The Missing Voice: 
Discovering the Alternative Faith Practice of Christian Emerging Adults in Canada

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emmanuel College 
and the Toronto School of Theology
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Emmanuel College and the University of Toronto

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Abstract

Statistics show ever-dwindling attendance at public worship and a growing proportion of Canadians who are choosing “none” as their religion. The continued absence of 18 to 30 year olds (“emerging adults”) from congregations in which I have served has led me to this study. I work with emerging adults in my ministry as a new church planter. While they express a strong faith and sense of Christian identity, they rarely associate with local congregations. The central questions of this research are: How are English-speaking Canadian emerging adults who identify as Christian, but who do not participate in a regular way with a local congregation, living out their faith? What sort of religious practices do they engage in? What are the beliefs, values and worldviews that lay under these practices? Perspective into the nature of this cohort and the reasons why they are absent from local congregations is gained through the disciplines of theology, sociology and anthropology. This study uses the metaphor of Exodus, ritual studies and life cycle theory to explore the faith and practice of Christian emerging adults, who have not yet been studied in the English-speaking Canadian context. Using a Grounded Theory approach,
interviews were conducted with 14 individuals from Ontario, British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Surprisingly, their practice appears to be relatively traditional and decidedly religious in nature. However, they understand the notion of community in a different way than previous generations and so create “networked communities,” blending offline and online relationships. These emerging adults are not actively seeking engagement with the church. However, if the church were to listen to and hear them, they would be open to having a conversation. Canada’s premier sociologist of religion, Reginald Bibby, declares that while the church may be in decline, the religiosity of Canadians remains strong. This study shows that as far as these emerging adults are concerned, Bibby has spoken the truth.
Acknowledgements

The inception and creation of this research project has been a labour of love. I am indebted to so many people for their ongoing support through a long and arduous process.

To the participants in this study, thank you for being courageous and vulnerable enough to share your deepest thoughts, feelings and reflections. Your stories bring me hope.

To the four congregations I have served during the five years of this program (Summerville Christian Church, Milton Christian Church, Guelph Christian Church, and Sugarbush Christian Church), thank you for giving me all the time I needed to focus on being a student. You understood my love of the church and my desire to use my gifts for her benefit.

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To my parents, Allen and Frances Boyes, thank you for the faith you taught me as a child. Thank you for loving me enough to take me to church. Your example of what it means to live in the footsteps of Jesus has guided me all the days of my life and I am thankful.
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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to all the Christian emerging adults in Canada who struggle to keep faith. It was the generation born in the desert that found the way into the Promised Land. So tell your stories, share your faith, and hold fast onto hope. You are Christ’s church for a new age…and you are not alone.
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Chapter 1: Background and Context

1.1 Current Ministry Context

I was raised in the Protestant church. Active all through my childhood and youth, I, like so many, left during my late teen years. I returned in my mid-twenties to raise my children there, honouring a promise made years before. I had often thought about becoming a pastor, but I perceived too many issues with the church as it was: in-fighting, dusty rituals and tired stories, too many words and not enough action. Eventually I came to understand that the church was far more than words, rituals and buildings. It was the community that had the resources and network to enact significant change in the world. I felt that if it could only come together, spend less time on rules and regulations that seemed to strangle its energy and life, and focus on living the Love of God for all, then people would celebrate and be transformed. Perhaps even, the people my age who hadn’t darkened the door since grandma brought them to Sunday School would come back and see the potential that I saw.

I made the decision to be ordained to ministry. I pursued and achieved my Master of Divinity and was ordained in 2006 into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada and the United States. Shortly after, I was called to serve my first pastorate, a two-point charge in rural Nova Scotia. It was there, serving in a congregation populated mostly by seniors that I began to notice more keenly the absence of youth and emerging adults. Sitting in the balcony of an empty rural Nova Scotia church which has stood on its foundation for over 150 years, I was asked by a parishioner, “Where are all the young people? Why don’t they come to church? Why do they never seem to come to church?” I didn’t have an answer, but could only shrug my shoulders and wonder.
No matter what kind of program we put in place, we couldn’t seem to draw them in. Although I had good relationships with many teenagers and twenty-somethings through the work I did with summer camping programs, these never developed into any of them taking an interest in regular congregational life. They gathered with me for Bible study in groups in their homes, and we met one-on-one to talk about Christianity, God and faith. I baptised many of them over the five years that I was there, and a rare few attended services sporadically. Their responses, when I would inquire as to why they had not found a congregation to call home would invariably be, “I don’t fit in,” “It’s not my style,” “It’s boring,” “I can live my faith doing things outside the church more than sitting listening to a sermon,” and the like. It was a conundrum, not only for me, but for many congregation members whose children had also left the church as youth and emerging adults, never to return.

It was during this time in Nova Scotia that I began my studies in the Doctor of Ministry program at the Toronto School of Theology. The question of why emerging adults were absent from our congregations was at the centre of my quest for knowledge and learning. I was not interested in learning about emerging adults so that I could help design new programs to draw them into the traditional church, but rather, my interest lay in meeting them where they were, to hear of their experiences and learn how they were living out their faith outside of the church buildings and congregations I know so well.

In 2011, I responded to a call from my denomination’s New Church Ministries arm and a local congregation to come to Guelph, Ontario to begin a new church plant. There were a handful of people from a dying congregation who dreamed that something new could happen in Guelph, and I was given carte blanche to create a new Disciples congregation. The sale of the church’s building a few years prior has funded this enterprise since its inception. I was brought in as a
“parachute drop” planter, meaning there was no community within which to begin to build, and the location was new to me (I had only one connection here). My task was to move into a neighbourhood that I deemed had the best chance to welcome and support a new congregation, begin an assessment of what was there and what was needed, and then begin to gather people together into a new faith community. My Doctor of Ministry studies proved to be an excellent jumping off point to begin conversations with emerging adults and youth whom I met in my first few months in Guelph. Specifically, learning about the nuances of this cohort with respect to theories and scholarship concerning their cognitive, emotional and spiritual states opened up new ground for me to begin conversations and explore faith in significantly different ways than I had been taught in seminary. For the emerging adults I met, encountering a leader in the church interested in how they “do faith,” rather than expecting them to conform to existing paradigms seemed to be something new and exciting. Most had tried church before and had tales of disappointment, dismissal, and heart-break to tell. But many were willing to take a chance to try something new.

I pastor this growing congregation of approximately fifty individuals, more than two-thirds of whom are under the age of thirty. Sugarbush Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a theologically progressive, non-traditional expression of church, has no permanent home, but rents space in a cafeteria for weekly worship in the West end of Guelph, a mostly-working class, young, ethnically diverse area, nestled within the suburbs of a rapidly growing, progressive city. Over the past four years, I have encouraged participants to build strong relationships with one another and from there, programs will arise which attend to the needs of the groups which form organically.
As pastor, I perform all the duties of any other pastor: I cast and interpret the vision, preach, lead fellowship groups, studies and classes, baptise, perform funerals and weddings, visit and provide pastoral care, and perform a variety of administrative functions. As a church planter, I spend the majority of my time in a mentorship role, working with youth and emerging adults to train them in leadership skills and assist them in exploring their vocational identity both inside and outside of the church. Since many do not have any substantial prior involvement with the church, nothing can be assumed when it comes to forming leaders. While I may know the traditional “way of doing things,” I am also a learner and leave space for these new leaders to add their wisdom to the experience.

1.2 The Research Problem & Reasons for the Study

Over the past nine years in my capacity as pastor, both in traditional and non-traditional English-speaking congregations, emerging adults have shared with me their faith, wisdom, and desire to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In the same breath, they express their frustration at the institutional church’s seeming inertia and distance from their own lived experience. Age is a factor for many emerging adults who would venture into congregations if there were people their own age there. Why this is has little to do with age-ism and much more to do with a disconnection emerging adults perceive between themselves and older generations with respect to culture, experience and worldview. Those younger than thirty have grown up in a world very different than their predecessors. The blindingly fast rate of global change with respect to technology and communication has been the only reality they have ever known. It is difficult for either group (those older than thirty and those younger) to bridge the pre/post-internet gap that exists in our memories and experiences. It is exactly the reality of living in a different world than our forebears and the church’s uneasy voyage of self-understanding in this world that leads
me to the central question at the heart of my Doctor of Ministry studies and which has driven my research: **How are English-speaking Canadian emerging adults who identify as Christian, but who do not participate in a regular way with a local congregation, living out their faith? How do what they practice and believe stretch the current definitions, presuppositions, and understanding of what it means to be the church?** In essence, what sort of practices do they engage in to grow and nurture their faith and understand the Divine? What are their beliefs, values and worldviews that lay under these practices?

Underlying these issues of emerging adult religiosity are three key questions which, when explored, add significant depth not only to this research, but to our understanding of the overarching context of faith and Christian experience in English-speaking Canada:

- What, if anything, makes the English-speaking Canadian context distinct and unique, especially in comparison to the American context (where most academic research and popular reporting on issues of faith and religiosity originate in North America)?

- Why is it important to seek out the voice of non-participating Christian emerging adults, who are among the under-represented or marginalized?

- What should be the response (if any) from English-speaking Canadian mainstream churches to these findings?

Perspective into the nature of this cohort and the reasons why they do not actively engage in any substantial way in local congregations can be gained through the disciplines of theology, sociology and anthropology. This study draws on these disciplines to explore the fundamental issues facing English-speaking Christian emerging adults, which have not yet been considered in the Canadian context, that influence their involvement (or lack thereof) in Christian
congregations. But before we begin to address these matters, let us first consider the cohort itself, the context within which it resides and why English-speaking Canadian emerging adult Christians warrants further research and attention.

1.2 (a) The Canadian vs American Context

One of the challenges that I have encountered throughout my ministry and especially during the work of this Doctor of Ministry degree has been the availability of resources that speak specifically to and of the English-speaking Canadian context. While the United States and English-speaking Canada share a common language and many cultural objects (e.g., television, movies, music, to name a few), we live in distinct cultures and varying contexts (described in more detail further on in this section). According to Clemens Sedmak, if we are to do good reflection, theology and learning, we must be able to ground our work in our own practice which takes place in our own context.¹ The context that is of particular concern to my research is English-speaking Canada. I recognize and appreciate the distinct cultures of French-speaking Canadians both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. However, due to the emphasis of this project on my own ministry as a pastor in English-speaking congregations, attention to the unique experience of French-speaking Canadian emerging adults is beyond the scope of my research. In order to truly understand the lived experience, practice, needs and worldviews of a group of people, research must begin with a basic understanding of the group’s context. Values, social mores, traditions and customs are all deeply embedded within the lived experience of a given group of people (in this case, emerging adults) who live, work, play and mature in specific locales (geographic and otherwise), social strata, and cultures. This is a person’s context.

Because we do not live in complete isolation from the rest of the world, our reflections must

begin by unpacking where we are. Subtle nuances, values, and worldviews exist because of context, and can be easily misinterpreted without taking it into account.

The case in point, we live in a time unparalleled in history. Never before have we been so connected to one another and yet so alienated. Humanity has moved through huge transformations and advances in the past, but never before have five generations stood together and sought to make sense of it at the same time. Never before has so much information been so readily available. With the push of a button Canadians can access societies, cultures, points of view, criticisms and praises, information and data, with no filter to help interpret it for our own situation, our own context. World economies are interwoven like a massive spider’s web that covers the globe. A shift in markets here, drives demand there; rising debt at home impacts investors abroad. And yet individuals are becoming more isolated, more self-centred than ever before. In our ever expanding world, we have lost track of where we are, no longer asking the question, “where is here?” In our rapidly changing world, it is too easy to create a sense of homogeneity and see ourselves only through the lens of those who appear to speak with authority or in a voice that controls power and influence. If we are to ask and address the profound questions of our age, we must be deeply aware of the reality of “here.” Context is important, critical even, to begin to open the ears, eyes and hearts of those who have an inclination towards hope. Without an intimate knowledge of where is “here,” we risk losing our identity, uniqueness, and prophetic voice.

Without a thorough understanding of our context, those who wish to respond to the experiences of those we serve, will be out of touch with them. A prophetic message that is divorced from the lived reality of its intended audience will not be given a second thought. Too much information

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vies for our attention already. Just as the prophets of ancient times spoke to and of the context of
the people to whom the word was being sent, so too a prophetic word must understand where the
people are, even if the people themselves are not intrinsically aware.

For those interested in exploring the English-speaking Canadian Christian context with respect to
emerging adults, there is a serious lack of scholarship on the matter with which to work. While
there is notable scholarship on the Canadian religious history and the landscape in general, and a
solid offering on trends in youth/teen religiosity, very little has been written to date on Christian
emerging adults specifically. We often have little choice but to gravitate to findings from other
global contexts (especially the United States), looking for trends, points of comparison, and
generalizations which may help to illuminate our situation. Too frequently, however, we have
not taken into consideration that not all of what is produced by our global neighbours is
applicable in the unique Canadian landscape. Especially in the disciplines of religion and

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3 Besides the work of noted Canadian sociologist, Reginald Bibby, it is important to note new scholarship in the
area of Canadian sociology of religion, most notably Lorne Dawson and Joel Thiessen’s Sociology of Religion: A
Canadian Perspective (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Joel Thiessen’s thesis, “Active and
Marginal Religious Affiliates in Canada: Describing the Difference and the Difference it Makes,” (PhD diss.,
University of Waterloo, 2011), which focuses on marginal Christian affiliates of various ages in Canada, and his
University Press, 2015), a study on marginal affiliation across age categories and discussion on secularization theory
in Canada. Thiessen’s work addresses an important gap in research in Canadian religiosity, namely the marginally-
affiliated. However, his research covers a far greater demographic than that in this study, as he examines religiosity
(focussed predominantly on attendance) across the spectrum of Christianity (including Catholics) and across age
ranges. While his book addresses critical questions that do at times parallel the work of my thesis, his emphasis on
attendance (8) and refuting Bibby’s revitalization hypothesis (11) take his work in a different direction. That being
said much like the findings in my own study, Thiessen’s emerging adult participants do appear to practice bricolage
(76), feel like outsiders in congregations where they have no relationships (77), and are not actively searching for a
congregation in which to practice (77). Because the majority of Thiessen’s participants are adults (Appendix B) as
opposed to emerging adults (35% emerging adult vs. 65% adult), his overall conclusions as to the reasons why they
refrain from public worship, their views on the church, and their overall practice, reflect a more mature stage of faith
which is markedly different than that of an emerging adult. Additionally, Paul Bramadat has produced an important
work examining the lives of emerging adult Christians and the interplay of an evangelical Christian organization
operating on a secular university campus in, The Church on the World’s Turf: An Evangelical Christian Group at a
Secular University, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). It should be noted that Bramadat’s subjects differ
again from those of my own study, most notably that most are active participants in a Christian organization as
opposed to marginalized, non-active Christian emerging adults.
sociology which, as will be shown in this paper, are heavily influenced by the values and worldviews embedded in the lived reality of people and in their distinct context.

