangelicals, sixty-one percent of born-again adults, and sixty-five percent of non-mainline Protestant Church attendees said being gay was a choice (Barna Research Group 2001). Another study conducted in 2013 found that thirty-two percent of practicing Protestants and fifty-seven percent of practicing Catholics favored changing laws to enable more freedoms for the LGBTQ communities. This stands in contrast to eighty-nine percent of Americans with no religious preference and sixty-three percent of Americans who follow other faiths that believe the laws should be changed to offer more freedom to LGBTQ communities (Barna Research Group 2013). The following chart represents the data found by the Barna Study.

Table 1. Percentage that Believe LGBTQ Identifying Americans should be better protected by Law

Denomination	Percentage
Religious Nones	89%
Practicing Protestants	32%
Practicing Catholics	57%

Leaders and congregations of protestant denominations have been debating the issues around homosexuality for the better part of thirty years (Cage and Olson 2008). These debates are often divided by the denominational leadership's perspective and the influence of local congregational cultures, the latter of which has been found to influence

the way the congregations view LGBTQ rights at a hyperlocal level (Cage and Olson 2008; Becker 1999; Ellingson et al. 2001). An issue that has taken center stage and has helped define the view of Americans in general, and Christians in particular, with regard to LGBTQ rights, is the definition of marriage (Barna Research Group 2013). The biblical definition of marriage as the union between one man and one woman (Hampshire 2020; Shlemon 2018) has become a rallying cry for those opposed to LGBTQ unions, leading to the 1996 passing of the "Defense of Marriage Act," signed into law by President Bill Clinton that specifically defined marriage as the union between one man and one woman (Legal Information Institute 2020) which was ultimately struck down in two Supreme Court decisions that found the fundamental right to marriage was protected by the due process and equal protection clauses of the constitution (United States v. Winsor 2012; Obergefell v. Hodges 2015).

At the same meeting in 2019 where it called for the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the Southern Baptist Convention in Birmingham passed a resolution that called on Christians who struggle with same-sex desire to forsake any self-conception or personal identity contrary to God's purpose of creation and redemption (Allen 2019). This resolution followed another statement, called the Nashville Statement, issued by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, an Evangelical Christian organization (Phillips 2017), defining marriage as being between one man and one woman and explicitly denying recognition to homosexual marriages. The statement further made clear the SBC position that anyone choosing homosexuality, or a transgender self-conception, was at odds with God's holy purpose (Allen, 2017).

The Presbyterian Church's (U.S.A.) General Assembly, by a majority vote of the members, approved a 2015 amendment to its constitution that changed the definition of marriage to a "unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman." Despite deep divides and a divided vote, the Church decided that it would allow its ministers to perform marriage ceremonies for gay couples while making it clear that it would not require its ministers to do so if the minister's faith did not allow for it (Smith 2015). The decision was cheered by many and lamented by others in the denomination (Heery 2015).

The United Methodist Church maintains the position that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching (Ask the U.M.C. 2022). the Church prohibits the celebration of same-sex unions on Church grounds and supports laws that define marriage as a union between one man and one woman (Ask the U.M.C. 2022). Church members and leadership are deeply divided on the official stance toward LGBTQ individuals, with some leaders finding the Church's anti-gay stance to be antithetical to the Church's mission of inclusivity. This divide has led to serious questions among Church congregants about the Church's future (Ask the U.M.C. 2022) and has raised the specter of the Church dividing (Hanh 2022). In 2019, at a special session of the General Assembly, the Assembly passed the "Traditional Plan," which strengthened restrictions on ordination (for self-avowed or practicing homosexual members) and same-sex marriage (Ask the U.M.C. 2022). On May 1, 2022, the United Methodist Church's General Conference formally split the denomination in what is being called a schism over gay clergy ordination and gay marriage (Miller 2022). This schism could result in the main body of the United Methodist Church allowing gay marriage and the ordination of

gay clergy now that a more conservative element of the Church's body has split off (Anderson 2020).

