

*Loose Connections and Liberal Theology:  
Blurring the Boundaries in Two Church-based Communities of  
Spiritual Practice \**

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## **Abstract**

*We used a mixed methods approach – including ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and a survey – to study two innovative Christian contemplative worship services housed in a mainline Protestant congregation in a Midwestern city. These services employed boundary-blurring practices designed to attract the “de-churched” – those who had been involved in a Christian congregation in the past but who had at some point disengaged from organized religion. Though attracting some formerly de-churched participants, these services were far more successful in attracting several other constituencies united by their liberal theology and by a preference for loose connections. We argue that these worship services are best understood as thriving communities of sustained spiritual practice where contemplative rituals sacralize both theistic and extra-theistic, Christian and non-Christian, symbols and beliefs.*

We draw on data from a year of fieldwork in two innovative worship services hosted in the same mainline Protestant church in a Midwestern community to analyze what happens when a congregation creates innovative ritual spaces that blur the boundary between members and non-members, evoking a wide range of religious experience – even the non-Christian. We focus on the culture work (Becker 1998) of the pastor and lay worship leaders at Journey Lutheran Church, which offers two monthly services – one Celtic, one Nordic – that draw on a range of sources, especially writings from Celtic spirituality and the contemplative worship movement, to construct rituals that would be meaningful to congregation members but also attract people the pastor calls “de-churched” (c.f. Baker and Smith 2009).

Because worship rituals are a locus for the formation of religious experience (Riesebrodt (2010) and the sacralization processes that form moral community (Taves 2009), studying these innovative services allows us to answer three inter-related research questions: What forms of religious experience do these innovative worship rituals foster? What religious symbols and theological understandings are sacralized through these rituals, and what ones are de-sacralized or marginalized? And what form does “community” take in these worshipping communities?

Part of our contribution is to demonstrate how the answers to these questions are intertwined. These services have become the focal point for sustained communities of spiritual practice (Wuthnow 1998a) which blur the boundaries between church members and non-members, between theistic and non-theistic spirituality (Ammerman 2014), and between Christian and non-Christian forms of worship. As such, they foster what Besecke (2013) calls reflexive spirituality, which is open to a variety of religious expressions and responsive to liberal concerns with more traditional religious expressions which can be perceived as anti-modern. While they have attracted only a small number of de-churched individuals, they have attracted several other constituencies in part because their ritual practices align with liberal theology, and

their boundary-blurring practices are resonant with a broad societal preference for “loose connections” (Wuthnow 1998b).

We answer the call for studies that de-center a focus on cognitive and discursive expressions of religion (Edgell 2012; Riesebrodt 2010) by focusing on ritual practice as central to the construction of religious identity and religious community (c.f. Baker 2010). We profile thriving religious communities that are not strongly bounded subcultures based on devotion to doctrinal orthodoxy (e.g. see Smith 1998), looking beyond the much-studied evangelical portion of the landscape to examine the link between innovation in worship and congregational vitality (c.f. Bass 2006, Marti and Ganiel 2014, Ellingson 2009). We also further the scholarship on religious dis-affiliation, which has focused on profiling the population of non-religious persons; instead, we shift the focus to religious institutions and ask how they may be changed in both intentional and unintended ways as they innovate in response to attract the disaffiliated.

### **Trends in Religious Commitment**

Since the 1960s, church membership and attendance have become understood as more voluntary and less of a social obligation in the United States. Many Americans have become disaffected from organized religion for a variety of reasons; they see large denominations as too bureaucratic, prefer an individual locus of moral authority to the authority of clergy, or dislike the politicization of religion and in particular its association with the political right (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Roof and Landres 1997; Wuthnow 1998a). Taken together, these trends have led to a declining percentage of mainline Protestants and white Catholics in the population, and a rising percentage of religiously disaffiliated, also known as “nones” (Baker and Smith 2009; Chaves 2011; Hout and Fischer 2002; Hout, Greeley, and Wilde

2001)<sup>1</sup>. In 1990, 7% of the American population claimed no religious affiliation; now the figure is 20%, and among Americans under the age of 30, it is 32% (Pew 2012).

Wuthnow (1998b) argues that Americans' style of commitment to a whole range of institutions has shifted, with a growing preference for looser connections that allow for more limited and intermittent, and less exclusive, forms of engagement. This seems a good way to characterize the orientation of the "nones." While some have never been affiliated, many were affiliated with a particular religious group at one point, and may choose to affiliate again (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). We know that "nones" do not entirely disengage from spiritual and religious practices or beliefs; about half of the "nones" (55%) describe themselves as either religious or spiritual, 41% pray more than once per month, and 68% believe in a God or a universal spirit (Pew Forum 2012). Moreover, many Americans who remain religiously affiliated nevertheless retain an individual locus of moral authority, accepting some elements of their religious tradition while rejecting others (e.g. see Smith and Snell 2009); commitment styles are varied, and a substantial portion of the affiliated also prefer "loose" religious connections (Wuthnow 1998b).

### **Changing Religious Communities**

Concomitant with the trends outlined above, a shift has occurred in how Americans experience spirituality and the relationship between spiritual practice and mainstream religious communities (Ammerman 2014, Besecke 2013, Wuthnow 1998a). More people now seek communities of spiritual practice which are organized around rituals and other collective practices; these communities of practice enhance spiritual expression and experience but foster a less encompassing, more intermittent commitment style. Wuthnow (1998a) argues that such communities have become more common in the United States as a way to ameliorate the costs

associated with individual religious seeking. Communal spiritual practice is still valued by many who do not value the formal membership, weekly attendance expectations, or an ongoing financial commitment all encouraged by mainstream religious institutions. Generally speaking, sociologists have treated such communities of spiritual practice as analytically – and empirically – distinct from the denominations and congregations (Bender et al. 2012).

A widespread preference for a looser, more intermittent style of commitment may lead to new forms of spiritual community (Wuthnow 1998 a & b), but it arguably fosters change in traditional congregational forms of organization and membership. Ammerman's (2014) research reminds us that religious institutions are an important context of support for both individual and communal forms of spiritual practice (c.f. Besecke 2013). She finds that for many, spirituality is not experienced as oppositional to organized religion but is, rather expressed in and through participation in mainstream religious institutions. She argues that the distinction between being "religious" and being "spiritual" is a false binary that fails to capture the complexity of spirituality.

Religious leaders may ignore changes in their environment, but if they do respond, it is often in the form of "culture work," which Becker (1998) describes as a process of mining the religious tradition for symbols and discourses that link religious tradition and the congregation's own history in meaningful ways to changes in contemporary circumstances. Culture work may also involve changes in organizational practices and routines, and potentially even new organizational forms. For example, the megachurch movement is an evangelical response to changing forms of religious commitment (Thumma, Travis and Warren 2007), as is the emerging church movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014); both feature experimentation with different organizational forms and an intentional reaching out to those alienated from traditional congregational forms and norms of membership.