The state of Christianity and, specifically the church, in Canada is the case in point. Christianity around the globe is changing. In the global South, Christianity and its institutions are growing numerically and are experiencing a time of great vitality. In contrast, over the last forty years Western Christianity has been in a state of stark decline with growing numbers of people choosing no religious affiliation and non-participation in congregational life. As will be explored in greater detail in Section 1.2 of this paper, the decline was first recognized and studied in Great Britain, then in the United States and Canada. It became apparent that disturbing trends were now visible and becoming more pronounced in all three countries (to varying degrees). And yet, neither the British nor American contexts nor the scholarship which arises out of them can accurately speak to the religious culture of English-speaking Canada (and vice versa). While there are some generalizations which may be transferable across cultural lines, it is naïve to think that all findings may be applicable. Significant work must be done to determine how local context influences behaviour and development.

There is seeming disagreement in Canadian scholarship with respect to how to describe the Canadian religious “scene.” Has it become one and the same as the religious “marketplaces” evident in much of the post-industrialized world? Or are there intrinsic Canadian values that are influencing religion in Canada in ways that are perhaps advancing the impression that Canada is what Michael Adams calls a “demystification zone”? We can read American scholarship on the topic of the decline of the church in North America and come to an understanding of the

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4 A full exploration of available scholarship on the state of Western Christianity can be found in Section 1.2
5 Michael Adams, Sex in the Snow: Canadian Social Values at the End of the Millennium, (Toronto: Penguin Books Ltd., 1997), 166
situation in the American context. Some of the information will be useful and applicable to our context such as human nature, life cycle, and some shared cultural influences. However, if we are to accurately understand the Canadian reality in its entirety, we must look more closely at the actual, lived experience of Canadians.

On the one hand, Adams, writing in 1997, claimed that Christendom in Canada died following the social protests of the 1960s, naming it a “secular movement with secular aims” that pushed the church (and God) to the periphery of life in Canada. Donald Posterski and Gary Nelson, writing at the same time, blamed church decline on the rising social gospel movement of the liberal-minded churches which (they surmised) had caused the “death of the devil” and so undermined the church’s authority in matters of human life and practice. Pundits reported that the decline in the centrality of religion in Canada was a natural occurrence, an “ebbing away” of its “historic status” and “religious monopoly, making space for “new reference points in the culture” now allowed to grow and flourish. The church was “discarded to accommodate the diversity” which was now the new normal in a post-industrial Canada.

In contrast, Reginald Bibby, writing more than a decade later argued the 1960s were a watershed moment when we had the chance to change our stars, move away from European influences, doctrines and teachings and claim our own identity. Unfortunately according to Bibby, we didn’t take that opportunity and are now living with the aftermath of that choice. However, Bibby has since altered his perspective and in the past thirty years of research on Canadian religiosity has

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7 Adams, Sex in the Snow, 25
8 “80% of Young People Identify with Religion,” Toronto Star, 22 Oct 1988: M25
9 Adams, Sex in the Snow, 33
pointed to a renaissance of Canadian religious belief. Like their American and European counterparts, Canadians have experienced what Bibby calls an “irreversible decline” in religion between the years 1960 and 2000, indicated primarily by a strong drop in attendance at public worship. Through his years of study, Bibby (and others) have confirmed that Canadians are slowly but steadily dropping out of organized religion. In 1975 youth attendance at weekly religious services was just over 72%. In 1988, *The Toronto Star* reported that fewer than 20% of Canadian young people were attending weekly services. By 1992, the number of young people in church had dropped to 18%. Overall, weekly service attendance dropped across Canada since 1975, with 19% of Canadians attending weekly services and 4 in 10 indicating they never attend.

Yet weekly service attendance is not the only measure of the religiosity of a nation. Various surveys from over the past twenty years reveal that although attendance has dropped, Canadian belief in God has remained relatively constant at approximately 80% of the population, something Bibby clings to as evidence refuting the death of religion in Canada. The majority of Canadians (70%) still do believe in God and still maintain affiliation or identification with either Catholic or Protestant denominations. Bibby, in his book, *Beyond the Gods and Back*, claims that while the church has seen decline in attendance and membership over the past forty years, a renaissance of religious belief has occurred.

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13 “80% of Young People Identify with Religion,” *The Toronto Star*, 1
14 McAteer, “Teens Turn to Popular Culture,” J141
15 Bibby, *A New Day*, 9. See also “Canadians Prefer Private Spirituality” (based on 2004 Stats Canada report) which claims 25% of Canadians do not attend, up from 21% in 2000, 13
17 Bibby, “Canada’s Dataless Debate,” 254
years, religiosity in Canadians is healthy and strong in the majority of Canadians. He attributes the prevalence of spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, etc.), belief in God/supernatural, belief in the existence of miracles, seeking meaning (e.g., asking the big existential questions such as “why are we here,” “is there life after death,” “what is the purpose of life”), and experiences of the Divine (e.g., respondents indicated that they felt God’s presence), as markers of the strength and vitality of belief in Canada. A significant difference over the past forty years, however, is the trend of Canadian’s choosing to practice their religion in private.

Contrary to Adams’ claims made in the late 1990s, religiosity remains a strong presence in Canadian life, although increasingly Canadians are not identifying with public expressions of religion. The number of religiously unaffiliated or “nones” continue to rise, with 16% of the population reporting in 2011 they have no religious affiliation (up from 12% in 1991, and 16% in 2001). Undoubtedly, this trend has a strong negative impact on the Christian church in Canada. On the surface it appears that the great institution is dying, and there is no shortage of commentaries on the reasons why. However, if Bibby is correct in his assumptions that Canadian religiosity is still prevalent in the majority of Canadians, albeit expressed in increasingly private ways, then religion is not dying, but the institution is slow to respond to the

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19 Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 212ff  
changing behaviours of Canadians. The vast majority of Canadians are now under the age of 50,\(^{23}\) and these under 50 live and experience society, culture and the world around them in radically different ways than the generations who came before them. As will be explained in Section 2.2(c), Generations X, Y and the Millennials (all born after 1965), appear naturally suspicious of social institutions, and relate to one another and create communities very differently than their predecessors. It therefore stands to reason, that an institution which operates on a social model created for and popular within a preceding generation, such as the traditional congregation, may find significant challenges in communicating and understanding this new way of being.

Understanding the practice and belief systems of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults and the complex social structures within which they exist, means analyzing the prevailing culture and context. Much of what we use in English-speaking Canada to identify trends and understand the meaning behind them, especially with respect to emerging adults, comes from studies conducted in the United States. American research must be consulted because: (a) there are no studies specifically focused on Canadian emerging adults; and (b) the studies done in Canada which explore younger age ranges do not distinguish emerging adults from other adults. Studies that do look at emerging adult religiosity are taking place in the United States. There are similarities between the two countries that make some of this research applicable to Canada, but there are limitations in using them. For instance, in a recent study entitled, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church*, collaborators refer primarily to American scholarship to define the culture within which

\(^{23}\) As of July 2, 2014, 63.2% of Canadians are 49 years of age and younger. “Population by Sex and Age Group,” Statistics Canada, CANSIM, Table 051-0001, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo10a-eng.htm, last modified September 26, 3014, accessed August 31, 2015
Canadian young adults exist. As will be shown, there are fundamental core values present in English-speaking Canada that are different than those in America, producing a vastly different cultural milieu. These differences, having not been taken into account, thus bring the researcher’s conclusions into question.

Christian Smith, a pre-eminent researcher in the sociology of religion focusing on emerging adults in the United States produces some highly compelling findings which were used by the Hemorrhaging Faith researchers and are referred to regularly in the context of this project. As compelling as they may be, they are still US findings and the Canadian researcher is left with little relevant emerging adult studies to compare them with in English-speaking Canada. The study of emerging adulthood is a relatively new discipline, having only been identified a slight twenty years ago and so research and resources on this cohort is in its infancy. The best known and most extensive research we have in Canada has been produced by Reginald Bibby. But, for the most part, Bibby tends to separate his demographics into two main categories – teens and adults – which effectively eliminates any specific findings related to the emerging adult demographic. The Hemorrhaging Faith collaborators do differentiate emerging adults from teens and adults, but their research is limited to only emerging adults who were raised with Christianity and are still active in the faith. There is no way to extrapolate the Hemorrhaging Faith’s findings (which are remarkably similar to Smith’s) to the greater population of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults as there appears to be what Bibby calls a distinct polarity between believers and others. Bibby explains that while there are these two groups of people in Canada (believers and others), there is little to no movement between these groups. That is to

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24 James Penner, Richard Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Désorcy and Rick Hiernstra, Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church, (The EFC Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, 2012), 12ff
25 Penner et al, Hemorrhaging Faith, 7
26 Bibby, Beyond the Gods, 54ff
say, those who do not believe rarely become believers, and those who believe seldom cease all
together. What this means then is that the specific focus on the patterns of believing emerging
adults in *Hemorrhaging Faith*’s findings cannot be extrapolated to all English-speaking
Canadian emerging adults because not all of them are believers.

Many Canadian researchers and commentators have often neglected the fundamental difference
between Canadian and American value systems which makes it difficult to generalize from much
US research on the topic of emerging adults with respect to the Canadian emerging adult and
their context. Specifically, according to Adams, freedom, and especially freedom of choice is
generally regarded as the quintessential American value influencing religion in that country. In
Canada, however, “respect of equality” (and diversity) is the central value, a very different
focus.27 When applied to the context of the church, what this means is that Canadians’ attitudes
to participation in and adherence to religion are far more influenced by the value that all
expressions of religion have worth than with the issue of personal freedom of choice. Adams
argues that Canadian religion has little to no influence on life and society in general.28 While I
am not in agreement with his observation (I believe religion continues to have impact on life and
society), are Canadian attitudes towards religion (as he claims) a result of religion’s lack of
influence on the average Canadian? Or are Canadian attitudes shaped by the core values of
Canadian society – a natural respect and toleration of differing traditions and experiences?
Adams goes on to say that Canadians have “moved from an organic model of society to a
rhizomatic one where personal networking replaces a reliance on representatives, individualism
or an idealized notion of country,” the characteristics of “social value tribalism.”29 The

27 Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 5, 192
28 Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 167
29 Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 170
additional values of this society are “secular,” Adams says, and include a “pluralistic and ecological morality, [with] a greater responsibility for the other.”\textsuperscript{30} Smith and Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, argue to the contrary that these are \textit{not} secular values, but are reflective of the influence of liberal Christianity, deeply embedded now in the psyche of society.\textsuperscript{31} Regardless of where these values originated, they create a culture simultaneously of openness and acceptance of differences and reliance on social networks rather than institutions for support.

The onslaught of globalization, post-industrialization and post-modernism have impacted and continue to impact Canadian life, society, and practice of religion in ways that are still being discovered. In this respect English-speaking Canadians are no different than other parts of the Western world that are, likewise, living through this new paradigm. According to Adams, Canadians have shifted in their value system significantly over the past forty years and now are seemingly defined by three “deep cultural forces:” “personal autonomy, pleasure [hedonism], and spiritual fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{32} Adams argues that these quests are replacing lifecycle theories and predetermined stages of life, and due to the advent of our globally-connected world, are affecting everyone at every stage of life.\textsuperscript{33} Undoubtedly, this changing Canadian identity and culture is impacting the church. There may indeed be consumerist tendencies with respect to the individual’s experience of God,\textsuperscript{34} for we are a world increasingly defined by consumerism. But we are also feeling the effects of growing generations of “wired” people who are “active users”

\begin{footnotes}
\item Adams, \textit{Sex in the Snow}, 193
\item Adam, \textit{Sex in the Snow}, 6, 18
\item Adam, \textit{Sex in the Snow}, 11
\item Penner et al, \textit{Hemorrhaging Faith}, 51
\end{footnotes}
of culture rather than the “passive viewers” of the past.\textsuperscript{35} It is possible that what masquerades as consumer-mentality, picking and choosing which parts of religion fit and don’t fit, could simply be the inherent actions of a differently-wired community that relies on experience and dynamic interaction in order to understand life and gain meaning. While further research is required to explore the nuances and realized effects of the wired generations on Canadian culture, values, worldviews and social norms, suffice it to say that emerging adults are challenging the theories of the past and the preconceived notions of how Canadians practice their faith.

Section 4.4 (e) of this paper will explore more fully the transformation that has occurred in both the practice of individual Christians and the church (local congregations and denominations) with respect to the World Wide Web. It is further possible that this generation, the “NetGeneration,” is using what Dan Tapscott identifies as its gifts of connectivity, scrutiny, customization, corporate integrity, openness, entertainment, play, relationship, speed, collaboration and innovation\textsuperscript{36} to re-imagine a new reality for the church, religion and spirituality, more suitable to the needs of today’s society than ever before. As will be seen in the interviews conducted as part of this study, English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults seamlessly use both the internet and their lived experiences to educate themselves and animate their faith. While they do not seem to have any designs on transforming the church intentionally, their gifts, knowledge and ways of being may in fact do just that.