In a booklet entitled "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care," the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offers the Catholic perspective on gayness, stating that the Church has consistently taught that homosexual acts are contrary to the natural law and cannot be approved under any circumstance (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2006). This echoes language in the Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, issued by the Vatican and approved by Pope John Paul VI on November 7, 1975, which found that homosexual tendencies came from a false education, bad examples, a lack of normal sexual development, and that they were transitory and intrinsically disorderly, which meant that they were in no case to be approved of (Šeper 1975). Pope Francis became the first Catholic Pope to endorse same-sex civil unions in a feature-length documentary, "Francesco," in 2020 (Winfield 2020). the Church advocates for treating homosexuals with care and takes pains to specify that homosexual tendencies are not a sin but that the acts of homosexuality are (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2006).

Following the Supreme Court's decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized same-sex marriages in all fifty states, the National Association of Evangelicals issued two statements in which it condemned the Court for moving away from the historic understanding of marriage and redefining the legal parameters of marriage (National Association of Evangelicals 2015), which was not in keeping with God's definition of marriage (National Association of Evangelicals 2015). The Association characterizes marriage as a union between one man and one woman while seeking to

affirm that people may choose other paths (National Association of Evangelicals 2022). Two major Evangelical groups, the NAE and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), passed motions in 2018 that paved the way for more protection and rights for LGBTQ individuals. However, these resolutions may have had more to do with enhancing protections for religious freedoms through a viable political strategy (Derrick 2018). Meanwhile, Focus on the Family, a deeply influential Christian group, says on its website that God created and ordained a husband and wife to come together to create children; there are no other options; men and women together complete God's image on earth, children have the right to a mother (female) and a father (male), and that homosexual attraction is in and of itself not a sin but acting on it is (Stanton 2019).

The notion that Christianity is incompatible with being gay is intrinsically woven into the fabric of the various faith traditions, with Presbyterians (U.S.A.) being the notable outlier in its support of gay Christians, that the term "gay Christian" is considered an oxymoron at best, heresy at worst (Trammell 2015). People with homosexual tendencies are encouraged by numerous denominations to live celibate lives (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2006; Ask the U.M.C. 2022), and when they commit themselves to do so are welcomed into the Church (Hill 1981). For Christian denominations, the idea is to hate the sin of homosexuality but to love the sinner, which is an attempt to demonstrate tolerance through the lens of a larger narrative of sin (Lomash, Brown and Galupo 2019). Interviews with Evangelical Christians tend to illustrate a variety of Evangelical views on homosexuality that often transcend stereotypes but typically deny the acceptability of homosexuality and present God's grace as a way to counter homosexual tendencies (Trammell 2015).

The position of various Churches has led to the vast majority of their congregants believing that being gay is a choice (Barna Research Group 2001), that being gay is wrong (Barna Research Group 2001), and that being gay stands in opposition to being a Christian (Trammell 2015), and that gay people are sinners (Lomash, Brown and Galupo 2019) in needs of salvation to curb their gay inclinations (Trammell 2015), which in and of themselves are not sin (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2006). In addition to believing that being gay is morally wrong, Evangelicals have shifted to the use of science, medicine, and ideas about "natural order" to demonstrate that being gay is biologically wrong. Ultimately, however, Evangelicals believe that when it comes to sexual orientation, like with all things, the Bible is the final authority (Thomas and Olson 2012) and the Bible implicitly condemns homosexual activity (Stanton 2019).

Among the participants in this study, gay rights brought about a noticeably more somber attitude and perspective, as 90% of the participants professed to have supported LGBTQ rights while the remaining 10% offered no opinion. Three of the focus groups had individuals who identified as gay or had a close family member (daughter, son, or brother) who identified as being LGBTQ. Two of the individuals with family members that were gay shared stories of trauma and a history of microaggressions (Trammell 2015) within the Church that led to tragic consequences. In both cases, the lack of acceptance within their Church communities drove the family member to commit suicide. All participants experienced a lack of freedom to express their views, and roughly 75% expressed fears that if they openly supported gay rights, they would be ostracized and relegated to the out-group of their Church. About 20% stated that they felt

comfortable supporting LGBTQ rights in their denominations, and 5% stated that their denomination was loving and fully accepting of LGBTQ individuals.