Leaders in mainline Protestant traditions may attempt to borrow cultural or organizational innovations from other parts of the religious landscape. One study of mainline Protestant congregations in the Pacific Northwest reveals a willingness to experiment with new worship forms and borrow from evangelical traditions, including megachurches (Ellingson 2007). However, the author also finds that for such culture work to “work” – to be perceived as authentic and to promote feelings of vitality and success – it must involve worship forms understood as compatible with the cultural style and progressive theology of mainline Protestant traditions. One source of innovation in worship ritual which may be perceived as more compatible with progressive theological developments is the movement in mainline Protestant and Catholic circles to revive and rework “ancient” (historic) Christian ritual practices in order to create contemplative experiences (D.B. Bass 2006, D.C. Bass 2010).

Rational choice approaches to religion predict that congregations with strong boundaries and doctrinal orthodoxy will thrive in the currently fluid and voluntaristic religious marketplace (Iannaccone 1994). Taken together, the work of Wuthnow (1998a) and Ammerman (2014) suggests that religious communities – including congregations – which allow for a looser and more intermittent style of commitment may *also* thrive in the contemporary religious landscape. Worship rituals that are understood as legitimate, authentic, and meaningful are a key to sustaining a thriving religious community (Baker 2010).

### **A Focus on Ritual Practice**

Following Riesebrodt (2010), we understand religion as a complex of practices oriented toward achieving a connection with superhuman powers (personal or impersonal) which are generally invisible and understood as “larger than” humankind. Religion includes ritual, discursive, and regulatory practices, but Riesebrodt (2010) is critical of sociology’s primary

focus on the discursive and regulatory aspects of religion – that is, of work that privileges the analysis of religion as ideology and religion’s effects on individuals’ social practices and behaviors. He argues that the field has neglected the study of ritual as the primary locus of religion and as constitutive of religious experience. Potentially, a focus on ritual practice can also re-center the analysis of embodiment, emotion, and aesthetics, which tend to be neglected in sociological analyses of religion (Edgell 2012) but which are constitutive of religious experience (Tavory and Winchester 2012; Neitz 2011; McGuire 2008).

Collective ritual is an important locus of sacralization processes (Taves 2009) through which collective representations and collective identity are formed. Symbols, beliefs, persons, and places are not sacred *per se*, but they become so for specific groups of people in particular times and places through the performance of collective rituals which create boundaries between the sacred and the profane. The making of boundaries around the sacred creates moral community (Taves 2009, Durkheim 1995[1912]).

We show how the Celtic and Nordic worship services at Journey Lutheran are locations for the sacralization of particular understandings of nature and of God that are markedly different than orthodox Christian understandings, forming worshipping communities compatible with preferences for liberal theology and loose connections. Ritual innovations that were designed to bring in the de-churched attracted a much broader range of constituencies, and resulted in the blurring of the boundaries of membership and religious tradition associated with mainstream congregational forms.

## **The Methods and the Case**

This project began, for the lead author, with an interest in the availability and appeal of alternative or innovative forms of religious engagement for mainstream Christians, religious

practices that might either supplement or substitute form more traditional forms of engagement such as Sunday morning church attendance. In the summer of 2012, I worked with a graduate student research assistant who collected a listing of all of these opportunities for communal practice that we could find. We used the events calendar of a local retreat and spirituality center and a newsletter published by a local Presbyterian congregation devoted to covering alternative, and especially contemplative, opportunities for Christian practice in the Midwestern city in which we were conducting research. That summer we discovered that the most common forms of communal spiritual practice in the area were centering prayer, Evensong, and Taize prayer. Most of these activities are conducted by small groups which meet in local churches and other spaces, too; they are not labelled as worship services.

A few larger worship-oriented activities also take place on a regular basis: four congregations in the metro area host Taize-centered worship services in a given week, and nineteen have developed contemplative worship services offered with different frequency. Of these, the services at Journey Lutheran are the oldest, best established, and the largest. On a typical Sunday evening, the Celtic service will have about 120 people in attendance and the Nordic service will have about 80 (barring a sudden worsening of the winter weather); for holiday services (those falling near Christmas or Easter), upwards of 150 will attend. While they are not representative of typical contemplative religious practice in the larger urban area, they provide an exemplary case (Ragin and Becker 1992) with which to examine the incorporation of new forms of spiritual practice and new worship rituals into the routine of a mainstream congregation. Originally, the focus of the research was on whether innovative worship would create a sense of renewal in the hosting congregation; after initial interviews with the pastor and reading her written historical account of the founding of the services, the focus shifted to the research questions outlined at the beginning of this paper.

Journey Lutheran Church is a pseudonym for an ELCA congregation, housed in a mid-sized Gothic-style stone building, set on a quiet street corner in a residential area of a large Midwestern city. The congregation was founded in 1921 as a mission church, but has undergone significant theological and spiritual changes over time. The current lead pastor has been serving at Journey Lutheran Church since 1999. The congregation's staff and lay leadership is comprised of about 25 people, most being positions occupied by lay people. A typical Sunday morning service draws approximately 120 people. The age demographic of these services is distributed relatively evenly, and there is a mix of family structures – single people, couples, and families with young children.

During the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013, the lead author engaged in 9 months of fieldwork at Journey Lutheran Church. I attended 8 Sunday evening worship services (4 Celtic, 4 Nordic), where I talked to close to two dozen different people at the coffee hours after the services; I also attended 2 Sunday morning worship services. I led two adult forums (Sunday School classes) telling members about my research and asking for their feedback. I conducted formal, semi-structured interviews, ranging between an hour to an hour and a half, with 4 people who lead the worship: the head pastor (twice), the staff director of lay ministry, and the lay worship leader from each service (in each case, the person who does the “Word” portion of the service as described below). I also interviewed 21 individuals who attend the services: 15 who attend both the Celtic and the Nordic service, 5 who attend the Celtic service only, and 1 who attends the Nordic service only. Eight (8) of the interviewees are men and 13 are women; interviews averaged about an hour and twenty minutes. I also attended two focus groups led by the pastor for the purposes of finding out whether there was support for developing programming that would coordinate with the Sunday evening worship services (e.g. potluck meals or lectures or book discussions); 15 people attended the focus group for Celtic service participants, and 7

attended the group for the Nordic service participants. All interviews but one, and both focus groups, were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions were loaded into Atlas.ti for analysis. One person did not wish to be recorded, so I took notes during the interview and typed up a paraphrase summary of the interview immediately following it.