In summary, while there is strong evidence that the church is in decline, Canadian religiosity is holding its own. According to Bibby, it is still on the minds of the majority of English-speaking Canadians and is a core value by which we live. Whether or not we live in a polarized religious

\textsuperscript{36} Tapscott, \textit{Grown up Digital}, 34ff
environment continues to be up for debate. True there are the so-called “religious” and there are “nones.” It is also true that there is little switching between these two groups. What Canadians have been experiencing, with respect to the changes in our religious landscape, has been nothing less than a cultural upheaval, an overhaul in understanding and practice precipitated by blindingly-fast technological development. Our society, always evolving, is steadily moving away from authoritarian homogeneity, and towards a more open, equitable, diversified and collaborative community that has made space for discussion, dialogue and difference. What makes it so confusing, and perhaps terrifying, for some, is that for perhaps the first time in history, five or more generations are experiencing the shift together. As Grace Davie insists, perhaps it is time Canadians took stock of the substantial opportunity the changing times in our country and world have presented to us.37 Perhaps we need to stop blaming systems and institutions for the changing world around us, and turn our focus towards what is next, and grow in new ways as our world, societies and spiritualties develop.

1.2 (b) The Importance of the Missing Voice

This research is primarily concerned with exploring the missing voice of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults who identify with Christianity but are absent from traditional forms of public practice. Emerging adulthood is a gritty, intense, wildly chaotic and amazing phase of life full of potential and hope. Yet, emerging adults are the least likely of all phases of the life cycle to have any religious affiliation. According to Statistics Canada 2006 Social Trends data, over 50% of Canadian young adults have no religious affiliation or practice or are only marginally

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connected, the highest rate of all population sectors. In recent studies focusing on the religiosity of Canadians, little to no attention is given to exploring the lived experiences of the marginally connected. Much attention is given to the rising cohort known as “nones” as we probe why they have left the fold. Slightly less attention is given to those who are regular participants in religious communities, to glean from them why they stay. Carol Gilligan poignantly argues in her book *In a Different Voice*, that the absence of a “voice” within a study or a set of findings (or by extension, a community of faith), visibly (audibly) distorts the overall theory, story or experience. Research (and faith communities), without the vivid imaginings and critical awareness and worldview of emerging adults, are missing a key aspect, quality and characteristic of the overall Body of Christ. Studies that take into consideration only the voices of one sex to the exclusion of the other cannot speak to the full experience of humanity. Likewise the church today cannot speak confidently with and to the full experience of faith when seemingly non-public-practicing Christian emerging adults are not part of that conversation. The challenge for today’s Canadian academic and faith communities is to begin the process of listening to and for the emerging adult voice. As Gilligan so aptly puts it, “To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act.”

Almost four decades ago emerging adulthood was first recognized as a separate and distinct phase of the human life cycle. A new voice was noticed and given a name. In the same span of time, our world has changed, becoming vastly more complex than we could ever have imagined.

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38 Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg, “Who’s Religious?” *Canadian Social Trends*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada (Summer 2006, Catalogue No. 11-008), 3
41 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, xvi
and yet smaller and more intimately connected than we could have ever dreamed. Within all the chaos and change, patterns of being within the church have remained remarkably unchanged, in some ways contributing to the exodus of emerging adults who no longer felt heard or part of the community. We have not listened intensely enough to the lived experiences of emerging adults who claim Christian faith and yet cannot find “home” within a faith community. More listening is required if we are truly to honour and nurture the voice missing and understand more fully our communal lives together as Christ’s church.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 My Theology of Ministry

Throughout my ministry in both traditional and non-traditional expressions of the church, I have come to understand that all ministry arises out of relationship. As Christians, we are called to love everyone, our neighbours, God, and our own selves. This love comes out of the love that we know in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of Divine Love, the essence of God. We are made in the image of God and like God, are inherently wired for relationship. No ministry can happen unless we are in relationship with God and others.

Likewise, the church is the community that comes together through that very same love and for the purpose of learning, prayer, worship and service. In local expressions of the church (the community or congregation) people of faith come together, first as strangers who are learning to become friends. As relationships grow, mutual support and encouragement strengthen individuals (and by extension, the community) for service to the larger area (the neighbourhood, city, country, world). As members of the community return for communal times of worship, study, and prayer, they dialogue, exchange ideas, explore scripture and as a result of all this their experience is more profoundly connected to faith.

Many involved with traditional English-speaking Protestant congregations have become accustomed to this process happening within the walls of a church building, or within the boundaries of the congregation: people from the same area come together to share their experiences with one another, growing and challenging one another, so that a fuller understanding of God (and the subsequent life of faith) can be explored and realized. However,
if individuals do not actively engage with the practicing community, how do they come to understand, grow and experience encouragement and support? What influences do their voices have (if any) in the life of the whole Body? How do they engage in ministry and mission if they are not visibly part of an existing community? How can we respond to the call to be “one body with many members” (1 Corinthians 12:12) if some of those parts (or members) seem to have no relationship with any other part of the body? If we are to be faithful to the call to truly be one Body, then we must begin to consider those voices and experiences outside of the traditional expressions of the church, to include them in our shared experience of the Divine.

As stated above, despite declining trends in public worship attendance and the growing number of Canadians who claim “none” as their religious affiliation, I do not think the church in Canada is dying. I believe, rather, that it is changing in ways informed by trends in social networking, communications, media, technology, and the rise of new, non-traditional expressions of Christian community. Advancements in technology have drastically transformed our personal interactions, communication and a host of other day-to-day activities, including the daily practice of faith. At the time of my ordination in 2006, email was just becoming a regular mode of communication. We still faxed documents, printed newsletters, consulted bookshelves of commentaries, and shared faith stories face-to-face in meetings and groups.

A mere nine years later, I communicate with a host of emerging adults through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. We use a website and social media to disseminate congregational information and plan face-to-face events through these same resources rather than printed materials. When we do meet in person (which is still weekly as a congregation, and at least monthly one-on-one or in small groups), we talk about the articles we have read online and challenge each other to “google” concepts and authors, to test out our
beliefs and theories against those of the “rest of the world” we have encountered online. My parishioners email me or post on social media articles or compilations which other persons or groups have put together to challenge, explore or explain the doctrines of the church, scripture, and the living out of faith. We engage these online articles as well, adding in our own viewpoints, beliefs and observations to the ever-growing accumulation of comments, beliefs and worldviews shared openly on the internet. All of these online documents, thoughts, conversations, and engagements are open to virtually anyone else on the planet who would like to see and/or comment on them. We create webs of interconnectivity with people we know and some whom we do not know, around ancient documents in a medium never imagined by those who first penned them.

It is a different world today than it was nine years ago, not only for everyday living, but also for the living out of faith. The church has not even scratched the surface of what this means to the body of Christ, the handing down of its traditions and teachings, the disciplining of followers, and the gathering of the Body. It is my belief that there are many Christians “out there” who use technology and media to learn, grow and explore their faith, but who rarely engage face-to-face with a physical congregation. The longer I serve in pastoral ministry, the more often I encounter these people, and the more I will need to understand and open myself to the possibilities previously unexplored for the living practice of faith.

2.2 Understanding Terms Used in this Study

There are a number of basic concepts in the study of religion and faith practice that can easily be misunderstood because they have multiple meanings in our current complex social and cultural paradigm in English-speaking Canada. The following is not intended to be thoroughly comprehensive in the study of religion in its attempt to define and clarify these terms.
2.2 (a) Cohort

The group of people, born between 1981 and 1996\textsuperscript{42} who are the subject of my study, are known by many different labels. There is no consensus in the naming of this generation, but they are often referred to as Millennials, Gen Y, or Emerging Adults. For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to them as “emerging adults”\textsuperscript{43} and will focus on the age range 18 to 30 years old.\textsuperscript{44} There are few characteristics of this generation that can be applied with a wide brush to every member, not the least of which is religious affiliation.

I use the term cohort to describe a specific sub-set of the generation, those of this age group who identify as mainline Protestant Christian.\textsuperscript{45} They consider themselves to be Christian but do not actively participate in any local congregation. These two criteria are critical. When I refer to cohort in this study, my intent is not to speak about the entire emerging adult population, but rather to a narrow subset, those who identify as mainline Protestant Christian. Likewise, this project does not attempt to speak to the lived experience of every emerging adult Christian in Canada, but only to those who are marginally affiliated and do not participate in a local congregation. Within this cohort may be those who have no church experience whatsoever alongside those who were raised in the church but for some reason have left and have not returned. For the purposes of this project, the term cohort neither includes those who do not identify as Christian Protestant nor those who are currently active in the life of the church.

\textsuperscript{43} Jeffrey Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” in American Psychologist (May 2000): 470
\textsuperscript{44} See Section 2.3 “A Thick Description of Emerging Adults” for detailed description
\textsuperscript{45} Although this is the focus of my research, two participants are former Catholics who no longer identify with the Roman Catholic Church.
2.2 (b) Church

In everyday conversation in English-speaking Canada, the term *church* carries multiple meanings depending on an individual’s context and experience. For some it may mean the building around the corner in their hometown. For others, “church” is the congregation in which they were raised. For yet others, it is the institution (including denominations), the church universal, the body of believers throughout the world. In the context of this paper, I refer to the church predominantly as an institution, with a set of doctrines and beliefs, a set of teachings, and ways of being that are specific to it. The church, in this instance, is synonymous with institutionalized Christian religion and practice. Whenever I wish to discuss the local gathering of believers or the local congregation, I generally use the terms *congregation* or *community of faith*. During the interviews, it became apparent that the participants for the most part understood my reference to the church as simultaneously meaning both the local congregation’s building and the body of believers practicing together in one place. As will become apparent in Section 4.5, there are some who use the word interchangeably to mean both the local congregation and the church universal and switch seamlessly between the two.

*A Brief Exploration into the Nature of the North American Church*

The church in North America developed significant differences from its European counterparts when it began to take root in the American frontier in the early 1600s. According to Sidney Mead, the European church in the homeland had managed to maintain its numbers and member support through means of coercion.\(^{46}\) It soon found that such a practice in the colonies of the New World proved untenable. Mead describes in great detail the rise of revivals in the American

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\(^{46}\) Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 113
frontier which attracted multitudes of faithful into membership and support through the art of persuasion, essentially redefining the church as a “voluntary association.” As such, the church became dependent on her members for support (both financial and otherwise) as they worked together towards a common cause. Matthew T. Loveland, Keely Jones-Stater and Jerry Z. Park refer to the voluntary association model as the “bedrock of organization” of the modern North American church.

Due to the intrinsic nature of the voluntary association (gathered through persuasion and the attraction of a common cause), the church in North America grew in unexpected ways. Denominations arose out of differences in theological stances (“left” and “right”) and ritual practices, aided by the tides of change brought about by the Reformation. The local congregation continues to be an important social institution as it serves to meet people’s need for community and assists them to connect with “the resources of great religious traditions.” In this way, the local congregation brings together the memory of the past with the lived experience of the present. However, emerging adults pose particular challenges to the local congregation. As Abby Day and Ben Rogaly have found, if the church is to persuade emerging adults to join them,

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47 Mead, The Lively Experiment, 113  
48 Mead, The Lively Experiment, 114  
52 Wind and Lewis, American Congregations, 15
considerable work needs to be put into developing significant “social relationships and identities as [these are the] main motivators for joining and sustaining voluntary networks” today.  

2.2 (c) Community

Perhaps one of the most confusing and malleable terms to define is community. It simultaneously means groups of people who are connected in multitudes of ways – by geography, practice, belief, cause, action, mutual support – as well the act of being together with others. As Day and Rogaly point out in their research on everyday religion and belonging in the UK, community is a term often used to “cohere and divide” individuals who are part of a group and those who are not. It also may be used to define a geographic location, as in “the community where I grew up or where I serve.” As mentioned above, I tend to use the term community to mean the local congregation (a community of people with like belief and faith), but I also regularly employ the term to identify the “network of social relations,” among those who have “social connections across space and time” with one another. During the interviews, I ask participants to comment on the role community plays in their faith lives and they appear to hold a similar definition to my own, seeing community simultaneously as a place where they either belong or belonged, as well as a network of relationships with people of similar beliefs or convictions not bounded by geography or space.

This study confirms what Day and Rogaly found in their research that community is “the dynamic nature of that term [community], how it changes over time as people move between

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54 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 77
55 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 82
56 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 75
places,” and so “Community is often an act; ...communities do not arise pre-formed.”57 Their interviews illustrate the ever-changing, dynamic and deeply embedded nature of networked community as it integrates offline and online practice and becomes seamlessly integrated into everyday life. Heidi A. Campbell explains that “individuals live between multiple spheres and groups,” all of which develops into a “networked understanding of community where individuals create webs of connection between different social contexts to create a personalized network of relations.”58 While this understanding of community may be vastly different than the one I knew in my teenage and emerging adult years, it is one in which I work and live increasingly every day. For the participants of this study, it is the only reality they have ever known.

2.2 (d) Spirituality

There is no consensus among theologians, clergy, sociologists of religion or those involved in the discipline of psychology of religion concerning the exact definition of spirituality. Peter Erb, in his article, “What is Spirituality?” recounts his experience developing a course on Spirituality in the 1970s. Those vetting the course suggested he change the name to “Mysticism” since students would be confused by the term, spirituality. A mere ten years later, the same institution asked why he hadn’t called the course “Spirituality.”59 Joel Wiberg reminds the reader that whatever definition is agreed upon can never accurately describe the full profundity of what a person experiences. For that we have insufficient language.60

In my search for a definition of spirituality that not only speaks to my experience in ministry and the experiences of those I have interviewed as part of this project, Hans Stifoss-Hanssen, comes

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57 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 87
the closest. Stifoss-Hanssen suggests that the following “test definition” of spirituality be considered: “spirituality is people's search for meaning, in relation to the big existential questions”\textsuperscript{61} of life. It may be argued that “sacredness” be included in the definition, however Stifoss-Hanssen argues that many outside of organized religion, including agnostics and atheists, express spirituality\textsuperscript{62} (hence, the use of the word “existential” instead of “sacred” in his test definition). For the cohort that I am studying, such a definition has been useful in the untangling from religion the experiences they have had and the pilgrimages they are on. Given their aversion to organized religion known to them as “the church,” a definition that offers a wider net for consideration is both preferable and appreciated.