P22 was among the first to open up the conversation about LGBTQ rights. Raised in multiple Protestant denominations, P22 identified as an Evangelical who had moved around between Churches and did not identify with any one denominational stream within the broader universe of Evangelical Churches. She said, about people who identify as LGBTQ, "I felt more aligned with the way that these people, who were treated differently, who lived differently, and I secretly thought that it was okay to be gay. And I couldn't tell anyone in the Church because that would have, you know, signaled to them that I was not all the way on board with the faith in the Church."

P23 from California shared his story of growing up in a strict Christian household in rural Washington. P23 was raised Baptist, but over the course of his youth, his mother, who was the head of the household, moved them between several independent Baptist Churches, a Presbyterian Church, and a Reformed Baptist Church. Describing his various Church experience as warm and welcoming at times, P23 talked about how cloistered the overall environment in the Churches was and how growing up, he would hear his mother frequently refer to gays as "faggots." He said, "My mom especially liked talking about gay people. It was a constant. If you wear earrings (as a man), you are the bane of our existence." At age 12, P23 says he discovered he was gay and believed that same-sex attraction was natural but was taught in Church that sin is also natural, so P23 went to college in Florida to escape his community and explore who he was. Once he came out as gay and decided to be with his (now) husband, he was removed from the Church and his family accused P23 of abandoning God and humiliating them in

the eyes of the congregation. P23 struggled with the idea of "love the sinner, hate the sin" (Lomash, Brown and Galupo 2019) as he described the day that the pastor of his small Reformed Baptist Church knocked on his door and gave him a letter signed by all the congregants officially excommunicating him for being gay and how when he told his mother that he was gay he did so in a public place because he feared physical violence from his family. P23 concluded that he has visited Churches occasionally but will never associate with organized religion again because of their stance on being gay.

P1 grew up in what he called a fundamentalist Baptist tradition, attending Bob Jones University in his youth. Eventually deciding that his denomination was too extreme, he became an Evangelical. Currently, he attends a United Methodist Church but said he could never rejoin a Church as a member because in his time away, he has become fully LGBTQ affirming, both practically and biblically, that he believes it's not a sin, and that is just not something that any of the Churches he has attended would tolerate.

P17, talked about her daughter, who came out as being gay. In 2016, P17's daughter took her own life after facing opposition to her sexuality from within the Church. P17 told us, "I could not sit with this issue anymore because I have ministered to a lot of mothers and a lot of kids whose parents rejected them (for being gay). Being gay meant being rejected by the minister of the Church." P17, who at the time attended a primarily black non-denominational Church, described how the day after she found her daughter had hanged herself, the pastor preached a sermon on the pitfalls of suicide and urged the congregation not to hang themselves. The isolation and lack of empathy made P17 walk away from wanting to be part of an organized Church.

P26, from North Carolina, describes herself as being associated with the Presbyterian Church growing up and having last attended a Nazarene Church. She claimed fear is the motivation for people within Churches being hostile to the LGBTQ community, saying, "They fear it because they don't understand it. Why are people gay? It's wrong; it's wrong in the Bible. And the truth is that nobody (speaking of gay people in the Church) wants to be in a culture that hates them."

In several groups, there was reoccurring agreement that among their prior Church congregations, empathy was necessarily switched off so that the focus could be on saving souls and that gay people had to go through temporary suffering on earth by denying their sexuality so that they could have eternal life. Roughly 70% of participants agreed that the idea of salvation for gays is more important than empathy or acceptance, and the other 30% did not voice an opinion. LGBTQ rights and what was seen as a campaign of persecution of LGBTQ people were most often among the top three reasons for every participant chose to leave the Church.