The second author attended two services and administered the survey to worship service participants. The survey was short and was administered as a bulletin insert in 3 consecutive services for each service in the winter/spring of 2013. Ninety-nine (99) surveys were returned (67 from the Celtic service, 32 from the Nordic). It is impossible to calculate an accurate response rate because the denominator across the services is not distinct (many of the same people would be in attendance at each service). Taking the average attendance figure for each service at the denominator, an approximated response rate for the Celtic service would be 67% and for the Nordic, 38%. In our analysis, we use the survey only for descriptive purposes and we are aware that the survey gives the best insight regarding the more committed and regular participants, not the relatively large percentage of worshippers who do not attend regularly and who, according to the pastor, comprise up to a third of each worship service.

The survey demographics reveal a profile of membership that matches fieldwork observations and interviews with the pastor and other lay leaders; 79% of the respondents are female, 98% are white, 92% have a college degree (60% have a Masters or more), and 86% report a household income of \$50,000 a year or more (22% report \$100,000 or more). While 75% identify as Protestant, 4% of respondents identify as not religious, 9% identify as a non-Christian, and 3% identify with multiple religious traditions. Approximately 82% of respondents are older than fifty, and 57% of the respondents are older than sixty. Fieldnotes show that both services typically have many couples in attendance, including same-sex couples, but families with children are less common.

Noticeably, the demographics of attendees, which skew toward an older, white, female constituency, do not match the demographics of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States, who tend to be younger and male (see Baker and Smith 2009). Fieldnotes reveal that while the bulk of service attenders on any given evening are older and female, a younger constituency is present; however, most members of this group seldom stayed for coffee after the service and several were not responsive to informal requests for interviews made after the service. Of course, it is possible that a sizeable portion of those not responding to the survey (and unavailable for in-person interviews) are de-churched. What is clear is that the strategy designed to attract de-churched individuals has not resulted in a worshipping community typical of the unaffiliated persons in the U.S.

### **The Structure of the Rituals**

The Celtic and Nordic worship services – which began in 2002 and 2004, respectively – were initially funded by grants for the purpose of worship service renewal. After the first year of each service Journey Lutheran took over the funding. Both services begin at 6:51 pm on Sunday evenings so as to commemorate the death of St. Aidan, an early leader in Celtic Christian spirituality, in 651 A.D. Though the evening time makes it difficult for some to attend (e.g. married couples with children, those who work evening shifts, etc.), our survey indicates that participants appreciate the timing of these services; almost 15% of respondents reported that the evening time made the services appealing to them because it gives them a “time to breathe deeply and prepare for the week ahead” or that it works well with their schedule. People in the in-depth interviews and focus groups also mentioned the timing as something that attracts them to the service; it’s well-suited to feeling “recharged” and ready to face the week.

This is directly mentioned in the bulletin provided at each service. The lengthy bulletin describes the structure of the worship service and the sequence of spiritual rituals or practices. It also provides the words for prayers and songs included in the service. It is designed to educate participants about why the Journey Lutheran services are structured in this way and explain the spiritual and religious significance of different cultural practices or items, such as the link between the starting time and the life of St. Aiden (above) and the lysglobe (below). It provides the history and the heritage of these spiritual elements and fosters the active participation and knowledge of the participants.

The Celtic service begins with each worshipper lighting a candle and placing it in a wooden frame filled with sand and shaped like a Celtic Cross, which is located in front of the altar. Celtic music, singing, and drumming play in the worship hall as people arrive. A prelude and invocation precede the “Gathering Words” offered by the lead pastor: “God in my sleeping. God in my waking. God in mine ever-loving soul. God in my eternity.” A liturgical dancer accompanies the “Gathering Words” which is followed by an excerpt from the *Carmina Gadelica* (Carmichael 2012): “God to enfold me, God to surround me, God of my sleeping, God of my waking... God in my sufficing, God in my everlasting soul, God in eternity.” This is followed by an opening song and a sung congregational response, in which nearly all attendants participate. Next there is the Word section, comprised of several readings from both Biblical and secular sources; the readings are given by three people who stand left, center, and right in the altar area; they speak in turn, sharing parts of each reading, weaving them into a dialogue based on a shared theme. A drumming response leads into the time for silent meditation and prayer during which participants are relaxed and comfortable. The lead pastor then uses very inclusive language to invite all to the communion table: “This is the table not of the church, but of the Lord.” She explicitly says that all are welcome at the table. The communion is followed by a blessing and a

prayer. For the sung benediction, the worshippers stand and turn toward one another across the aisle to end the service; people seemed generally happy, and comfortable making eye contact. Though most leave after the service, about thirty generally stay for coffee and refreshments, a fellowship time lasting about thirty minutes.

The Nordic service shares many of the elements of the Celtic service, but there are several key differences. A circular structure with many candles, called a lysglobe, is at the center of the worship; it represents “the world, with Christ as the light of the world at the center,” as explained in the bulletin. A woman plays the violin as people arrive, and the prelude transitions into the service as a woman in traditional Scandinavian folk dress processes toward the front while playing a Hardanger Fiddle – a traditional Norwegian instrument. After an unaccompanied song from the cantor, the opening prayer is offered. The congregation offers a repeating sung response and during this time, congregation members grab votives from the front altar area and carry them, placing them around the sanctuary on window sills and other flat surfaces. The Word section has the same format as the Celtic service; it includes Biblical and secular texts put in response to one another.

The cantor then provides a sung response, which is followed by the ringing of the singing bowl to begin a short period of silent meditation. After more readings and a congregational song, the singing bowl signals the “Great Silence” which lasts for about five minutes. Next the cantor leads the offering prayers, which are broken into stanzas separated by the cantor leading a sung response. The Lord’s Prayer and a hymn close the service before announcements are made and the coffee time begins.

For both services, poetry is a key source of Word readings. Non-Biblical sources of poetry include the works of Mary Oliver, Shuntaro Kanikawa, Philip Levine, Edward Rowland Sill, Diane di Prima, Patrick Kavanagh, Lise Sorensen, and Walt Whitman. Prose readings from

a range of authors, including Thomas Merton and other writers on contemplative practice, are also occasionally used.

## **Religious Experience & Commitment**

Journey Lutheran's evening services are explicitly designed to foster a contemplative religious experience. Participants in these services said that the time for contemplation and quiet is the most important characteristic that make these services meaningful to them. The survey gave people an opportunity to write in what was most important to them about these services; 40% of the Celtic service respondents used both 'quiet' and 'contemplative' to describe what they value about the service; 30% of the Nordic service respondents named these. In fact, several wrote in that they "wish there was more quiet, contemplative time" during the services. In the in-depth interviews, people talked at length about finding these services to be both unique and important for their emphasis on "quiet," "stillness," "contemplation," "going inward," and "just being." People liked the interplay between the Word section and the contemplative pauses because it allows for reflection, where the "texts suggest but do not direct content for contemplation." Others appreciated the quietness for its departure from traditional Sunday morning worship services because, "it's kind of nice that it's so quiet because there's not a lot of kids there and it's not all like Sunday school and people running around and stuff like that."