Due to the difficult nature and over-use of this word, the definition suggested here is a working definition, provided to aid in the discussion at hand. In no way is this definition meant to be comprehensive. That being said, I am in agreement with Stifoss-Hanssen that any definition of spirituality that limits it to an aspect of religion needs to be broadened to include that which lies outside the purview of organized religion.\textsuperscript{63} In addition, for the purposes of this project, references to spirituality will be understood to mean Christian spirituality only.

\textbf{2.2 (e) Spiritual but not Religious}

Like “spirituality,” the term “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) is becoming more and more commonplace in everyday discussions about the church, faith and religion. It is a term that sociologists of religion have been using over the past ten plus years to describe a significant segment of the population who generally do not participate in public or congregational life, or

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Stifoss-Hanssen, “Religion and Spirituality,” 28
\item[63] Stifoss-Hanssen, “Religion and Spirituality,” 25
\end{footnotes}
subscribe to any particular set of religious beliefs, but who do believe in some greater power or transcendent being/force. They are interested in spirituality, God, and the good of others, but without the dogma or beliefs of organized religion. There appears to be mixed reactions towards the institution of the church with some SBNRs claiming that much good comes from these communities in terms of support and help for the poor and needy, and others arguing that the church focuses too much on money, power and politics.\textsuperscript{64}

The SBNR were at one time referred to as “seekers” or those who were not religiously affiliated but were on the search for a denomination or congregation to call home. According to Pew Research, we now know that there is little evidence that this is the case.\textsuperscript{65} There are a considerable number of SBNRs (44\%) who do pray or have other spiritual practice.\textsuperscript{66} Surprisingly, although the term is used generously in sociology of religion reports and news items detailing the supposed demise of the church, in the context of the interviews conducted as part of this study, only one of the participants referred to themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Otherwise, the term did not factor into the findings of this study.

\section*{2.2 (f) Bricolage}

“Bricolage,” a term first coined by Claude Levi-Strauss in his book \textit{La Pensée savage}, means the intentional act of pulling together “whatever is available at hand” for the purpose of creating something unique and meaningful in a new configuration (like a collage).\textsuperscript{67} Tom Beaudoin,

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\item \textsuperscript{64} Pew Research, “Nones on the Rise,” 41
\item \textsuperscript{65} Pew Research, “Nones on the Rise,” 41
\item \textsuperscript{66} Pew Research, “Nones on the Rise,” 45
\item \textsuperscript{67} Claude Lévi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, translated by George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd. (University of Chicago Press, 1962), 11
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
writing about the spirituality of Generation Xers, uses the term to describe the habits of this
generation as they make sense of and create a practical, more-culturally relevant theology and
spiritual practice for themselves. Although he speaks about the generation prior to the subject of
my study, the practice of cobbling together pieces of religious experience and practice that are
ready to hand is common among emerging adults as well. They have a growing interest in
mysticism, paganism and personal spiritualties and believe strongly that people can be spiritual
and religious without the church. There appears to be a “burgeoning interest in spirituality and
an affirmation of religious pluralism,” a new paradigm which is thriving beside the traditional
model of religion. Like the cohort that follows Generation X, experience is key.

Although Levi-Strauss in his original work is not speaking specifically about the bricolage of
religious belief, his explanation of the concept provides much-needed clarity around this
emerging practice:

> Now, the characteristic feature of … ‘bricolage’ … is that it builds up structured sets, not
directly with other structured sets but by using the remains and debris of events…. …it
makes use of French ‘des bribes et des morceaux’, or odds and ends in English, fossilized
evidence of the history of an individual or a society.

Essentially, the practice of bricolage in constructing religious belief and faith is the picking up,
sifting, and extracting portions of pre-existing beliefs and aspects of faith (i.e., language, rituals,
documents, concepts, etc.) and re-imagining them in a new configuration which is culturally

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68 Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). Evidence of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults using this method to construct their faith is also supported by Joel Thiessen’s study, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 76
69 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 178
70 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 51
72 Roof et al, *Religion and American Culture*, 143
74 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 14
relevant and accessible to the individual. There is no creation of new concepts or fashioning new beliefs in the practice of bricolage. Rather, it is the intentional act of the individual to discern, determine, and choose what to pick up and what to leave behind. As Levi-Strauss takes pains to describe, the “bricoleur” uses what is available to fashion something new and is “still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman.”75 This methodology and “devious” (i.e., clever) nature of the emerging adult is perhaps what confounds the regular church-going Christian (Levi-Strauss’ “craftsman”).

2.3 A Thick Description of Emerging Adults

2.3 (a) Life Cycle Theory

Emerging adulthood, the time of life between approximately 18 to 30 years of age, appears to be a phenomena occurring only in industrialized countries (predominantly North America).76 Greater access to health care, technology, and higher education (to name a few contributors) in industrialized countries allow emerging adults to delay major developments previously associated with this stage of life such as starting a career, getting married, having children, and owning a first home. They are usually caught in the conundrum of no longer being children, and yet not quite adults. They experience what Victor Turner calls “liminality,” (the state of being on the threshold of a stage in life or between stages of life), and so often do not know what to call themselves.77 Although this is an experimental time of life78 where the individual can explore options and possibilities for the future, it is also an intense time of “identity exploration in the

75 A translator’s note in the English version is included which reads: “The ‘bricoleur’ has no precise equivalent in English. He is a man who undertakes odd jobs and is a Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself man, but, as the text makes clear, he is of a different standing from, for instance, the English ‘odd job man’ or handyman (trans. note).” Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (English Translation), 11.
76 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 470
77 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 471
78 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 471
areas of love, work, and worldviews.”79 This includes re-examining religious beliefs learned in their family-of-origin (or faith-of-origin), testing and experimenting in order to understand and claim for themselves what it is that they believe, and develop an ethos and worldview of their own.

While this has been the trend in emerging adulthood, current emerging adults live in a substantially different time and context from previous generations. As a result, present-day emerging adults have some very distinct habits which further differentiate them from the rest of society and from their parents and grandparents (when they were of equivalent age). According to Jeffrey Arnett, American emerging adults “spend more of their leisure time alone than any persons except the elderly and spend more of their time in productive activities (school and work) alone than any other age group under 40.”80 Arnett also claims that the majority of emerging adults explore worldviews mostly alone as well, without the “daily companionship of either their family-of-origin or their family to be.”81

While this may be true, some scholars believe that this “alone time” is actually not spent entirely alone, but rather is time interacting with media content. According to Sarah M. Coyne, Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Emily Howard, emerging adults are “media-soaked,” spending eleven to twelve hours a day with a combination of music, video, cell phones, internet, social networking sites (SNSs), and movies.82 Although it is considered “leisure time,”83 emerging adults actively seek out various types of media “to fulfill certain needs, but are also influenced by such

79 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 473
80 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 474
81 Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood,” 474
82 Sarah M. Coyne, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, and Emily Howard, “Emerging in a Digital World: A Decade of Review of Media Use, Effects, and Gratifications in Emerging Adulthood,” in Emerging Adulthood, 1(2) (originally published online 26 March 2013): 125-6
83 Coyne, et al, “Emerging in a Digital World,” 125
media.”

Relationships are pursued, established and developed both online and offline. Media significantly impacts and shapes identity, intimacy and autonomy, the key tasks of emerging adulthood. For instance, Coyne et al cite a number of studies which argue that emerging adults actively use media “as a means of exploring their identity, especially in terms of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.” Media use is a key aspect of this project and emerging adults’ practice as will be discussed in depth in Sections 2.6 and 4.4.

2.3 (b) Faith Formation in Christian Emerging Adults

The life cycle of Christian emerging adults is not only concerned with their cognitive and social development and the tasks associated with this growth, but also with issues of faith. According to James Fowler, faith is not always (but can be) separate from religious enterprise. It is the movement of the person into the full knowledge and experience of life, encompassing trust and experience not only of the self but the self in relationship to the other “against a background of shared meaning and purpose.” Sharon Daloz Parks identifies faith as something we all do, a “composing and a composition. …Faith is not only the act of setting one’s heart; it is also what one sets the heart upon.” As we grow physically, emotionally and cognitively, our faith develops with us. Always relational, it matures as we encounter others and have experiences along the life path. We begin life with faith in those around us, to care for and protect us. As we mature, through faith we gain greater consciousness of ourselves, the world around us and how all of life is inter-related. Ultimately, faith forms our identity and understanding of our purpose.

84 Coyne et al, “Emerging in a Digital World,” 127
85 Coyne et al, “Emerging in a Digital World,” 130
87 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 4
88 Sharon Daloz Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 18
89 Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, 32
in the world. Faith formation is a life-long process. For participants in this study, exploration and growth in faith is central to their identity, values and worldviews and defines how and why they live and work in the world.

Emerging adulthood is understood to be an exploration of intimacy, of encountering the other on a variety of planes (intellectual, spiritual, sexual) in a profound and non-threatening way. One must balance such a quest with its antithesis, isolation, striving to build a healthy life of relationships and connections, the structure on which the adult life will be built. As James Fowler so aptly puts it, “Intimacy requires the ability to stand alone as well as to risk one’s forming self and sense of identity in close engagement with other persons and with ideological commitments that channel one’s actions and shape one’s vision of life goals.” For the emerging adult, life is comprised of the tasks necessary to transition from adolescence into full adulthood. It is a process of differentiating from one’s parents or family-of-origin in order to claim one’s own life. The emerging adult is no longer a child but a full individual with distinct dreams, goals, relationships, occupation and family. Sometimes termed “provisional adulthood,” it is a journey of both building up existing world views and exploring new ones. At times the emerging adult claims fierce and firm identity, beliefs and idealism, which are essential to the critical task of building a new and distinct self. However, these times are sandwiched between times of equally intense exploration into new possibilities of life and ideas, which are also necessary in the process of becoming one’s own person and fashioning one’s future.

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91 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 181
94 Gollnick, Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle, 124
Scholars agree that emerging adulthood consists of phases of confident knowing and ambiguity. Parks describes this process as pilgrimage – creating and nurturing “home” but also journeying forth to explore, relate, connect, learn, and grow, only to return home once again. Both exercises are essential if one is to cultivate intimacy (and avoid isolation) which not only marks this stage of the life cycle, but which undergirds future development and meaning-making.

Faith development for the emerging adult follows a similar path. As with other aspects of development, emerging adult faith must enter a time of “pulling up roots,” critically examining one’s faith-of-origin with an eye to differentiating and recomposing it to fit a burgeoning identity and accompanying worldview. As will be seen in Section 4.3, English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults are doing exactly this.

Moving away from the faith that was fashioned for them by family and other authority figures, and the need to conform to another’s expectations and judgements, the emerging adult embarks on a journey to understand oneself as a separate self with one’s own worldview, distinct and not dependent upon others. Friedrich L. Schweitzer states that since this stage of life is marked by high cognitive development and ability, many emerging adult’s experiences with traditional religion come under that critical microscope and previously held convictions “appear naïve and questionable.” The emerging adult also understands that this new found “truth” requires justification and so idealism oftentimes develops. This may mean leaving the church altogether.

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97 Sharon Daloz-Parks, “To Venture and to Abide,” in Developing a Public Faith, eds. R.R. Osmer and F.L Schweitzer (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 71
98 Gollnick (quoting Gail Sheehy), Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle, 124
99 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 172
100 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 182
as the emerging adult resists or challenges being defined by a group or a tradition,\textsuperscript{102} although that is not always the case. James Gollnick clarifies Fowler’s understanding of this stage by stating that although it is marked by independence, it is “not necessarily an individualistic stage.”\textsuperscript{103} That being said, Schweitzer argues that “even if they still belong to a congregation, [emerging adults’] religious outlooks clearly have a distancing effect in that they will find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept any given faith without deeply questioning it.”\textsuperscript{104}

The pivotal challenge thus becomes what Fowler and Erik Erikson describe as a balance of intimacy with isolation, or the demands of developing one’s own truth while maintaining relationships with families (and sometimes faith) of origin. The danger is, of course, that in the process of defining one’s own truth, should it be at odds with that of the family/faith-of-origin, isolation may ensue. However, I argue that although one of the central tasks of emerging adulthood is intimacy-isolation as delineated by Erikson and Fowler above, it may also be considered a balance of intimacy and choice.\textsuperscript{105} Carol Gilligan explains that the experience here is the desire to care for and maintain relationships and yet be able to nurture and choose what is felt to be right.\textsuperscript{106} This again may explain the paradox of the absence of so many emerging adults from traditional congregational settings and yet their spiritual questing and strong faith. In an effort to construct the architecture of faith and religious meaning in their own lives, the emerging adult often needs to appear both “self-aware and ambivalent,”\textsuperscript{107} building their own maturing principles of faith while holding the expectations of family and church-of-origin at arms-length in order to maintain peace and avoid hurt. According to Gollnick, “the religion of

\textsuperscript{102} Fowler, Stages of Faith, 182
\textsuperscript{103} Gollnick, Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle, 129
\textsuperscript{104} Schweitzer, The Postmodern Life Cycle, 71
\textsuperscript{105} Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 164
\textsuperscript{106} Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 164
\textsuperscript{107} Sharon Daloz Parks, “Young Adult Faith Development: Teaching is the Context of Theological Education,” Religious Education, 77/6 (N-D 1982), 666
young adults is a matter of gradually recognizing the tensions and complexities of life, and becoming increasingly able to manage polar opposites without denying or ignoring one of the poles.”