Significantly participants shared that empathy for LGBTQ people was met with hostility at the local level (Cage and Olson 2008; Becker 1999; Ellingson et al. 2001) and often a fear of being ostracized. This left the participants feeling like outsiders even within their Church communities (Todd and Rufa, 2013). Being a gay Christian was tantamount to being a heretic (Trammell 2015), and people like P23 were quickly shown the door. Each of the participants, of the roughly 80% that spoke on the subject, felt that there was no redemption for someone who could empathize with being LGBTQ because that empathy was seen as embracing sinful (Lomash, Brown and Galupo 2019) behavior

that was based on a wrongheaded, uneducated (Šeper 1975), and unbiblical choice (Ask the U.M.C. 2022).

Environmental Justice

Evangelical Christians are more likely to express skepticism about global warming than any other group of Americans (Barna Research Group 2007). Across the spectrum of non-Catholic Christians, roughly half (51%) believe that global warming is a major problem facing the country, compared to 69% of agnostics and atheists and 59% percent of Catholics (Barna Research Group 2007). In a 2015 Pew Research Study, divisions on environmental issues among Churchgoers were along cultural and racial lines in addition to religious convictions with 28% of white Evangelical Christians saying that climate change is primarily the result of human activity, compared to 56% of black protestants and 77% of Hispanic Catholics that hold the same view (Pew Research Center 2015). Roughly 64% of religious Nones believe that human activity is responsible for climate change (Pew Research Center 2015). The chart below reflects the Pew Research data.

Table 2. Percentage that Believe Environmental Change is Principally caused by Human Activity.

Denomination	Percentage
Religious Nones	64%
Evangelical Christians	28%
Black Protestants	56%
Hispanic Catholics	77%

While theological views and commitments to certain religious ideologies play a key role in determining broad-based support for environmental justice policies in the United States (Hempel and Smith 2020), the believers themselves are by no means monolithic in their support of environmental policies (Hempel and Smith 2020; Smith, Hempler and Macllroy 2018; Peifer, Khalsa and Ecklund 2016; Peifer, Ecklund and Fullerston 2014). As early as 1967, some scholars argued that the Judeo-Christian ethos of dominion over the earth was partially to blame for the earth's ongoing ecological challenges (White 1967). Despite increased awareness and activity at the organizational level, studies have not shown a positive relationship between affiliation with Christian denominations and a pro-environmental attitude (Konisky 2018). Most evidence seems to suggest a negative association between Christian faith and environmental concerns (Hand and Van Liere 1984; Eckberg and Blocker 1989; Kanagy and Nelsen 1995; Wolkimir et al. 1997b; Clements et al. 2014b; Arbuckle and Konisky 2015; Morrison et al. 2015; Arbuckle 2017; Smith et al. 2017). There remains little evidence of individuals who self-identify as Christians embracing a more environmentally friendly or "green" point of view (Konisky 2018). However, as Kearns points out, there are multiple Christian approaches to environmentalism, including a commitment by some to steward the earth as God's creation, and this has led to increasing divergence among beliefs on how to support stewarding the earth (Kearns 1996). Even among Evangelical communities, traditionally a bastion of low support for environmental justice issues (Barna Research Group 2007; Pew Research Center 2015), many are beginning to vocalize their rejection of the idea that the Christian faith is unconcerned with the abuses of the earth (Simmons 2009).

On March 10, 2008, the Southern Baptist Convention issued "A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change" (Staff 2008). The text was a significant shift away from previous skepticism of environmental concerns expressed by the denominational leadership in 2007 when the delegates at the SBC's annual convention urged Southern Baptists to proceed with caution regarding the idea of humans being responsible for climate change (Veldman 2016). The 2008 declaration was a strongly worded statement that called a lack of concern and failure to act a poor reflection of Christianity and called on Christians to take responsibility for the damage humans have done to God's creation (Staff 2008). The statement also called it "prudent" to address global climate change, recognized that Southern Baptist Doctrines demanded environmental stewardship, called it time for individuals to act in concert with governments and Churches, and made a pledge to act based on the claims made in the declaration (Staff 2008). Some denominational leaders hailed the passing of the declaration and decried the denomination's previous timid, cautious, and ununified stance on environmental issues (ABP News 2008). At the convention where this resolution was ultimately passed, deep divides emerged between the leaders of the SBC, with pro-business conservatives working to remove language that would have called for government funding and expressing doubts about the idea of human-induced global warming (ABP News 2008). Still others, including David Hankins, the then-executive director of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, expressed their opposition, refusing the sign the declaration, based on more traditional arguments like human dominion over the earth which entitled humans, under divine mandate, to maximize the utilization of natural resources for the glory of God and the good of man (Hankins 2008).