This quietness allows people to gain a sense of stepping outside of the rush of contemporary life. When asked what the contemplative aspect of the services means to him, one man responded,

It means losing myself. It means losing the boundary conditions of my body and instilling the internal dialogue, internal monologue that goes on in order to get in touch with amazing other things out there... But it's getting in touch, spiritual talks to spirit and when you lose your boundary conditions that's where the best I can describe becomes spirit to spirit.

This man also attends a Taizé service at a local Episcopalian church, and with his wife attends an evangelical Sunday morning service at a local nondenominational church; they also participate in an intentional Christian community focused on Celtic spirituality. Participation at these services is part of a larger expression of contemplative spirituality in his life. For others, this is the only contemplative service they attend, and the only place they find that quiet time to have a sense of reconnection; this was true for one woman, who is a deacon in a church of a different denomination, who told us that, "I . . . like the silent time after the drumming meditation. There's so little silence in my life even though I live alone that it's a place to rest. And I think that is also what's unique about this service."

Participants were also moved by the inclusive nature of both services. In our survey, (17%) of worshippers made positive comments on the inclusiveness of the services, and in the interviews, people mentioned how engaging it was that all "are invited to be active and engaged participants in the worship." As one participant told us, "I mean you just say 'come'. So I just really appreciate that there's a simplicity, but an honesty. We practice open table as well but where [the lead pastor] clearly says, 'Come, not because I'm inviting you but because Christ invites you.'" This is a common theme among participants, as one noted, "[The lead pastor] says, 'It's not the church that invites you, it's not I who invites you, it's Jesus who invites you.' It's the whole sense of total and complete inclusivity." One woman, when asked what

engages her, said “Number one it’s welcoming and non-judgmental . . . I think the most encouraging thing is it is such an open community, it just never asks anything that would in any way ask you to identify yourself other than a participant in this particular evening service. That’s all they ask. That’s how you feel. You participate and they say fine. Here’s a candle.” In the interviews, these comments about inclusiveness were often framed by stories about other churches in the past which were not inclusive, other experiences with religious communities that did not feel good. One woman was visibly moved when she told her story of her experience at a church she used to attend, saying that “My friend had cancer and they wouldn’t let her take communion because she wasn’t Catholic” and then recounting the contrast when, last year, she invited her friend to the Celtic service at Journey and her friend was able to take communion. For her, this was “very meaningful, that I can invite my friends and they won’t be excluded.”

The inclusive nature of the service is intimately linked to the active and engaged worship style, according to participants. One described the services as being “immersed in it and in a way that represents full engagement as opposed to just mumbling something you’ve done for twenty years.” This is achieved through several means at Journey Lutheran’s contemplative services, including the dispersion of candles throughout the sanctuary. The singing is energetic; the sung responses to the prayers draw people in, and during the times of contemplation, the congregation is remarkably still and focused, with little fidgeting or other visible signs of discomfort or distraction. As one woman put it, even in the silence and meditation, participants feel deeply connected: “One thing, there’s a way I feel like a participant there even with it as quiet as it is and I don’t know if it’s just the candle and the ritual, but I don’t feel like I’m a spectator. I don’t feel like I’m just sitting in the pew. I do feel really connected. It feels like a very adult community experience. And part of that again is because everybody wants to be there.” Edwards

(2009), focusing on African-American worship, describes this rise of participatory worship in progressive and liberal religious communities.

The Nordic and Celtic cultural music appeal to nearly all of those with whom we spoke. People told us that the music enhances meditation and reflection: “I enjoy the music, the drumming in the Celtic celebration sets off the silence for meditation quite nicely.” One interview participant said, “[the] singer for the Nordic services who was absolutely haunting, like scary as hell. It was perfect. It was wonderful.” While some simply enjoy it for its musical quality, others find it deeply spiritual: “And the music is always fascinating in just the sense of calm and deep spirituality that’s there.”

A major theme in the interviews was participants’ appreciation for a lack of specific mention of doctrine and a de-emphasis on the Bible, which was always balanced by readings from other sources. It is hard to over-emphasize how much the use of alternative, non-Biblical texts appeals to many who attend. One person said, “What I like most is the Word section because it’s not preaching and it’s voices from so many different sources and again it’s a non-reason oriented experience.” Another noted, “Right from the very beginning was the fact that there were these readings and it wasn’t all Scripture.” This is different from what many are used to, and that difference is noted and valued. One person told us, “Well I think that including readings that are not Biblical is very unique. Not a lot of worship services do that so I think that’s very different.” Another said, “But almost every time I come I’m amazed at the way they intertwine the theme with these different readings and there’s always something that helps me make meaning and I think that’s what faith development is all about and that’s what helping me grow.”

The use of non-Biblical texts, including poetry, in the Word section is part of what makes this service appealing to the participants who do not strongly identify – or identify at all – as Christian. One of the first people I interviewed, a retired pilot in his 60s who attends regularly with his wife, told me that “You don’t need to be Christian” to enjoy the services and that he finds it easy to tolerate the relatively few mentions of Jesus. He identifies as post-Christian, as do two of the other people I interviewed. (In addition, another person identified as pagan, two preferred not to identify in any particular way; the rest identified as Christian.) One woman explained it this way: “There are pieces of it that are recognizable, but then they combine what I believe in my own spirituality which is basically a pre-Christian Celtic paganism, it combines that pre-Christian spirituality with a ritual and some structuring but it’s very open and ecumenical in many ways.”

Even Christian participants valued this approach to “official” church doctrine, as this man, who was raised Lutheran and went to a small Lutheran college told me, “Journey’s approach to theology is one of self-determination. These aren’t doctrine, these aren’t mandates, these aren’t ‘take ‘em or leave ‘em’ or ‘my way or the highway’ type of precepts in our church.” Journey’s lay leaders support this approach to the evening worship services, one of the congregation’s leadership team told me in his interview, because it fits with the congregation’s larger mission and motivation for outreach:

The last thing is our hungry minds and souls – is our mission statement. And I think that we often talk about Journey being a home for de-churched, people coming from not being part of a church community for a long time, and I think that’s an interesting way to describe Journey too because it does describe the open, searching environment that we, I think, maintain both in the Sunday services, but certainly in

the evening services... they're unassuming, they're easy to enter and you can take from them what you want to based on your own place and thought process or whatever.

For some of those who attend these services, the experience is deeply moving, providing a sense of feeling rejuvenation, as this man explained:

How do I feel after these services? I think it varies. I think there are times when I feel filled and refreshed and renewed. There are times when it brings forth in me some things I didn't expect. I've been real close to tears sometimes when I've left and thankfully for all of these folks I laugh a lot afterwards. So I think it varies.