2.3 (c) Religious Involvement

One group of scholars echo Bibby’s findings on Canadian religion among youth and emerging adults whose religious participation is in decline but who remain concerned with spiritual matters, although in more “private ways.” They use emerging adult studies pioneer, Jeffrey Arnett’s term “a congregation of one” to describe “the individualized belief systems that many youth develop.” Their research is confirmed by this study, which has found that English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults tend not to exercise their faith in congregations and public worship but rather in “prayer, meditation, or community service.” In the American context, Christian Smith explores how emerging adults may profess a belief in God, but their “religion” tends to be what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” or the understanding of God as a nice, moral entity that is available to make things better and respond to needs as they arise. Smith claims Christian doctrines and key tenets have somehow been replaced by “the language of happiness, niceness and an earned heavenly reward.” This study does not confirm the totality of Smith’s conclusion as Smith’s sample is far broader, encompassing both Christian and non-Christian, practicing and non-practicing emerging adults. As will be seen in Section 4.4, participants affirmed that God is a being who is there to respond to needs as they arise.

108 Gollnick, *Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle*, 131
110 Schwartz et al., “Identity in Emerging Adulthood,” 100
111 Schwartz et al., “Identity in Emerging Adulthood,” 100
113 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 171
However, there was no further similarity to Smith’s findings. In addition, the Christian emerging adults involved in this study did not speak of “niceness” or an “earned heavenly reward” but appeared to hold key Christian teachings of compassion, peace, and love of one’s neighbour. Additional research into a broader sampling of emerging adults akin to Smith’s study would have to be undertaken in order to ascertain if Smith’s Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is in fact reflected in Canadian emerging adult religiosity.

During the intense period of emerging adult faith development, symbols and rituals undergo intense scrutiny and questioning. Fowler refers to this period of discernment as a time when the symbol or ritual is no longer simply accepted as “mediating the sacred in direct ways and therefore as sacred themselves.” Rather, the emerging adult’s desire to know what a symbol or symbolic act “means” displaces its inherent mystery by reducing it to “propositions, definitions and/or conceptual foundations.” This process can lead to “a sense of loss, dislocation, grief or even guilt.” According to Gollnick, in the rational mind of the emerging adult, life is manageable when viewed critically and empirically. By contrast, life becomes too complex if one opens up oneself to the mystical and transcendent. Gollnick argues that this process of “oversimplification” is a significant contributing factor in emerging adults’ low attendance and participation in traditional religious communities. For some emerging adults, this may be the case. However, for emerging adults who continue to identify with a faith community or tradition through this turbulent time, the issue is more complex. Remaining connected to some aspects of childhood and adolescence and the struggle against stagnation that occurs as one moves from adolescence into adulthood are essential goals of emerging adulthood.

114 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 180
115 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 180
116 Fowler, Stages of Faith, 180
117 Gollnick, Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle, 158
(as Bonnie Cushing and Monica McGoldrick suggest). The emerging adult may hold tight onto some symbols and rituals practiced or learned in their faith-of-origin, but there is a need to understand them in a more profound way, a way consistent with the new lessons acquired and the emerging adult’s maturing faith.118 This may mean dissecting the faith learned in childhood and expressing it in non-traditional, contextually and culturally relevant terms. During this process the emerging adult justifies his/her relationship with the power and transcendence of the symbol which in turn shapes her/his faith. If the end result of the emerging adult phase of faith development is as Fowler argues, to hold in tension the paradoxes of life, then employing all of one’s gifts (including criticism, differentiation and growing cognition) in this regard makes space for the humanity-transcendence paradox to thrive. According to Cushing and McGoldrick, making space for and seeing the “other” is a “core spiritual task” of this phase of life.119 In this instance, “other” may not need to be restricted to other human beings, but may include the actions and symbols of a shared life, experience or even religion. Making and keeping room for the sacred can only be done if on some level, the emerging adult is able to justify its “rightness,” and this is done to a large extent through critical examination.

Where the emerging adult does this work is important in the discussion of their faith practice. Much of the exploration and determination of their belief, faith and practice occurs outside of the local congregation. Emerging adults see institutions as suspect, and practice what Beaudoin calls “spiritual passivity,” finding their religion within their already spiritually rich cultural context (e.g., in music, television, movies and popular culture references).120 They don’t practice the

118 Cushing, McGoldrick, “The Differentiation of Self and Faith in Young Adulthood,” 240
119 Cushing, McGoldrick, “The Differentiation of Self and Faith in Young Adulthood,” 240
120 Beaudoin, Virtual Faith, 24
same way as their “elders,” and ambiguity in life (bordering on relativism and exclusivism) is a central tenet of their practice.

In his work, *Souls in Transition*, Smith develops a typology that differentiates the varying degrees of religiosity in American emerging adults that is helpful to understand this phenomenon. Smith asserts that 67% of all emerging adults he has studied fit in one of these four categories: Devoted (5%), Regular (14.3%), Sporadic (17.9%), and Disengaged (25.5%). Approximately 37% do not fit “cleanly” into any one these categories, but they do straddle one or more. Smith clearly shows that the majority of American emerging adults are engaged in some kind religious activity or belief to some degree. In fact, he states although there is significant social pressure to not be religious and “social support” for religion is often absent (causing some emerging adults to withdraw), there are a number of emerging adults who are serious about spirituality. So much so that Smith declares “the myth of overall religious decline among emerging adults must be dispelled.” There are definitely many who leave religion all together, or “wane” in their practice, but many do not change in their religiosity from their teen years, and a few increase in the level of their religious belief and practice. While the findings presented in this paper can neither support nor refute Smith’s typology (the cohort of emerging adults as interviewed is restricted to Christian emerging adults opposed to Smith’s general cohort), they do support his conclusion that there are emerging adults in Canada who are serious about faith.

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121 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 175
122 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 121
123 Smith, *Souls In Transition*, 259. Compare these same categories in the teenage years: Devoted-8%, Regulars-27%, Sporadic-17%, and Disengaged-12%. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 220
124 Smith, *Souls In Transition*, 283
125 Smith, *Souls In Transition*, 283
126 Smith, *Souls In Transition*, 283
Smith concludes that attitudes and characteristics of emerging adults in the United States are both shaped by “larger cultural forces” and individual agency. Specifically, American emerging adults have “internalized and through their ongoing, thoughts, feelings and behaviors, maintain[ed],” the social and cultural structures of their society. At the same time, they have exercised their propensity to “make ongoing choices and commitments and engage in practices that also affect the character and outcomes of their own lives and collectively sustain and shape the larger social world.” What we will see occurring among the participants in this study support Smith’s conclusions.

2.3 (d) The Importance of Understanding and Engaging Emerging Adults in Community

While it is true that the process of personal and spiritual growth happens within the individual and may at times appears narcissistic, the process and the individual are both shaped by relationship. As human beings, we can only know ourselves in relation to those around us. According to Fowler, we live and find our meaning in community. Fowler argues that if we are to truly develop and establish identity in healthy ways, it must be done within the context of “our connections to others and our spiritual connection to the universe, including our concept of God – the force beyond our personal will or lives.” It is critical for the developing Christian emerging adult to have access to supportive communities who understand their specific needs and are able to make space for this “other” among them. Fowler argues that the faith community is an essential part of the identity-making process of emerging adults, especially because identity, vocation and formation arise out of the community. As emerging adults scrutinize

127 Smith, Souls In Transition, 298
128 Fowler, Becoming Adult, 118
129 Cushing, McGoldrick, “The Differentiation of Self and Faith in Young Adulthood,” 237
130 Fowler, Becoming Adult, 118
their belief systems and struggle with issues of relativism, faith communities have the opportunity to be a “fertile place” to ask questions and dream good dreams.\textsuperscript{131}

Those who cannot find a place within the church to explore their intrinsic need for intimacy and connectivity will look for it until it is found as will be seen later in this paper. If, in unfortunate cases when securing community is not possible, the emerging adult risks isolation. Understanding that their quest of meaning-making is not a challenge to adult ways of believing, but rather an opportunity to explore more expansively into sometimes long-forgotten aspects of faith, churches and other faith communities now have a chance to become mentors and fellow pilgrims. If youthful idealism leads ultimately to the adult voice,\textsuperscript{132} then as will be seen in Section 5.2, a community that strives to understand and appreciate the goals and tasks of the emerging adult will be a place of hopeful relationships, embedded not in maintaining the status quo, but building “home,” supports and relationships that benefit the emerging adult as well as the entire community.

According to Parks, communities of faith have a unique opportunity to practice three essential components to the healthy growth of the emerging adult: hearth, table and commons. The hearth is a place of “stability and motion,” where warmth, comfort and times for pause and reflection are offered.\textsuperscript{133} As we have seen, emerging adults require times of action and venturing into the unknown and the unexplored, but they also need times to come home, reflect, digest and think about the other (ideas and people) they have encountered and how they will or will not incorporate what they have learned into their now and their future. Home is also where dialogue takes place, where experienced and novice, critical and traditional, can meet to form a “critically

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131] Parks, \textit{Big Questions, Worthy Dreams}, 103
\item[132] Feldmeier, \textit{The Developing Christian}, 141
\item[133] Parks, \textit{Big Questions, Worthy Dreams}, 154
\end{footnotes}
aware, inner-dependent, and worthily committed faith.”134 When there is security within relationships, where trust is nurtured and space made for difference and dialogue, where the costs of forming faith in this challenging world are known and honoured, there will be an environment that “support[s] and nourish[es] a new imagination.”135 In order to make a “hearth” where emerging adults feel honoured, supported, nurtured and heard, faith communities must learn of the challenges and gifts of this generation.

Parks also refers to the table as a place/experience where we learn to wait, to be gratified, to be civil, and to accommodate. Given our modern culture with fast food and microwaves, many of our emerging adults do not have the same understanding or extended experience of table that older generations may have had.136 Like many of the symbols employed by faith communities everywhere, the table can be reduced to its utilitarian purpose – we hunger, we come here to eat. Or it can be purposefully imbued with meaning – we hunger, we come here for encouragement, nourishment (physical and spiritual), conversation, community, to be fed and learn to feed. Parks argues that intentionally cultivating table fellowship with adequate space for emerging adults nurtures their growth and builds leaders who will help to reweave our world in positive and life-giving ways.137

Parks reflects on the future of emerging adults who do not have ample opportunity to engage in meaningful ways in communities that nurture one’s spirituality. In her exploration of the commons, Parks remarks that the commons is the “place where people meet by happenstance and intention and have a sense of shared, interdependent life within a manageable frame.”138

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134 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 155
135 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 155
136 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 156
137 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 156
138 Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 156
Through spending intentional time together, we learn to “stand – and stand with – each other over time.”\textsuperscript{139} Because dreaming and imagining what life is to be is so critical to emerging adult spiritual growth, there is an inherent vulnerability to be concerned only for his/her own interest or one’s “tribe” rather than for the wider range of life.\textsuperscript{140} In creating “commons,” connecting our lives together through stories, practices, and dreams, we engage in keeping the greater good at the forefront of life. We find common purpose, meaning and orientation which do not discount differences, but connect us beyond ourselves, keeping us from isolation and despair.

Smith in his book \textit{Lost in Transition},\textsuperscript{141} explores the so-called “dark side” of what happens when emerging adults do not have supportive and nurturing communities with which to journey:

\begin{quote}
We have shown that the passage of American youth moving from the teenage years toward full adulthood today is often confusing, troubled and sometimes dangerous. Many who make this passage find themselves disoriented, wounded, and sometimes damaged along the way. In the popular imagination, these early adult years are filled with youthful fun and freedom enjoyed in the prime of life. For some, this image is true. The actual reality for many, however, is instead one of personal struggle, confusion, anxiety, hurt frustration, and grief. … the challenges and dangers of emerging adulthood are built into the very structure of that passage itself.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

Smith continues to explain that although some emerging adults do make this pilgrimage to adulthood with ease, the majority are struggling and this is a reality that not only affects them but will be carried forward into later adult years, ultimately influencing society as a whole. Smith urges his readers to consider that while mass consumerism, individualism, globalization and a rapidly-changing culture are all factors negatively influencing the life of the emerging adult, there are ways to join their pilgrimage and support them.\textsuperscript{143} Turning to faith communities, Smith

\textsuperscript{139} Parks, \textit{Big Questions, Worthy Dreams}, 156
\textsuperscript{140} Parks, \textit{Big Questions, Worthy Dreams}, 157
\textsuperscript{142} Smith, \textit{Lost in Transition}, 236-7
\textsuperscript{143} Smith, \textit{Lost in Transition}, 239
recommends re-establishing ties, becoming mentors, showing an interest again rather than just assuming that all teenagers will leave and will come back one day.\textsuperscript{144} Echoing the call Parks issues, Smith agrees that communities that intentionally plan, make space and undertake to listen to and engage emerging adults will find the ensuing relationship mutually beneficial, even extending beyond the local faith community to society at large.

2.4 The Canadian Context: Situating the Emerging Adult Reality

Undertaking any significant research on the topic of emerging adult faith practice in Canada is a daunting task, primarily because very little work on emerging adulthood has been done by Canadians to date outside of the research performed by Reginald Bibby and Statistics Canada. One notable exception was produced (as noted above), Hemorrhaging Faith. However, they base their findings on dated Canadian statistics (2006 Census) and American resources and do not take into consideration that English-speaking Canadian cultural identity is different than our American neighbours. Bibby has produced a substantial amount of Canadian research; but, as noted, he does not separate out emerging adults from older adults (those over 30). This unfortunate reality makes teasing out Canadian emerging adult trends in Bibby’s work nearly impossible.

That being said, Bibby does have a substantial amount to say about the Canadian religious context in general. In his latest work, A New Day: The Resilience and Restructuring of Religion in Canada, Bibby describes a changing Canadian religious landscape. He states that youth (15-19 year olds) who “never” attend religious services almost doubled between the years 1984 and 2008 – “from about 1 in 4 to 2 in 4.”\textsuperscript{145} Youth involvement in groups, however, has stayed

\textsuperscript{144} Smith, Lost in Transition, 241
\textsuperscript{145} Bibby, A New Day, 7
constant over the 25 years, hovering around 21% of the youth population surveyed. Overall, weekly service attendance has dropped across Canada since 1975, with 19% of Canadians attending weekly services and four in ten indicating they never attend. In some ways, there are direct parallels and points of similarity here in Canada to what Davie describes in her research in the United Kingdom and Europe. She describes a lived reality where the majority of the population appears to live their faith vicariously through the minority who still are actively engaged in public worship and communities of faith, what she terms, a “believing without belonging.” As will be seen in Section 3.0, the Christian emerging adults who participated in this study seem to reflect both Bibby’s and Davie’s findings. Those who were active in congregations in their youth stayed active until age 19 or 20, then dropped out completely. While they still believe very strongly and follow the Christian religion in surprisingly traditional ways, they appear to be among those who believe but do not belong, choosing not to get involved in congregational life.