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been at the forefront of environmental activism since the late 1960s, promoting social justice initiatives for safe drinking water, protection of endangered species, climate change, and U.S. energy policy. In 1971 and 1990, the Church issued statements on the environment that focused on long-term environmental impact and made clear that the Church was focused on healing God's creation through sustainability. In 2008, the denominations (218th) General Assembly approved "The Power to Change: U.S. Policy and Global Warming," which called on everyone from individuals to the General Assembly counsel to work towards sustainability in their own lives. In this document, the Church called it a moral responsibility for world leaders to resolve climate change issues and urged the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol. This declaration was on the heels of a 2006 declaration that strongly urged all Presbyterians to aspire to live carbon-neutral lives. Despite its unambiguous stance on environmental issues, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) leadership has faced pitched battles on environmental issues (Halpert 2012). For some, there is skepticism that policies formulated at a national denominational level will have much effect on changing beliefs within local congregations that are already deeply entrenched (Townsend 2016). The divisions have played out within the denomination as the Presbyterian Environmental Justice Committee of the 225th General Assembly continued to mull questions of whether the Church should divest from its interests in fossil fuel industries as part of a broader environmental strategy and, ultimately, the General Assembly's deciding that more time was needed to devise a strategy moving forward (Carter 2022).

In a 2022 tract titled "Faith and Facts: Environmental Justice," the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society affirmed the denomination's support for environmental justice by stating that human beings are responsible for global warming due to pollution mainly caused by cars, power plants, and other industrial sources and calling for its members to choose environmentally friendly modes of transportation, consume local food products that are cultivated sustainably, conserve energy, and investigate using green energy sources (General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church 2022). On the climate section of its website, the United Methodist Church expresses a deep understanding of the failure of humankind to caretake God's creation and states that United Methodists are called to a ministry of reconciliation between God, humankind, and creation by participating in and alongside the frontlines of communities experiencing environmental injustice (United Methodist Church 2017).

In 2007, the Vatican announced plans to become the world's first carbon-neutral state (Rosenthal 2007). That plan was reemphasized by the Holy See with a plan for the Vatican to reduce its carbon emissions and fully embrace renewable energy sources to power the Vatican by 2050 (Gori 2020). In 1979, Pope John Paul II named Saint Francis Assisi the patron saint of ecology, and his successor Pope Benedict XVI increasingly emphasized the moral and theological importance of environmental issues (Agliardo 2016). On May 24, 2015, Pope Francis issued an encyclical entitled "Laudato si'" with the subtitle "on care for our common home," which laid out the Pope, and hence the Church's position on environmental ideas like global warming, irresponsible development, environmental degradation, and calls for people to take swift and unified

global action (Pope Francis 2015). the Church identifies climate change as one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community and one that impacts the most vulnerable people making it the moral imperative of the Church to address climate change. the Church recognizes that greenhouse gases are a major contributor to climate change and promotes prudent action, including the need for national standards of carbon pollution, to address global climate change (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2019).