That's all I can say, it varies. Most of the time though I feel renewed and refreshed.

Sometimes, the worship rituals work to create a sense of timelessness and liminality for participants, as this woman told us:

I just need to go and sit and worship and not worry about what's going on behind the scenes. I just need to not worry about that for a little while. And after a while I got to the point where I was feeling I had something missing. I needed an outlet for this passion that I have. I'd never dreamed I would be sucked in quite so deeply as I am, but it has provided an outlet for me to express that... I was watching everyone go up to communion and it was dark, it was dark out, and all the sudden I kind of had this feeling of being in a timeless place, like this had gone on for centuries. Like I could be in any century and I would be experiencing this one thing.

Another worshipper described this sense of timelessness this way: "... there's something about the Celtic service that feels very ancient to me in the way it's done and it really, I

don't know, it just strikes a chord... There's not a sense of denomination to it. There's more a sense of, I feel, an ancient tradition." This sense of timelessness and ancientness experienced by some participants is appealing both for its ability to provide a feeling of mystery or awe to the service and its connection to ancient religious or spiritual wisdom.

The appeal of these services is in their emphasis on quiet and contemplation, in the music, and in the open and inclusive nature of the language and symbols used. In in-depth interviews, people also told us that these things make these services unique and of unique value; when asked, people would say that these services were "very important" to them, and one woman said they were "essential" for her. So what kind of commitment do participants have to these services? How does participation in them fit into an overall profile of religious or spiritual practice?

Journey's contemplative services have been able to draw people in consistently from their beginnings: 50% of our survey respondents said they had been attending for more than three years, while 27% had begun attending the year prior to our survey. This bears out the observation of the pastor and the lay worship leaders; there is a consistent core of members who have attended since the beginning of each service, but both services also consistently draw in new members resulting in growing and dynamic worshipping communities.

Our survey reveals a great deal of emotional attachment to these services; we asked people on our survey to say how important the worship service was to them, on a scale of 1 to 10 "with 1 being not at all important and 10 being utmost importance" – 18% of survey respondents responded with a 10, and fully 65% rated responded with an 8 or higher. Fewer than 10% said 4 or lower. This sense of importance is also evidenced in the interviews.

The lead author interviewed one woman who attends the Celtic service with her husband;

she said “I attend the Nordic as often as I can. We *have* to attend the Celtic service.” Another told us, “So I’m very fond of them. I think of them as really core to Journey’s identity.” On our survey, more than 50% of respondents told us they attend 5 or more of the 8 services in a year.

For the most part, participation in these services complements other forms of religious and spiritual practice, rather than serving as a substitute for them. More than 80% of our survey respondents told us they also regularly attend a Sunday morning worship service somewhere (only 18% attend Sunday services at Journey, the hosting congregation). Most are weekly church-attenders (60%), and 17% attend at least once or twice per month. One participant was very articulate about this in our interview, saying that

the Celtic and the Nordic services feel like supplemental worship opportunities for us, of a different kind than what we may seek out for Sunday morning, which just add something. They’re not a substitute for Sunday morning, but they add something that’s really important, that we, that I really need.

It is important to note that they are not all participants in the evening worship services are looking for a “home church,” and this is true not only for those who attend Sunday services elsewhere, but for those who only attend these evening services. Several interviewees told us that they had “done that” at other points in their lives and that now they were simply looking for a place to worship, a place that did not make other demands on them – to sit on committees and “run things” or to be around all the time and “make friends.” A lay leader at Journey Lutheran told us that for many the Sunday night services are enough, saying “They come, they don’t attend a church, they’re not members of a church, but they come for these evening services, and some probably go both to the Nordic and the Celtic... I didn’t find a single member, I’m sure there were some, but I didn’t find a single member but I found people who have that [worship service] as a repeated connection.” Put simply, coming to

these services does not necessarily indicate a desire for it to serve as a space for community or a sense of “being home” (Wuthnow 1998a).

Our survey shows that those who attend these services also regularly engage in other types of spiritual practice besides Sunday morning Christian worship, whether contemplative or not. Nearly 30% reported that they regularly participate in activities such as Taizé worship, evensong services, Native American practices, pagan rituals, yoga, meditation, and Bible study groups. Some of these services, such as the Native American and pagan rituals, represent a departure from the Christian tradition. Taizé seems to be particularly popular as it has a similar structure and aesthetic as the Celtic and Nordic services. Survey respondents who attend both see them as spiritually comparable: “So, for me, these services are like Taizé.”

### **Blurred Boundaries and Varieties of Religious Experience**

Journey Lutheran’s contemplative services were intentionally designed as an outreach to the de-churched. As the lead pastor told us,

I sometimes say it’s like they’re gathered figuratively on the front steps of the church, not willing to fully forsake the faith communities of their childhood, maybe, and every now and then they get up from those steps of hope, and peer in the figurative stain-glass windows and like, are they still doing whatever it is that drove them away. ‘Is it safe for me to come back yet?’ So the Sunday night services have been part of that portal of return, for many people, like a safer place.

Culture work (Becker 1998) often has unintended consequences, and despite the intention to focus on the de-churched, that constituency is only a small portion of those who have come to participate in Celtic and Nordic services at Journey Lutheran. The substantial majority of those

who regularly attend these innovative services also regularly attend traditional church services, and many hold leadership positions in other congregations and engage in other forms of spiritual practice. In fact, rather than being de-churched, most of those who responded to our worship service survey are *more* actively involved in church and religious life than the average American.

There were some exceptions to this dominant pattern, however. About 20% of those responding to our survey indicated that they do not attend other church-related activities; for this group, the Sunday night contemplative services are their major or only involvement in a religious community. Our in-depth interviews give some insight why some choose to be regularly involved in the Celtic and Nordic services but not elsewhere. Several of those we interviewed had experienced long stretches of time when they were not involved in a church, but they had continued to search, off and on, for a church where they might feel comfortable. For example the couple who talked about previous experiences with churches that felt too excluding, the young woman who told us that her pastor growing up was too harsh and judgmental, and the two older women told us that their values did not mesh well with the values of the religious communities in which they were raised – these were all currently active participants in the Celtic and Nordic worship services who had spent long stretches of their adult or young adult lives not attending church. For them, the Celtic and Nordic services are a good fit, but more traditional religious communities still feel uncomfortable. The woman who currently puts together the Word section of the Celtic service was also de-churched for a stretch of several years; she had a feeling of burnout after years of being “everybody’s good girl” and taking on too much committee work at a former church; she found out about the Celtic service through a friend, and it was her pathway back into regular worship.