Yet weekly service attendance is not the only measure of the religiosity or spirituality of a nation. As described above, sources from over the past twenty years claim that Canadian belief in God has remained relatively constant at approximately 80%. Bibby reports that while the percentage of atheists has remained constant (7% in 2005, up from 6% in 1975), the most dramatic decline has been in those affirming a definite belief in God. He asserts that the cohorts most responsible for the decline are the Boomers and Pre-Boomers who have in turn

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146 Bibby, A New Day, 10
147 Bibby, A New Day, 9. See also “Canadians Prefer Private Spirituality,” 13 (based on 2004 Stats Canada report) which claims 25% of Canadians do not attend, up from 21% in 2000
150 Bibby, Beyond the Gods, 48-9
passed on their declining belief onto their Millennial children and grand-children.\textsuperscript{151} While the public display of religiosity has been in sharp decline in Canada for decades, belief still remains strong and statistics for emerging adults (or as close as we can come, given Bibby’s age divisions), remains relatively stable.

Bibby is able to provide a general overview of the Canadian context for Canadians, but does not have specifics available on the emerging adult cohort of specific interest to my research. In order to understand sociological trends in emerging adults, we must turn to research done in the United States with this cohort through the writings of Christian Smith. Smith’s work is useful in constructing hypotheses specific to emerging adults in the English-speaking Canadian context. While there are undoubtedly some similarities between the Canadian and American context, there undoubtedly are also vast differences in culture, national identity and experience. The best we can do, at the present moment, is compare the emerging religious/spiritual trends found in the context of our neighbour to the South (and, as we will see later, the new findings of researchers on European religion) and ask the question: do we see any evidence that these trends, experiences and practices observed elsewhere are happening here in Canada as well? If so, what do they look like? If not, what are Canadian emerging adults doing and why is it different from the rest of the world? At the time of writing, there appears to be no one in Canada asking these specific questions.

2.5 Exodus over Exile: Choosing an Alternative Biblical Metaphor that Speaks to the Lived Reality of Emerging Adults

It was a biblical story that drove me to seek more clarity around the issue of the absence of emerging adults in our congregations in Canada: the story of the exodus of the Hebrew people

\textsuperscript{151} Bibby, \textit{Beyond the Gods}, 49
from Egypt and their forty years journey in the desert before finding the Promised Land. I could not understand how some of the older adults I pastored could cling so strongly to what seemed to be a shared memory of the glory days of the church, the days when Sunday School classes were filled to overflowing, when everyone came to church, and the faith community was the centre and influencer of daily life for all. There was a strong desire to go back to those days even though there was strong evidence that they were not perfect, were fraught with in-fighting, fractures to the community, and a mis-alignment of values.

The memory of a strong church was not one I shared with my older parishioners. I had only ever known the church in its waning years, its pews partially empty, occupied by grey-haired elders and few grandchildren. Sloughing off the shell of past years so that we could be free to follow more faithfully both the scriptures and the call to be centred on mission were possible, I thought, now that the church was faced with change or death. Where the elder members of my congregations felt adrift, wandering in unknown places, I felt excitement and possibility, even perhaps some relief at having left the old Pharaoh, the institutional church, behind. It seemed to me that we were re-living the Exodus in modern times, having been rescued by God from the slavery of the institutional church and now wandering in the desert under God’s lead until we could find a way to relearn how to be children of God.

I vaguely remembered the vestiges of a powerful and influential church, but I began to wonder about those who had been born after me, those born in the desert. How might they understand this experience? If they had no memory of a place “we” had left, but only knew the journey (i.e., being nomads) would they see things differently? Would they use different language to describe their experience, different metaphors for God? As I discussed this correlation with peers and
leaders of my own and other traditions, I found disagreement. I was pushed, instead, to consider the popular “exile” metaphor for our shared experience.

In his book, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Walter Brueggemann argues that the key to understanding the current state of the Christian church in the Western world is to view it through the lens of exile. Analyzing Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah, Brueggemann correlates the lived experience of the post-modern, post-Christendom church to the lived experience of the ancient Hebrew people who, exiled from their homeland, lived for generations under the rule and culture of their captors. He argues that what the ancient Israelites needed was a prophetic voice which called them out of their assimilation into and acceptance of exilic life and back into deep memory of their homeland, the place where they belonged. They needed to wake up and realize that they were in exile, and they needed to go home. Only then would this people be able to live into the dream God had for them, to be a unique people, chosen by God. Brueggemann artfully compares these stories to the lived experience of the modern-day church, arguing that the church too is in exile within the dominant cultures of the Western world where we have forgotten that we too have a homeland that we are being called to remember and to which we are to return. For the traditional church, this is a prophetic call. There is much evidence to support this theology of hope as a necessary metaphor for the transformation of the church in its decline in the Western world. However, it is not a metaphor that is relevant for those who live in the margins of the church, especially those who have never known church to be “home,” born in the desert of the decline of the Western church.

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153 Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 120ff
154 Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 128ff
The central disparity between the metaphors of exile and exodus lies in the relationship of the person to his/her home. With respect to exile, the person has some recollection of home, either a direct memory or the memory of the preceding generation. Home exists and can be returned to. However, exodus presumes that home is something that is yet to be known. While Egypt was the “home” of the Hebrew people and had been for over 400 hundred years, it was also a place of oppression, slavery, and lost identity. Some might argue that that is too strong a language to use with respect to the church of the recent past. However, to those generations who have left the church for its supposed tyranny and restrictiveness, its adherence to codes of conduct and rules of acceptance, the language fits. Those who remember the halcyon days of the modern church will, perhaps, speak of it fondly, call it “home” and desire to return to the goodness and hope they experienced there. For those who have only known the church in decline, struggling to survive, seemingly irrelevant, inert, myopic and inhospitable, the prospect of putting an end to wandering and facing towards a “promised land” where one can gather with others of like mind to build “home” is a powerful and compelling metaphor of hope. Emerging adults may be searching for home, not because they remember the past, but because they have been born in the desert of post-modern post-Christendom, and they yearn for stability, surety and a new foundation for their faith.

2.6 Ritual Studies as a Key to Unlocking the Liminal Experience

If we take into consideration that the Canadian religious landscape has been changing over the last fifty years, that we are a kind of hybrid of the American “marketplace” and the European “civil utility” models, and that there are specific trends and habits of the emerging adult cohort

\[^{155}\text{North American churches are based on a voluntary association model, meaning people come to and stay with the church voluntarily, usually attracted to a common cause. Hence, in North America the term “marketplace” church has been coined to describe the common practice of picking and choosing a church (congregation and/or} \]
which present much differently than other cohorts before and after it in the life cycle, we can begin to see some answers to the question “where are the emerging adults who are absent from church?” The easy answer is, they are not in congregational life. They are somewhere else, doing something else. Taking some cues from our American cousins, we can assume that even in Canada, this cohort is inclined to do things differently than the generations who have gone before it. We can even get inside a little bit and view some potentially parallel experiences. However, there are still so many unanswered questions. We are no closer to understanding the full story of how these dynamic, seeking, spiritually-interested emerging adults live out their faith. It is not until we turn to the discipline of anthropology of religion that we begin to add more pieces to the puzzle and notice which ones are missing.

During my course work, specifically while working in Anthropology, I came to understand that a key to understanding the practice of emerging adults in the English-speaking Canadian context lies in the area of ritual. So much of our religious and spiritual practice in the Protestant church is tied to our rituals – Eucharist, Baptism, some forms of prayer, even the act of gathering on Sunday morning. A significant disconnect for many Christians (emerging adult and otherwise) is seeing not only the importance of engaging in ritual as critical aspects of enacting faith, but also the meaning undergirding them. This disconnect could be a significant reason why so many have left the traditional, public expressions of church. It begs the question; have those who have left created substitutionary rituals and practices in order to realize the fullness of faith?

denomination) based on what churches have to offer, much like choosing from a menu of options. If people are unhappy with their church, they are free to move on and choose another. In Europe, however, churches operate on a “civil utility” model which is very different than the North American voluntary association. Davie explains “the patterns of religion which flourish in the United States cannot simply be transferred to Europe at will. Europeans who are dissatisfied with their churches do not, on the whole, seek new allegiances (as they might in a market); they remain, very largely as passive members of their majority churches – reactivating their commitment at pivotal moments in their individual or collective lives.” Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, 138-139
Catherine Bell explains that ritual is not purely for entertainment. It exists to bring meaning and understanding to a people. She states, since practice is situational and strategic, people engage in ritual as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances. Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit or “the dead weight of tradition.” Ritual is not a dramatization of the problems and questions of life, just as it is not the answer to them. Rather, it is the process by which individuals interact with one another in specific, structured ways in order to bring coherence and understanding to bear on their individual and communal lives. It has a goal: not to entertain, but to create and realize “the new person.” It is through the practice of ritual that the new person, the new world is actually realized, transformation is enacted and achieved. For the moment in which the ritual is enacted, the desired world comes into being. Ritual as practice speaks to a greater, more sustained interconnectedness and intentionality with respect to the challenges and struggles of life. Evidence of this lies in the creation of masters and specialists within a community, those ritual leaders who dedicate their lives to lead and teach the rituals of community. Furthermore, ritual speaks not to random events, but to overarching systems and social narratives, to issues of power and the abuse or misuse of that power both on individual and corporate levels. From the point of view of practice, issues of solidarity, relationship and power are more clearly able to be examined and appreciated.

157 Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 108
158 Bell’s “new person” is the person transformed from old ways of being into new (e.g., moving from isolation to connectedness, thinking only of the self to focusing on others, changing focus from despair to hope) Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 110
159 For instance, in the ritual of Communion in my own congregation we believe that one of the things the Table represents is the hope that one day people will come together without division, hate or fear and eat together as equals, friends, one body. We believe that this is a core teaching of Jesus and that in instituting the ritual, his hope that humanity would one day be united would always be practiced. Bell explains that at the moment when the community enacts a ritual, what the ritual stands for (humanity coming together) actually happens. In the moment when members of our community come forward to participate in the act of Communion, everyone is equal, everyone is welcome, and everyone is one body. For that brief period of time, the hope of unity becomes reality.
160 Bell *Ritual Theory*, 130ff
Ritual theory as practice provides some excellent means of understanding emerging adulthood in North America. It is undisputed that rituals exist within distinct cultures, societies or groups who enact and practice the ritual. In part, the ritual assists to define the group (although it is not the group’s originator). Bell argues that one cannot take part in a ritual unless there is some understanding, no matter how small, as to the meaning and purpose of the ritual. One must have some kind of tie either to the group or to the ritual act itself (i.e., some sort of understanding or familiarity) in order to participate.161 This reality begs the question if a person who identifies with a certain group or culture does NOT take part in its rituals, is that person considered to be part of the group?

With respect to emerging adults, many claim to be Christian, attempt to live the values taught by the tradition, follow the teachings of scripture and Jesus Christ, but they do not take part in the public rituals of worship and the sacraments. Ever since the age of Constantine, the church has viewed participation in Sunday worship as being normative for its members. As a result the lack of attendance of many emerging adults raises a number of critical questions. Are they or are they not part of the church? If ritual assists to define the group that practices the ritual, then perhaps they are not. If ritual assists in the participant’s understanding of his/her role in the world and the individual does not practice said ritual, then how does s/he come to understand her/himself as a Christian? Perhaps, they are not really Christian. If ritual empowers and explains power structures in a given context, but the person never engages in the practice of the ritual, how does s/he come to understand power structures and their own embodied power? Perhaps, they do not understand the Christian worldview concerning power. How does the vision of a new world

161 Bell, Ritual Theory, 186
order get lived out in a group of people who do not participate in one of the major ritual practices of the church – weekly congregational worship - that enables vision to become reality?

It would be easy enough to dismiss a whole cadre of people on the basis of their non-participation in a given set of rituals. However, Bell notes that it is not always the purpose or intent of ritual to maintain tradition. Just as important is the task of ritual to create new rituals for new circumstances, new instances of “deliberately radical innovation and improvisation.”

According to Virginia Hine, “A period of fundamental socio-cultural change is a time of personal and social experimentation with shifting values, alternative life styles and major reshaping of basic institutions. …some are viable adaptations to the changing cultural milieu and constitute components in an emergent socio-cultural paradigm.” In addition, she states that in our “ritual starved society…church affiliated and religiously alienated alike are generating new forms of ritual.” If this is the case, then the question must be asked: have emerging adults created new rituals that better define their worldview and ethos, their understandings of the world and their relationships? Most emerging adults who identify as Christian have at some point in their childhood and adolescence encountered Christian ritual (through public worship and participating in the sacraments). Perhaps this residual memory has resulted in the production of new rituals that parallel those of the traditional church. According to Bruce Lincoln, “Ritual is not always where you expect to find it, yet in any culture it is there to be found, and perhaps our much-heralded “secular society” is not so secular as some would have us believe.” Perhaps those of us within the traditional Christian community need to reconsider what appears to be secular practice in the life of Christian emerging adults who seem not to be connected with the

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162 Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 91
164 Hine, “Self-Generated Ritual,” 405
church. It may be after all, that they have established a new set of substitutionary rituals for their own culture.