In an updated 2022 report, the National Association of Evangelicals issued a stark analysis of the world's condition as it relates to environmentalism (Boorse 2022). In the report, the NAE called for individual and joint action by Evangelicals to help with climate protection actions and identified the earth's inability to continue absorbing carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere and oceans, which meant, according to the report, that humans needed to severely cut greenhouse emissions, and switch to non-fossil-fuel based energy sources (Boorse 2022). In the report, contributor Galen Carey who is the vice president of government relations for the NAE, called on Evangelicals to conserve and use energy more efficiently, advocate for energy efficiency standards, lower carbon goals, and sustainable agriculture, and to let Congress know that Evangelicals want them to work on developing sensible solutions to address the changing climate (Carey 2022). The Evangelical Environmental Network, an organization founded in 1993 and official formed as a 501(c)(3) in 2004, seeks to inspire, equip, educate, and mobilize evangelical Christians to rediscover a Biblical mandate of care for creation and to work towards a stable climate and healthy pollution free world (Evangelical Environmental Network 2022). When Richard Cizik, the then National Association of Evangelicals'

Vice-President for Governmental Affairs, spoke about climate change in 2007, the reaction from John Dobson, Chairman of Focus on the Family, Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, and 23 other conservative Evangelical leaders was swift in demanding Cizik's resignation and making it clear that Cizik was unauthorized to speak for the 30-million member NAE. In a letter addressed to the NAE, this coalition of Evangelical leaders decried attempts to shift emphasis away from the greater moral issues of the time (Blunt 2007). Influential Evangelical leaders like James Dobson and Charles Colson continue to oppose environmentalism and climate change, causing divides within Evangelical communities (McCammack 2007). In 2010, Focus on the Family released "A Statement on the Environment," in which it stated, in part, that it trembles when it considers the consequences to America as a nation that spends billions of dollars on pure air and water while permitting the destruction of millions of unborn children through abortion (Focus on the Family 2010).

Environmental justice, in general, and climate change, in particular, are increasingly becoming polarizing subjects within the American Christian community (Zaleha and Szasz, 2015). There are indicators that while religious beliefs may not directly contribute to suspicion of climate change, conservative Protestants are more likely to be suspicious of scientists' recommendations on how to address climate change (Ecklund et al. 2017; Evans and Feng 2013). This collective climate change denial has led to a split between mainline Protestant groups and Evangelicals on the realities of climate change (Zaleha and Szasz 2015; Haluza-Delay 2014). Part of this divide is the global messaging from within conservative Christian communities that have aligned themselves with American conservative capitalist values (Kearns 1997). Evangelical

believers who subscribe to end-of-day theology and literal interpretation of Biblical texts tend to be more likely to reject climate science (Haluza-Delay 2014). Conspiracy theories, specifically about globalist elitists using climate change to undermine national sovereignty and dominate the globe, also play a role in how conservative Christian's view and response to environmental justice issues (Haltinner 2018). Dominion theory, which believes that humankind is slightly lower than God, has dominion of the earth and all creation, and that while heaven is God's, God has given the earth to mankind, has been a prevailing theory in many Christian sects leading to a distrust of and biblical opposition to environmental justice ideals (Zaleha and Szasz 2015).

Environmental justice issues were not as controversial in the group discussions as women's or gay rights, but they did evoke some strong emotions, particularly when it came to the perception of hypocrisy within the Churches that the participants had left. Environmentalism and climate change were the one area where there was a distinct split in the participant's views on how their Church treated the issue. About 65% stated that their Church didn't really believe in or follow an environmentally conscious agenda, while the remaining 35% believed that their denominations, and specific Churches, were supportive of environmental justice and would take active steps to promote that agenda.

P1 stated, "What is really believed in Evangelical Churches is what is discussed in small groups, Bible studies, and in the lobby before and after the service. The Evangelical Church I belonged to was very anti-science, not believing in global warming, the whole nine yards, and mocking the whole idea of global warming. The blurred lines between

politics and religion made it very anti-science." There was universal agreement in his group with this statement and similarly high agreement with this concept in other groups.

P7 stated that the Churches he attended didn't care about the environment at all. "They do not care about the environment. What they care about is the money and being able to spin how they did this great thing (if they support an environmental cause). But the hypocrisy is so deeply ingrained and woven into these institutions that it (hides the fact that) they are capitalist institutions where your worth is value based on not the principals they are teaching."

P8 said that when it comes to doing the right thing for environmental issues, the Churches she had been a part of will offer a litany of reasons why it was more important to save costs rather than consider ethically sourced products that were better for the environment.