More generally, it seems that one of the strengths of Journey Lutheran's contemplative services is that they blur the boundaries between Christian and non-Christian, member and non-member, spiritual and religious. This makes it possible for the formerly de-churched to feel comfortable, but it also attracts a broader set of constituencies of those who prefer loose connections and favor liberal theology. These constituencies are *the contemplatives, religious leaders, host congregation members, and intermittent participants*. While not tightly bounded and exclusive, these are worth considering as distinct constituencies because they are drawn to the services for different reasons and, taken as a whole, their styles of commitment are distinct as well.

The core constituency is the *contemplatives*. They comprise the longest-term members and are likely to volunteer to serve as ushers or to read for the Word section of the services. A few of the contemplatives are members of the host congregation and have gone on trips to Scotland, led by the pastor, to visit the Iona community, which engages in ancient forms of Celtic spiritual practice. Others simply found out about these services through the directory published by the retreat center or through the contemplative newsletter published by another congregation in the area. Some of the contemplatives are religious leaders in other congregations, and some are among the de-churched, who are not seeking a new church home but rather a worshipping community. All of the contemplatives are intentional in seeking out these services for the silent meditation and reflection time. They tend to engage in other forms of contemplative worship, such as Taize, meditation, yoga, and other Christian contemplative practices like Lectio Divina, Christian meditation, or the walking of labyrinths. For the contemplatives, these services offer a change of worship style from the traditional Sunday morning service and a chance to engage in relatively rare

form of communal worship that resonates well with their own religious and spiritual preferences.

Another constituency consists of clergy and religious professionals who serve as *religious leaders*, including deacons, pastors, youth ministers, and religious education professionals for other congregations, or who serve the area's hospitals and schools as chaplains. In interviews and on both surveys, they frequently described the Celtic and Nordic services as a place to relax and "be fed." The services are appealing to the clergy because they serve as a break from the pressure of facilitating worship and allow religious leaders to enjoy, be present, and actively engage in the worship. The 6:51 pm start time also makes these services feasible for religious leaders who have professional commitments each Sunday morning. Finally, as a deacon in a local United Methodist congregation told me, it is a joy for a religious professional to attend worship services that are "beautiful, just beautiful," where worship is a priority and the aesthetics really matter. In our survey of worship service attenders, 18% of respondents reported serving as paid clergy in some capacity, and another 20% told us they served as a lay leader in an unpaid position (vestry and committee members, small group leaders, etc.).

There is a relatively small constituency of *host congregation members* who were introduced to these services through Journey Lutheran's Sunday morning services. For them, participating in these services expresses their membership in the larger Journey Lutheran community. In interviews, they told us that they see the contemplative evening services as an important and integral part of the broader Journey Lutheran Church community. They have pride in them – in their beauty, in the quality of the musical performance, and in their success in drawing in so many people.

Some of them also worry about the sustainability of these Sunday evening services; financially, it is a stretch to support two monthly services not primarily aimed at the core congregation. In the two Adult Forum discussions I led, which were attended by 25-30 people each, this topic received lengthy discussion, as it did in my interviews with the pastor and the lay leaders at Journey. There was a consensus among lay leaders at Journey, as conveyed by the interviews and the interactions at the Sunday morning forums, that these services are an important form of outreach, but also that there needed to be an appeal for more financial support from those who attend them. That appeal has since been made, via an explicit request for financial support made during the announcement period after several Sunday evening services in a row and via a message sent out to the Sunday evening email list (comprised mostly of longer-term worship participants). Contributions have increased, but this will no doubt be a recurring discussion.

The fact that many attend these worship services regularly, but do not become – or wish to become – church members is a challenge for some of Journey Lutheran’s lay leaders. What does membership mean, if not regular participation at worship? Why is church-membership a barrier for those who are otherwise regularly involved, and clearly happy with that involvement? In the focus groups, when people would say that they wanted to be part of a worshipping community but not a member of an organization, their statements were met with respect – but this blurring of what “membership” and “community” mean and a preference for a looser form of attachment is something that not all of Journey’s lay leaders truly understand.

Finally, there is one constituency that is difficult to describe in a meaningful way, and that is the *intermittent participants*. Intermittent participants may only come once, though some attend once or twice a year. They are not connected to the broader Journey

Lutheran community nor to the other participants in Journey's contemplative evening services. Most did not fill our worship service survey. A few of these "visitors" were included in interviews, after being directly approached by the lead author on the way out of the sanctuary after the evening worship service, and several more were included in informal conversations after the worship service, in the hallway or at coffee hour. However, several requests for interviews were turned down for this group.

The intermittent visitors we were able to speak with expressed appreciation for the flexibility of commitment and the fact that they can come and go as they please. One of them told me over coffee and cookies one night that,

I would hate being on committees and I feel like that's okay at Journey. I feel like that's okay. Like you can enter in the water at whatever level you want to and actually I was a little more leery of dipping my toes in the water when we got here.

In response to a question about his home church, one intermittent participant said, "That's a process of discernment and basically there are various churches that seem to meet my needs in different ways." One group of intermittent visitors attends a college nearby; on the way out of the church one night, two of these young women (attending as part of a group of 6) explained that it was fun to come to these services "occasionally" – and depending on the demands of the academic calendar.

### **Sacralization and Moral Community**

Both the Celtic and the Nordic worship services thrive in part because of their ability to satisfy different constituencies and to provide a meaningful religious experience for those who are looking for a quiet, contemplative worship opportunity in an environment that is open, inclusive, and not dominated by statements of orthodox Christian doctrine.

Worshipping together creates a variety of meaningful religious experiences for the various constituencies that fill up the nave two Sunday evenings a month. But worship not only creates religious experience for those who participate in it; worship is also a collective act that results in the sacralization of some symbols and the de-sacralization of others. What is made sacred in these worship services? And what kind of moral community emerges around these sacred symbols?

Both Celtic and Nordic contemplative services place huge significance on nature and on experiencing a deep spiritual connection to the natural world. Both of these worship services sacralize nature through repeated, rich, varied invocation of symbols of the natural world, and a discursive placement of humankind *within* creation which is intentionally offered to counter other Christian understandings of mankind having dominion *over* creation. This sacralization of nature and humankind's connection with it is evidenced in the readings, especially the non-Biblical ones, and in the music, and it is a major theme of discussion for those we interviewed. The readings frequently used nature and living things as metaphors for God, spirituality, and community. For example, a Word section reading at a Celtic service described a tree with its roots and branches as a metaphorically nurturing and spiritual entity. These themes are also present in many songs in Celtic and Nordic services. For instance, a song during a fall Celtic service included the lyrics, "Words on the wind. Milkweed, grasses. Clouds, sky, willow river song. This night a prayer, quiet talk with God." The lay leader who puts together the Word section of the Nordic services told me that she always experiences God most directly and intimately in nature, and always works nature themes into the Word section and into the prayers (which she often leads as well). It is not just that images of nature appear; it is that they appear in every service and are repeated over the course of each service using a rich vocabulary of words and images. In interviews, people told us how

this drew them to the service; for example, one participant described her longstanding connection between spirituality, God, and nature this way: “I am also a farmer's daughter, so finding God in nature has always been my experience . . . even as a child.”