As noted earlier, significant media use defines emerging adulthood. For this study it is notable that there may be an important connection between emerging adults’ media use and potential substitutionary ritual. According to Felicia Hughes-Freeland, “Ritual and media are similar because they both generate realities that are surprising, special, and outside everyday routines, or in contrast to sensate everyday realities, mediated by technologies, be they embodied or external to us.”166 Hughes-Freeland turns to Victor Turner’s model of ritual process, “which centers on liminality, the temporary removal of an individual or group from the ordering norms of social structure in tribal societies, which produces communitas.”167 What occurs in communitas is the recognition of the other as equal, valid and valuable members of the same community (Buber’s “I, Thou”).168 In essence, some argue that media with its global reach, is able to produce a sense of “an area of common living…an essential and generic human bond.”169 So emerging adults have the potential to create communitas through online communities where identity is ambiguous, anonymity the norm,170 and so they are able to connect on a significantly different plane than in face-to-face social encounters. As will be seen in Section 4.4 (f), emerging adults in Canada have done exactly this, creating for themselves what Campbell calls the “networked community,”171 a seamless integration of physical and virtual relationships of equal value.

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167 Hughes-Freeland, “Media,” 596 (emphasis Hughes-Freeland)
169 Turner, The Ritual Process, 97
171 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 68
If media use has become a substitutionary ritual for emerging adults, helping them to build identity, reflect a shared worldview, and make sense of the world around them, how exactly have they done this? What values and cultural boundaries exist within this complex and multi-faceted aspect of emerging adult life? What are the similarities and differences of these media practices to the rituals Christians share in a traditional congregation? What other rituals have emerging adults created to help bring into focus their shared beliefs, values, and worldviews?

Unfortunately, to date we have only considered some of these questions from sociological and psychological developmental perspectives. No study has been conducted that would help to clarify and interpret exactly what emerging adult rituals may look like and the worldview which they try to achieve.

If we take all of these various perspectives together – the sociological, psychological, theological and anthropological - interesting points of intersection emerge that may indicate why emerging adults have abandoned traditional “church” rituals altogether or alternatively, have created substitutions in line with their particular worldview and needs. Take for instance the highly individualistic nature of emerging adulthood as previously discussed. In a society that holds the needs and desires of the individual as paramount to all others, an act or practice which focuses on relationship would be incongruous. On the other hand, in an individualistic society, were one so inclined to follow teachings which valued relationship and “the other” above the needs and desires of the self, one may attempt to create opportunities for that to happen that would be counter-cultural in their intent and imagination.

We can imagine a scenario in which a Christian emerging adult may begin a blog about the teachings of Christ which run counter to the prevailing culture, such as focussing on the need to care for one another, thinking globally but acting locally, giving examples of what the world
could look like if it were to be transformed through God’s love. Theoretically, she would use the methods and media prevalent in emerging adulthood, and would use the available means of dissemination (e.g., social networking sites), and followers and adherents would gather. A group or community would form around these ideas and worldviews, regularly engaging in the practice of reading, responding and reposting on a regular or semi-regular basis. In essence, a new ritual has been created. The blogger becomes the specialist or master, the act of posting, reading, reposting and responding become the practice which not only gathers community members, but engages them in a shared (although not homogenous) vision of a transformed world, theories of power dichotomies are advanced and discussed, and personal empowerment results – all without the need to meet face-to-face. As will be seen further on, while this behaviour was not evident in the majority of participant experiences, it was central for one of the emerging adults in this study. It is anticipated that further research would uncover more emerging adults who have recreated this type of ritual online as a substitute for remembered congregational rituals.

The further one delves into ritual theory, the more intersections with issues, habits and cultural norms in emerging adulthood appear. While the purpose of ritual is not to provide answers to the questions raised by living life, the study of ritual of a specific culture or group can provide insight and greater understanding into their inner workings of emerging adult culture. Perhaps, in our effort to minister more effectively with Christian emerging adults in Canada, we need to pay closer attention to how they may be using media and ritual in new and innovative ways.

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172 Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 107ff
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Grounded Theory: Allowing the Data to Speak for Itself

In determining how to approach the research project, I considered a variety of possible methods but ultimately decided to use Grounded Theory. It appeared to provide the greatest flexibility and structure to capture the experience of participants and allow previously unexplained theories to develop organically. The most significant factor in choosing Grounded Theory was that there has been no significant research conducted to date on either this cohort or its spiritual practice on which to draw theory or themes. With no Canadian literature or research specifically focussed on English-speaking, marginally affiliated, emerging adults available, there were no phenomena with which to compare, no theories to prove or disprove, no themes to explore or challenge. Grounded Theory gives the expansiveness with which to approach both the cohort and their experience as it does not require their responses to be shoe-horned into a specific set of pre-conceived theories. In fact, it allows the opposite. Grounded Theory seeks to provide a forum for respondents’ words, actions and lived realities to dictate and create not only new theories but to open up new, previously unknown avenues of study and exploration.

Grounded Theory research allows for data to be collected through a variety of means: field work observation, examining documents (online and print) produced by respondents, and conducting interviews and focus groups. Such data is analyzed and sorted through a system of open coding, codes not determined until after interviews take place. Open coding allows for the inclusion of new codes to be added as new themes and patterns emerge. Once coding is complete, auxiliary axial coding links relevant, related or complementary themes and patterns. As with most
Grounded Theory research, links, patterns, themes and theories deduced by me, were offered to the research participants to review to ensure that their voice, not mine, has been properly interpreted and represented. The Findings Section of this document has been distributed to participants and their feedback, where applicable and available, has been taken into consideration in the final presentation.

3.2 Research Design

Abby Day, a British anthropologist studying the belief systems and belonging patterns of various age groups in the UK states that if researchers are interested in exploring the habits and practice patterns of a particular constituency, then they must also consider that constituency’s beliefs as well.173 These two, belief and practice, are inextricably linked. In order to understand what someone is doing as they live out their faith, one must explore what it is that this someone believes. Thus, every aspect of this study from the questions asked to the organization and interpretation of data, has been grounded in the understanding of the importance of the interconnectedness of belief and practice. While it was beyond the scope of this research to undertake a full investigation into the complete belief systems of Christian emerging adults in Canada, this study will provide enough context within which to situate the practice patterns of the participants.

It seemed appropriate to ask participants about their basic understanding of God (images, relationship to/with, and specific characteristics and attributes) in order to root their practice in belief. Without such information, their practice would make no sense. In addition, because the participants were drawn from a specific sub-community (Christian) of the whole age group (18-30 year olds), some understanding of how they came to the beliefs they currently hold was also

173 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 76
critical to comprehend their practice. As Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall once stated, “one is not born Christian. One learns Christianity.”\textsuperscript{174} Therefore, how they learned their religion/faith and how they developed their beliefs significantly aid in understanding their current practice. Without this background knowledge, identifying patterns of practice and understanding their significance in the lives of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults would be extremely difficult.

3.3 Choosing Participants

I embarked on this study with great anticipation, feeling that emerging adults from across Canada would be eager for the opportunity to participate. Having worked with a number of emerging adults from across Canada through the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I was sure that gathering sufficient data would not be an issue. I decided to use snowball sampling both to avoid self-selection and to attract a wider group of participants since this specific group of people are not easily accessible through “regular” church channels (given their absence from regular public worship).

In developing the Initial Qualifying Questionnaire (IQQ) my Thesis Committee brought to my attention that my questions ought to avoid giving the impression of setting expectations, given that this cohort live in the margins of the church, quite possibly are estranged from it, and certainly are sensitive about their position outside of what may be considered “normal” Christian practice. In order to avoid any potential embarrassment or further marginalization, practice-centred questions were reworked to remove any perception of judgement. For instance, in the question concerning frequency of worship attendance, instead of beginning the list of options

\textsuperscript{174} Douglas John Hall, “The Future of the Church,” (Cousland Lecture, Emmanuel College, Toronto, ON, October 16, 2013)
with “weekly” and progressing to “never,” the list was revised to begin with “never” and end with “weekly.”

I began to gather participants by posting my IQQ link on the social media site, Facebook, with the request to forward it on to any and all friends and family that readers might think would be interested. Within moments, numerous friends, parishioners, family members and extended acquaintances had shared or forwarded the link. I also sent the link via email to key gatekeepers: clergy peers, graduate students and others in a wide variety of positions who have access to English-speaking Canadian emerging adults with the same request to share it with my desired demographic.

Eight respondents to the IQQ survey were received within the first hour of it going live. However, none of them qualified. Most declined to participate in the interview (no reason given), or were regular church goers and thus were disqualified. No other respondents were ever received through the IQQ.

Since the IQQ was unsuccessful in securing participants, I posted a reminder on my Facebook feed and encouraged my contacts to share it. Again although it was shared quite widely, no participants came forward. I decided to change my tack and approach emerging adults personally who I knew were or had been involved in the church at some point or whom I had met over the past seventeen years as an active layperson and pastor. I sent out a group Facebook message to approximately twenty individuals in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and Nova Scotia. From this appeal, I received four positive responses and a few promises to forward to friends who would be interested. After waiting a week and receiving no more interest, I then sent
approximately fifteen personal Facebook messages to individuals, one at a time, specifically asking them if they would be interested in taking part in the study. This approach yielded commitments from six individuals, four of whom actually followed through to the interview stage. In the meantime, adults from my home congregation continued to spread the word at home and in their work environments which resulted in seven local participants. In total, I interviewed fourteen individuals. Although I would have preferred to have a larger sample, the sample I used was within the Doctor of Ministry guidelines.

I was curious with respect to why some respondents who were very excited and interested in participating didn’t. Many of these people knew of others who they thought would be equally as eager and assured me that they forwarded the invitation. I created a simple four question anonymous survey using FluidSurveys\textsuperscript{175} to ask why they did not participate and if they did share the invitation with others, why did their contacts not respond. Six people responded within twenty-four hours and indicated that they intended to participate but forgot, didn’t have time, or didn’t think they had anything to share. Although they did share the original IQQ survey with approximately five others, their contacts were not interested in participating.

### 3.4 The Participants

This study employs theoretical sampling and so does not seek to be fully representative of the broad context of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults. Instead, it is a snapshot, a random sampling of individuals that assist in developing the research instead of being representative of the overall population. Kathy Charmaz defines theoretical sampling as “a type of grounded theory sampling in which the researcher aims to develop the properties of his or her developing

\textsuperscript{175} \url{www.fluidsurveys.com}
In the case of the research being presented in this study, I interviewed individuals not because they would represent certain demographics present in the emerging adult populace, but because they would potentially bring insight and data to the issues that I was investigating. That being said, the sample is quite diverse and covers many of the lived experiences present in the emerging adult stage of life and English-speaking Canadian demographics. Of the fourteen participants,

- Eight are female, six are male;

- Nine are from Ontario, four are from Nova Scotia, and one from British Columbia;

- Nine are located in urban/suburban centres, five are rural;

- Eight have attended post-secondary school, one is in graduate school;

- Three have children;

- Six are married, five are single, three are in relationships;

- All are between the ages of nineteen and thirty;

- All could be considered “middle class;”

- Eleven are of European/Caucasian descent, two are Pilipino descent, one is Jamaican; and

- Seven have come from a childhood background in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), three Roman Catholic, one Presbyterian, one Free Methodist, and two unknown/no specific church connection.

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I was unable to secure any participants under the age of nineteen although attempts were made to encourage last year high school students to participate. In addition, I was unable to secure any participants who identify as Christian but who have no previous church experience.

3.5 The Interview Guide: Making Space to be Heard

Developing the Interview Guide posed a number of challenges. I leaned heavily on Charmaz’s recommendations in *Constructing Grounded Theory* to fashion the guide and ensure the interview would yield the desired depth of data.\(^{177}\)

The main categories of data were targeted in the Interview Guide:

- Participant’s understanding of God;
- Participant’s faith practice;
- Participant’s relationship to and perception of the church;
- Participant’s values and worldviews; and
- Participant’s reflection on the interview process.

I crafted open-ended questions around issues of belief and practice and encouraged participants in the interviews to ask for clarification or rewording wherever and whenever they felt the need. My interview style allowed for participants to relate their stories and experiences freely without interruption or prompting. On occasion, if a participant, after answering a question stated, “is that what you meant?” or “is that what you were looking for?” I would take cues from what they had

\(^{177}\) Specifically the chapter entitled “Crafting and Conducting Intensive Interviews” (p 55ff). I relied on her example Interview Guide found in Box 3.1 “A Sample of Grounded Theory Interview Questions about a Life Change,” incorporating changes, deletions and additions specific to my area of research. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 65
shared to refine or reword the question to match their experience. I understood these moments to be times when the participant did not connect the question with their lived experience and therefore the question was not worded correctly. I encouraged participants to take their time and tell their stories, assuring them that it wasn’t about what I wanted to hear, but rather what they were willing to share and wanted others to know.

It was clear from the outset that the questions that I was planning to ask had to be in the language of the participant, presumably non-churched or de-churched: their voices, which have never been heard before, had to be the focal point of the project. If I used language that was too “churchy,” there was the risk that the questions would be dismissed or misunderstood, or the participant would experience discomfort or stress as they struggled to translate my words into their experience. I learned during the first interview that although I thought I had performed my due diligence, two specific words needed to be altered: “practice” and “worldview.” These were words that came from my own experience, education and faith practice which are not commonly used in the everyday life of emerging adults in this study. As I asked the two questions associated with these words, I needed to provide some explanation or rephrasing without using specific examples so the participant would not be led in any particular direction (i.e., examples from my practice would then become the standard of what I was looking for).

Because Grounded Theory research demands that the theory arise out of the data from respondents, it is important to bracket out the researcher’s pre-existing theories during the interview process so as to not influence the subject. Charmaz suggests that for this very reason, literature reviews in Grounded Theory research should be left until after the research has been

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178 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, xxi (Location 460 of 12256)
completed in order to achieve a pure Grounded Theory. This warning became immediately relevant during review of the first version of my Interview Guide. It was apparent that a theory I was holding concerning potential substitutionary ritual behaviour was skewing my line of questioning, emphasizing group practice over personal and private practice. The Guide was amended and a significant number of questions concerning private practice were added. This proved to be a wise revision that yielded significant important data which might not have been collected otherwise.