P22 said that her pastor used to actively preach against environmental and climate change themes, but she really didn't realize that these sermons were politically motivated at the time. P22 talked about her mother, who is still a member of an Evangelical Church and believes that environmentalism is part of a global conspiracy with unclear (to P22) aims. Ultimately, however, P22 believes that there is opposition to environmentalism in the Christian Church because of the idea that "we are all here temporarily, this is not our final destination; so why spend too much time being concerned about this earth."

P29, a Korean American from California who was raised in a Nazarene Church and now occasionally attends an Evangelical Church, stated that when it comes to environmental issues, his current Church "is full of right-wing Trump supporters. From

what I understand, they deny climate change, they deny science, they deny global warming. Environmental pollution means nothing to them because our very existence or life here on earth is very temporary. If we pollute the world, who cares, we are going to be gone (from here) anyway." P33 from Cincinnati agreed (in a different group) with P29 when she discussed how the people in her Church didn't care about the environment because they were all going to be raptured and taken to a better place.

P30, a staffer for a Democratic Delegate and activist from Chicago, stated that her former Church cared about climate change issues and that they would be offended at the idea that Christianity and environmentalism were at odds with each other. P25, an outlier from Australia, said that he did not know of a single Church that was not environmentally conscious and that he knew of no Churches that would put economic concerns over environmental ones.

P5 described her Church as providing lip service to environmental concerns. She added that, in the Churches she attended, it was almost an unspoken that environmentalism was not really something to adhere to. She added, "(The problem is) the Church presenting itself one way and the reality, being very different things. In my Church, we were about 20,000 people, and nothing was being recycled. They wouldn't say overtly that they were anti-environmental, but it was behind the scenes. People would try to get recycling (programs) going, but it was just too difficult."

P9, from the Wisconsin/Minnesota border, talked about trying to start a recycling program through the Parent Teacher Organization at her child's Christian school but was told by the principal of the school that they do not do that because the Church doesn't recycle, and how she felt that the denomination was actually anti-

environmentalist. P8 added that at her Baptist high school, she took an environmental class and was "literally taught that climate change was a hoax."

Throughout the conversations on climate change and environmental justice, the theme of a disconnect between what the Church was saying and what its congregation believed was apparent (Konisky 2018). Skepticism about environmental realities abounded in these Churches (Barna Research Group 2007) despite increased awareness (Konisky 2018) within denominations of environmental challenges. From conversations behind closed doors and in the lobby of the Church before and after services, there continues to be very little evidence that self-identify as Christians embracing a more environmentally friendly or "green" point of view (Konisky 2018). From the participants in this study, the growing disconnect and multiple Christian approaches to environmentalism, including a commitment by some to steward the earth as God's creation, was evident (Kearns, Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States 1996). However, for these participants, the overriding sense was one of isolation in their environmental beliefs which led to them seeking community outside of the Church walls (Todd and Rufa 2013). Even for the few that were still attending services occasionally, like P29, they fell outside the mainstream and at odds with the general belief system in the congregation (Todd and Rufa 2013).

Chapter III.

Conclusions

This study began with Todd and Rufa's conclusions that social justice activism and even a bent towards social justice leads Church members to feel isolated from their community because of their social justice inclination and often to seek edification in communities outside of their Church (Todd and Rufa 2013). This study built on the idea of seeking community outside of Church and applied it to one of the fastest-growing segments of religious society, the religious Nones (Hout 2017; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017, 64; Twenge et al. 2016). This study also sought to challenge the notion that Churches, by their mission and spiritual directives, automatically serve as conduits for social justice and social change (Powell 2012) and instead built on the idea that congregational ideology, pastoral leadership, and the focus of the Church on missions other than social justice can lead to isolation, frustration, and ultimately a departure, from the Church, by people who feel strongly about social justice and equality issues (Todd and Rufa 2013).