Journey's contemplative services also sacralize God, but they do so in a way that greatly differs from traditional Christian worship services. There are no images of or references to God as patriarchal, judgmental, and references to the Trinity are made in contemporary language, using contemporary metaphors that do not invoke patriarchal meanings. Rather, the readings and songs of these contemplative services allow for God to be understood in flexible and metaphorical ways – even as an ambiguous universal spirit which might or might not be a being, might or might not have a will. The readings in the Word sections describe God as healing, forgiving, supportive, mysterious, and ubiquitous (“God is around us, inside us, above us, supporting us, God of our yesterday, today, tomorrow, present, God of our soul and our sleep and our mind and our relationship”). This is important to participants, and many of those we spoke to were explicit about why this matters to them. For example, one interviewee said, “I do like the wider embrace to say God isn't dead, God wasn't contained in scripture, there's a broader place for God's activity in the world than the stories that were captured in our canon.” In this way, the worship service participants are able to understand and connect to God in a personal way through a shared communal journey, which makes the service more meaningful and spiritual in their lives. This language and construction of the sacred also cultivates Journey Lutheran's sense of inclusivity.

This flexibility and metaphorical sacralization of God facilitates to the leaders' deliberate attempts to reach the de-churched, who may reject traditional religious doctrine about God. But this way of sacralizing God is also appealing to the constituency of religious leaders who attend these services, most of whom are affiliated with liberal Protestant denominations and many of

whom are familiar with liberal Christian theology that rejects certain aspects of traditional Christian orthodoxy. As one man, a chaplain with a Masters of Divinity, told me, he's not really sure he believes in the doctrine of atonement anymore; he's been reading about it on his own, and he thinks he agrees with theological interpretations that reject the need for atonement. In a discussion after one of the Celtic services with several United Methodist religious leaders who routinely attend, they all agreed that they like this service in part because of its flexible theology which is compatible with their own; when I asked for an example of what they meant, one referred me to the works of Marcus Borg. Other religious leaders and professionals I spoke to mentioned a range of liberal religious thinkers and theologians, including contemplatives John Philip Newell and Thomas Keating. For people like this, the way that God is sacralized at these services resonates with their beliefs and experiences far more profoundly than would traditional God-images or orthodox doctrinal statements.

The Journey Lutheran's evening services are also unique in the way they construct femininity and the body as sacred. This is largely accomplished through the vivid imagery frequently described in the Word sections. This can be seen in the following excerpt: "The love of being food for someone, the joy of bursting forth with fruit, of the scattering of one's seed." Images of fecundity, of birthing, of embodiment, of blood (menstrual and birthing) are common in the Word sections, as are images of the things that women have traditionally done – feeding and caring for children, the making of a home. In addition to this imagery of birth and reproduction, care-taking and home-making, God is characterized using both masculine and feminine pronouns and titles. "We gather in the Name of God, Mother and Father of All, and of Jesus, the Word made Flesh." The progressive and inclusive depiction of God helps to attract the formerly de-churched who often reject traditional religious doctrines as outdated, backwards, and misogynistic. However, this embracing of the feminine is also broadly appealing to the other

constituencies that comprise the core worship attenders, including the liberal religious leaders, the contemplatives, and the members of the larger host congregation.

While the sacralization of nature, God, and the feminine mark the Celtic and Nordic services as unique and innovative, the relative lack of emphasis on Jesus, doctrine, and rules is equally important. It is not that Journey's contemplative services are constructing Jesus or traditional doctrine as profane. Rather, they are de-centering these elements in the evening worship spaces so as to broadly appeal to participants with many spiritual and religious values. The significance and importance of the lack of these traditionally sacred elements became very clear during interviews. One man, a member of the host congregation and a regular participant in both evening services, articulated these common themes quite well:

I guess I kind of consider myself Christian in the sense that I believe that Jesus lived and was a person with a real strong connection to the spirit. Obviously as I've said earlier I don't think there was a virgin birth. I don't think he ascended into heaven, but that doesn't mean that the things that he said weren't relevant.

It is worth noting that this de-centering of Jesus is not consonant with the spirituality of many who attend the church's main Sunday morning worship services. However, it is also not offensive, and in fact, there are those who identify as Christian and who attend Journey's morning services regularly who nevertheless appreciate the de-centering of these traditional elements in the evening services. One of Journey's lay leaders told us that

I'm not that much a Jesus person really... I like the story and I think he was a fabulous man and an incredible leader and a great role model and had great teachings and was totally counter-cultural and a very brilliant person... I go back and forth on whether I actually think he's son of God or whether I think he's... whether we're all

children of God and therefore, he is the son of God as well as all of us. So I feel really welcomed, though. I don't even feel like I need to commit to Jesus more than I do at Journey.

These comments were typical, not exceptional, and for worshippers like this, traditional Christian services emphasize Jesus' sacred nature and divine character too much. By de-centering Jesus as a sacred figure in Journey's contemplative services, it allows for participants with a wide variety of religious beliefs to find the services meaningful and spiritual. For participants like those quoted above and the de-churched, the lack of description of Jesus as sacred allows them to attend a worship service that does not feel like the traditional services that are not as personally meaningful to them. And for Journey members who fall on the more liberal end of the theological spectrum, the evening services satisfy a need for a form of worship consonant with their own beliefs, and strengthen their commitment to the church as a whole. That type of service with an emphasis on Jesus, sin, and creeds would not be as meaningful or effective; as one woman told us, she likes the evening service because it is "not too cluttered up with doctrines and dogmas and all this other stuff that nobody wants anymore." However, the services are careful not to alienate members who do view Jesus as divine, including members of the clergy who attend. In this way, participants are able to take from the services what they want.

This combination of sacred and profane elements results in a moral community of religious seekers. Both the Celtic and Nordic services are a way for the participants to explore spiritual and religious ideas and themes via reflection on Biblical and non-Biblical texts without a strict adherence to doctrine and traditional religious rules. This is reflected in the congregation's name, Journey Lutheran. Participants are on a spiritual journey of discovery (c.f. Besecke 2013). As such, these services work, in part, because they blur boundaries that religious

communities usually work hard to maintain. For example, the de-centering of Jesus is a boundary-blurring practice. It appeals to the non-Christian but also to many liberal Christians to whom a Christian identity is very important (the questioning of Jesus' divinity corresponds to a strong trend within liberal Christian theology). The de-centering of doctrine and the desacralization of patriarchal God-images are important to the constituency of religious professionals because they do not have to espouse traditional beliefs and narratives that do not match their own liberal Christian beliefs; it also draws in those who think of themselves as de-churched, post-Christian, or pagan, and those who wish to eschew such labels altogether.