The participants in this study echoed many of the findings in the Todd and Rufa study regarding their sense of frustration at their various Church's attempts to maintain the status quo and the lack of communal interest in social justice. In addition, this group consisted largely of people who had left the Church or had minimized their interaction with the Church to a large degree, and now identify as religious Nones. Interestingly, their experiences still mirrored those of the participants in the Todd and Rufa study in terms of structural resistance to change, leadership priorities, and

frustration at what both groups saw as an un-Christlike focus on capitalistic tendencies and a failure to care for those most in need.

As expected, nearly all the participants attributed their divergence from Church to a feeling of alienation within their respective churches. Many described feeling isolated, lonely, or out of place within the walls of the Church because of their views on various issues (Todd and Rufa 2013). All the participants expressed a strong association with at least one of the four social justice causes that were part of the study but surprisingly, none of them was particularly engaged in direct social justice activism. It became apparent that it was not participation in social justice activities that drove these participants to become Nones, rather it was a mindset shift towards social justice matters that caused them to distance themselves from, and eventually leave, the Church. Other social justice causes that were shared in these sessions included concerns over gun violence, drugs, and corporate greed but were not explored because of the limited parameters of the study. Out of seventy-five participants, only one was actively involved in politics and social justice causes; roughly half were semi-involved, pointing to memberships in groups and occasional participation in townhalls or meetings, while all the rest engaged in social media and other online forums to express their stances and opinions.

The interviews revealed several interesting things about the oneness of the participants. Nearly 100% of the participants were actively engaged in more than one Church congregation, with the median being three, before deciding that they counted themselves as having no religious preference or, in about 65% of the cases, as being disaffiliated with the term "Christianity." In each of that 65%, the participants still

considered themselves to be a form of Jesus follower, with some even articulating that they believed in the resurrection and doctrines like good/evil, salvation, and judgment, but that they found their spiritual practice of Christianity at odds with the views of Church congregations and messages being preached from the pulpit. Roughly 35% of participants considered themselves complete Nones, evenly split between agnostics, atheists, and people who believed in spiritualism but not religion.

Ultimately, this study provided further evidence of people with a social justice bent feeling isolated within Churches and seeking community elsewhere (Todd and Rufa 2013). It also added evidence that Churches in and of themselves do not foster an environment that encourages participation in social justice. Those deeply entrenched beliefs, often stemming from political alliances or prior teachings of the Church, are hard to shake from the pulpits, while pastors often walk a line between the faith and the faithful that often disenfranchises those who want the Church to help those who cannot help themselves (*Ibid*).

Study Limitations

Although this study provided additional evidence about individual perceptions of the Church and a possible explanation for why people leave the Church and become Nones, it is important to note that there are numerous limitations to this study. First, the study was of a convenience sample of people who are active on social media in opposition to the Church and Christianity in general. Further research would be needed to explore a larger, less vocal segment of Nones to get a broader understanding of why they do or do not seek solace outside the Church. Second, the parameters of social justice in this study are limited to items that may be considered left-leaning on the political

spectrum. While women's rights, specifically reproductive rights, civil rights, gay rights, and environmental issues, are often addressed issues in the media and popular culture, they are not the only social justice issues that evoke an emotional response from religious and non-religious people (LoConte 2006). Further research would be needed to identify how Nones react to issues like economic freedom, the centrality of the family unit, sexual morality and opposition to pornography, and support for prayer in schools to name a few. Third, as mentioned early in this study, there are hundreds of theology variations, and it would be impossible to accommodate all the different points of view that fall under the broad categories of Christianity or Catholicism (Barna Research Group 2005). Finally, Nones did not emerge in a vacuum (Drescher 2016), nor did they emerge solely out of a Christian tradition (Jeung, Esaki and Liu 2015). Future studies would be well positioned to start their exploration with non-Christian Nones.

As with any study, this study presented many questions that future studies can and should attempt to weigh in on. Questions, for example, about the correlation between social justice inclinations and the decision to leave organized religion were briefly explored in this study, and future studies could provide sociologists with a treasure trove of evidence about the ebbs and flows of religious participation as the United States becomes more secular (Brauer 2018).

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