The lead pastor made it clear that this blurring of the lines between "members" and "non-members" or Christian and non-Christian was intentional and built in from the beginning. In one interview, the pastor asked rhetorically, "What's our goal? Is it to make you a Pilgrim member? Well no, I don't think so. But is it to invite you to live the life of faith and community because we believe that's part of what it's about." By de-emphasizing the distinction between "member" and "non-member," the services centralize the focus on ritual and communal spiritual experiences. The pastor went on to say,

So sometimes I think what have we done, these Sunday night services are just kind of another expression of that isn't it for people. Not criticizing the ritual experience but the kind of what's happening between people. As simple as the old here's the vertical axis where you relate to God, here's the horizontal axis where you relate to one another.

These services offer this really well.

Some of those who attend these services thrive on this openness and find it stimulating, as does this man, who I sought out for an interview at the close of the first Nordic worship service I attended:

I was so delighted to read recently that there's a mini trend developing now of people having two churches and I was startled because I thought, 'Well, my gosh, this somehow relates to my sense of not looking to one church to fulfill all my needs...' So I've been to Evangelical churches, I've been to Assemblies of God, I've been to the Hindu temple. . . , I've been to the Buddhist temple . . . I've been to the Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois, I've been to spiritual churches so-called, the non-denominational Evangelical churches, I've been to the temple of ECK . . . ”

Others can find that this seeking can feel, “baseless, a little . . . just lacking in roots.” Wuthnow (1998a) notes that one of the reasons that communities of spiritual practice form is to combat the alienation that can accompany seeker spirituality. At Journey, the evening services provide that combination of spiritual connection with the opportunity to connect with other worships if and as one desires to do so.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The worshipping communities that have formed around the Nordic and Celtic services have thrived by embracing the factors that many have posited as responsible for the decline of mainline Protestant traditions – liberal theological and social teachings, low boundaries, an emphasis on ritual and experience over doctrine (Iannaccone 1994). A strongly bounded or strict church would not work for the liberal religious constituencies, or for those preferring loose connections and non-traditional forms of participation. Of course, one study of two thriving worship services cannot speak compellingly to the much larger historical trend of mainline Protestant decline. However, our analysis does suggest that there is no *logical* relationship between liberal theology and a lack of vitality; to the contrary, by making liberal theological

elements central to these worship services, both of these services have attracted a large and committed following.

Of course, Journey Lutheran's contemplative worship services were not begun as an attempt to increase the membership or attendance of a struggling congregation; it was already a growing congregation when its leaders decided to do something innovative to try to attract the de-churched. The fact that these innovative worship services unintentionally attracted a set of mostly religious, highly involved, and theologically liberal constituencies shows that there was a need that had been unfilled. In its use of non-Biblical texts, its Sunday evening timing, its ambiguous and non-hierarchical god-talk, in its flexibility about membership and its lack of pressure to do more than worship, these services grew overnight to some of the largest mainline Protestant evening worship services in the area.

The success of these services has been noted by other area pastors. An increasing number of congregations have begun offering contemplative worship services in the metro area. Even more have introduced contemplative elements into their evening worship services, especially rituals that involve the lighting of candles and the inclusion of extended periods of silence marked off by the sounding of a gong or other musical instrument. At two different coffee hours following the Celtic services, I encountered lay leaders who sit on the worship committees of other area churches who were coming to these services to get ideas to take home to their own churches for innovative worship practices.

In one sense, the innovative worship services at Journey Lutheran are best understood as one of many kinds of changes occurring in mainstream religious institutions as they respond to changing commitment styles. These changes include emerging church movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014) and other practices that are challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship between religious community, spirituality, and church membership (Ammerman

2014). All of these changes are being inspired by the desire of church-leaders to either attract those who have become religiously disaffiliated or to proactively stem the tide of disaffiliation. Our analysis shows that institutional changes that attempt to target the de-churched may or may not work to draw in a large segment of this constituency. However, changes targeted to the de-churched may have a much broader impact on religious institutions by institutionalizing liberal theology in new and innovative ways that attract contemplatives, religious professionals, and other liberal Christian seekers, and by blurring the boundaries of the community and encouraging the experimentation with new forms of participation that rework the meaning and practice of membership.

We are aware that the “seeker” label is sometimes used to indicate an orientation to spiritual practice that is flighty, shallow, or consumerist. We do not use the term this way, and could not, given how much evidence we have of the sustained, often life-long nature of the spiritual journeys engaged in by these worship service participants. Many of the people we interviewed and who answered our survey spend a great deal of time engaged in religious and spiritual practice and quite a few support this service with financial donations (some of these also donating to other religious communities at the same time). While the intermittent participants come and go, the majority of the people in the pews on any given Sunday night find the experience to be important to them, a source of sustained joy and renewal.

Wuthnow (1998a) pointed out the challenges of incorporating those with a “seeker” style of spirituality into sustained communities of practice. These challenges are apparent at Journey Lutheran, as members of the host congregation debate whether the services mainly serve as “outreach” to outsiders or whether they are an integral part of the larger congregational community, and as those who attend the Celtic and Nordic services recognize that sustaining them will require at least some commitment of resources, both financial and temporal, if they are

to continue to thrive. These challenges, however, seem outweighed by the commitment that the worshippers have to the evening services and the pride that host congregation members feel in their success.

Riesebrodt (2010) argues that religious experience is defined by communal practice of rituals, and Taves (2009) reminds us that when communities practice rituals, they create the sacred, the profane, and a moral community. There is nothing inherently sacred about nature and our connection to it, about a sense of God as a universal spirit or a mystery, about the feminine and the fecund. Silence and candle light do not have to create a sense of well-being and calm (they could evoke a sense of fear and deprivation). Likewise, “ancient” practices may or may not seem relevant to contemporary worshipers, and their authenticity is constructed, not natural. All of these elements were made sacred at Journey Lutheran through the ritual of repeated communal worship. In this way, the seekers at Journey have come to have meaningful and sustained religious and spiritual experiences (Roof and Landres 1997), and they have created a moral community that emphasizes worship over membership, shared ritual practice over doctrine, the feminine and masculine in balance, and humans as a part of creation and nature instead of outside and above it. They are seekers who choose not to go on seeking alone, but rather in the context of a worshiping community. The contemplative worship services that were meant to attract the de-churched have attracted a much broader set of constituencies who differ in their religious trajectories, but who are united by their preference for liberal theology and loose connections, and who have together forged thriving and innovative communities of spiritual practice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Latino Catholics have grown in numbers due to immigration (Chaves 2011), and evangelical Protestants held off decline through the 1990s due to higher birth rates and younger age at birth among their members (Greeley and Hout 2006).

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