The interviewees understood that although I had a list of questions to ask, I might not ask all of them, or might want to explore some additional themes as they arose. For the vast majority of participants, I asked all the questions (except those which had obviously been covered in a preceding answer). I realized after the first interview, however, that I should have included a question gauging the relative importance of community in the life of faith. Living in community is an important aspect of Christian faith. This cohort is choosing not to participate in public worship, a gathering/community of faithful people, and so it was necessary to explore their understanding of community. The full Interview Guide was asked of all remaining participants.

A second question became relevant in a number of interviews where the participant seemed especially engaged and self-reflective in their practice. While I had been careful not to skew the discussion towards my theory of substitutionary ritual, there were opportunities to explore with select individuals the idea of ritual in the life of faith. The question, “what is the role of ritual in the life of faith?” was asked of approximately one third of participants, namely those who had both extensive past church experience and a strongly held conviction either positive or negative

179 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 8 (Location 651 of 12256)
180 See Section 2.6, which describes my theory of the potential for emerging adults to create rituals which are in essence substitutions for rituals they experienced in attending public worship earlier in life
towards the church. In addition, these individuals had a committed practice and I was interested to see if they would make the connection between their past and their present practice. In many cases, where a strong connection to the church was not present, this question would have yielded little to no data and would have required significant prompting and explanation.

3.6 Coding: Looking for Patterns

The fourteen interviews (fifteen hours total interview time) produced 120 transcribed pages of participant responses. From these pages I identified over 1,900 individual pieces of information which were relevant to the exploration of emerging adults’ spiritual practice. I did not begin the process of coding with a set of pre-set codes to apply to the data. Instead, I began simply by re-reading each transcribed interview and entering relevant data into an excel spreadsheet, sorted only by respondent identifier code. As Charmaz suggests, I employed a word-by-word coding strategy at first in order to “attend to images and meanings.” However, I spent more time and effort in “line-by-line coding” which meant reading and re-reading the transcripts, making a comment at every line, and identifying the otherwise “undetected patterns of everyday life.”

Reading and commenting line-by-line showed the subtle nuances in the stories told by participants that might otherwise have been lost in simply coding with themes. It provided an opportunity to stay with the conversations I had had, remembering emphases, body language, and variances in engagement.

Following the close line-by-line reading and commenting, I began to develop primary codes that were predominantly geared to the categories of information the questionnaire collected, namely understandings of God, practice, church, as well as people’s beliefs, values, worldviews, and

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181 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 123
182 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 123
183 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 123
advice offered by respondents to other Christian emerging adults. Not every piece of information lent itself immediately to classification. An attempt was made to ensure that each interview, once it had been entered into the spreadsheet had complete primary codes for each entry before moving to the next interview.

Once all the extracts from the interviews were entered into the spreadsheet and primary codes were in place, the spreadsheet was sorted by primary code. It became obvious in comparing codes from one interview to the next that some primary codes were too broad or ill-defined and therefore would cause some confusion in the final analysis. Some codes were modified to provide more clarity and secondary codes added for further refinement. It was also revealed that some unanticipated information had been collected that defied classification. A further sorting and section-by-section analysis, led to a tertiary level being established for some codes in order to provide much needed detail and delineation.

When coding was complete, the following areas of focus were identified:

- Details on emerging adult (values, worldviews, beliefs);
- God (image, relationship, attribute, how I learned about);
- Practice (changes in, private/personal, one-on-one, group, communication, resources, role of community and online/media use); and
- Church (involvement, perception, ritual, conceptions of community).
Chapter 4: Results of the Action in Ministry

4.1 Overarching Themes from Individual Interviews

The process of interviewing English-speaking Canadian emerging adults who claim Christianity as their own was both daunting and exciting. With no expectation concerning what their responses might be, the potential was seemingly limitless. I had come to the interviews with a tension in mind: would the emerging adult experience and practice be remarkably different than that of the average publicly-practicing Christian or would it be more of the same? What kinds of words and images would they use given their fringe association with the faith? Would I be able to conduct the interviews as closely to Grounded Theory methodology as possible given that I had a wealth of theory and literature already in my head? What emerged from the interviews was surprising on many levels.

As will be seen from the detailed findings in the following sections, English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults are a lively group with a deep and growing sense of identity, purpose, and faith. The struggles they have had in their spiritual journeys mirror life-cycle theory in stunning particularity. From forging their identities to differentiating from faith-of-origin to faith of their own, from struggles with intimacy and isolation to understanding themselves as individuals and making time to reflect on the process, they are living examples of the hard but rewarding work of emerging adulthood. While they also reflect in some ways their American counterparts (according to research done by Smith, Ammerman, Arnett and others), their Canadian context and culture have shaped them in profound ways. They reflect different cultural and societal values than emerging adults in the United States. This finding alone, I hope, will give rise to additional questions and areas of potential research in Canada beyond the scope of
this project.\textsuperscript{184} For the purposes of this paper, it is notable that many of the key issues and concerns raised by Smith in his research of American subjects, such as emerging adults’ lack of volunteerism and financial support of charities and not-for-profits, are not supported by the English-speaking Canadian subjects of this study or in the recent results of Canada’s most recent \textit{General Social Survey}.\textsuperscript{185} While the participants in this study all share a Christian background, albeit nominal, and Smith’s are from a wider sampling (religious and non-religious emerging adults alike), it would be interesting to undertake further research to determine to what extent English-speaking Canadian emerging adults are different than their American counterparts with respect to socially conscious behaviour (i.e., volunteerism and charity support).

With respect to what emerging adults in Canada believe, their images of God are both surprisingly traditional and engagingly abstract. Their faith is rooted in childhood where families-of-origin taught them to pray, introduced them to the church (both the institution and the congregation), and nurtured the seed of faith that would one day be transformative. At the same time, their intrinsic use of media (especially online content and social networking sites) has challenged their traditional image of God and the well-known ways of practice, introducing them to new and compelling ideas, philosophies, images, and practices. They are able to hold in balance the old and the new, seeing them both as useful parts of their faith to be lived out in the

\textsuperscript{184} Such questions/research include whether or not these differences are contained to those Canadians involved in Christianity, or are others outside of the faith notable in the same way?

\textsuperscript{185} See Maria Sinha’s General Social Survey analysis, “Volunteering in Canada, 2004 to 2013,” Statistics Canada (June 18, 2015, Catalogue no. 89-652-X2015003) wherein the rates of volunteerism in Canada were strong across youth and emerging adult categories (2013 percentages: ages 15-19 66%, 20-24 42%, 25-34 42%). Likewise, Martin Turcotte’s analysis, “Volunteering and charitable giving in Canada,” Statistics Canada (January 30, 2015, Catalogue no. 89-652-X2015001) indicates that youth and emerging adults slightly increased their giving to charitable causes compared to 2004. The national average per household for donations was $531 in 2013. In comparison, youth and emerging adults, while contributing less than the national average, still continued to support (2013 amounts: ages 15-19 $156, 20-24 $245, 25-34 $364)
here and now. Yet, they are far from having a complete and mature faith and are still wrestling with many unknowns, questions, and possible paths.

Finally, emerging adults have strong feelings about the church. As will be detailed in the following pages, Canada’s emerging adults have a love-hate relationship with the institution as well as the local congregation. For most, there is simply nothing truly compelling about the institution as it stands right now. There is some draw to the local congregation if pre-existing relationships remain, honest and open discussion is available, and there is something to learn that they can connect with life. But for most, the challenges and risks are too great, the history too damaging, and life too busy with work and family to make any kind of commitment. Instead, they have created webs of communities around them – both online and offline – to love and support, answer questions and have discussions, and provide the social interaction that they crave. What they are still looking for are mature people of faith who are interested in listening to, walking with, and being companion to them on this journey through the desert.

4.2 Meet the Participants

Fourteen emerging adults from across Canada participated in this study. As mentioned above, they come from all walks of life and various Christian backgrounds. The majority of participants are in their mid to late twenties (aged 23 to 29), two (Susan and Melodie) were the youngest (ages 19 and 20), and Christopher, Stephen and Paul are all the oldest of the cohort (30 years old). At the time of the interview, Ontario residents Susan and Peter were dating and living together in their own apartment in an urban centre (they are no longer together). Both are

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186 Evidence of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults not actively seeking out congregations is supported by Joel Thiessen’s study, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 77
187 Please note: participant names have been changed throughout this paper to protect their anonymity.
188 Peter has only recently moved to Ontario from British Columbia. His experiences in church, congregational life and religion in general are all rooted in British Columbia. Hence, although he currently lives in Ontario, he identifies more with British Columbia and so was classified as being from that province.
working full time jobs and have no children. Graham and Melodie both live in Ontario (Graham in a city, Melodie in a rural area), have full time work but still live at home with their families. Mark, Stephen, and Paul are all married and each has one young child. All work full-time in various fields, but Mark and Paul are located in Ontario (Paul in an urban setting, Mark in a rural one) and Stephen in Nova Scotia (rural area). Christopher is also from Nova Scotia, lives on his own in an urban centre and became engaged to be married shortly before being interviewed. Cheryl and Jordan are sisters who are both married and living in separate homes in rural Nova Scotia. Cheryl just announced that she and her husband are expecting their first child. Both sisters are employed full-time. Yunika grew up in Jamaica and came to Canada as a teenager. She has always lived in urban areas in Ontario since coming to Canada, sometimes on her own and now with extended family. She is currently single and a full-time Master’s student working on her thesis. Lana and Maria have been good friends for most of their lives. They are both Pilipino and grew up in and still live in Ontario in urban areas (neither lives with parents). Lana is married with no children and Maria is currently single. Both work full-time.

Each of these individuals was not only willing but eager to share their stories, thoughts, and reflections on faith and religion and being an emerging adult in Canada. Most were unsure if they had anything to share, but as will be shown in the findings below, their voices shed light on an otherwise relatively unknown constituency in Christ’s church and in English-speaking Canadian society. They also raise some interesting questions that, while extending beyond the scope of this project, are worthy of exploration.
4.3 A Greater Understanding of the Values and Worldviews of English-Speaking Canadian Emerging Adults

The North American church seems obsessed with understanding where all the young people have gone. Social analysts and religious researchers are scrambling to understand what is it about emerging adult generation that makes it behave the way it does, choosing to be “none” over part of a loving, supportive community.\(^{189}\) Smith in his seminal works *Souls in Transition* and *Lost in Transition*, attempts to give some insight into the inner workings of the emerging adult belief system in the United States of America that have undoubtedly influenced the state of religion there. He claims that while belief in the United States remains high, what emerging adults believe and why is strongly influenced by a number of factors:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a) a general ambivalence or indifference to religion and its institutions,
  \item b) the consideration that religion is basically a positive influence in life,
  \item c) personal experience is final authority in life decisions about faith,
  \item d) a consumerist attitude, and
  \item e) an understanding that universal truth does not exist (only individual truth).\(^{190}\)
\end{itemize}

Each of these factors alludes to changing trends across North America and a different understanding between previous generations and emerging adults with respect to the authority, place and purpose of institutions versus the power of personal experience in the life of the individual. This is coupled with emerging adults’ natural propensity to “make ongoing choices and commitments and engage in practices that also affect the character and outcomes of their

\(^{189}\) Pew Research, “Nones” on the Rise, 11
\(^{190}\) Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 145ff
own lives and collectively sustain and shape the larger social world.”191 While these tendencies are evident among the subjects of this study, given the specificity of English-speaking Canadian and American cultures, the resulting attitudes and behaviours of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults appears different than those presented in Smith’s research in his context.

4.3 (a) What English-Speaking Canadian Emerging Adult Christians Value

During the interviews, the question concerning values was met with a variety of responses. Some interviewees paused for considerable lengths to think intensely about the question, others asked for clarification, and only a handful jumped right in and began to describe their core values. Regardless of how they approached the question, the responses were remarkably similar. Respondents gave answers equally to two categories: those standards to which I hold myself (my own personal values), and values I hold for others (those I wish to see in the world, those I honour in the world around me). In the first category, participants described or mentioned forgiveness, goodness, dedication, hope, support for the other, love, kindness, respect, hard work, and tradition. In the second category, they explained how they look for authenticity, generosity, peace, goodness, openness, and occasionally faith in those around them. None of these values seemed to be enacted or desired out of any kind of obligation, but rather were seen as desired ways of being in the world. Each respondent had multiple values and appeared to give equal weight to personal as well as communal values.

There were two values (both personal and communal) that the majority of respondents held in high esteem, much more than any of the others mentioned above: acceptance and compassion. Seven of the fourteen respondents spoke at length about cultivating a culture of acceptance, first starting with their own actions and movements in the world and extending outwards. They

191 Smith, Souls in Transition, 298
explained this in terms such as “seeing the goodness in all people,” having “open mindedness about our diversity,” “all life has value,” “we are all human,” and “we need to be less judgemental.” Coupled with this was an explicit call to compassionate action in the world. Eight participants emphasized looking out for others, strangers included. Four quoted the Golden Rule (“do unto others and you would have them do to you”) and followed up with examples of caring behaviours. Two recalled the story of the Good Samaritan as an example of the life they try to live and their desire for the entire world to do likewise.

Having come to this study with the expectation outlined by Smith that emerging adults, so fashioned by a culture of “individualism and pursuit of freedom” are only concerned with their own personal lives and successes, I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of self-concern exhibited in these interviews. In only two instances did respondents comment on their own individual success as a value. In one, Peter commented that his career has always been his first priority. In a second, Mark mentioned that when he was younger he was primarily concerned about himself. However, both of these men spoke much longer and with much more detail about the values mentioned above than they spent speaking about their own individual needs for success. It would seem that if emerging adults, as Smith argues, are shaped by their culture, then for this cohort, Canadian culture is remarkably different than its US counterpart for it has influenced them in radically different ways. Rather than valuing individuality and freedom, this cohort appears to value social responsibility, compassion, and community.

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192 Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 12
4.3 (b) How do English-Speaking Canadian Emerging Adult Christians See the World

Consistent with their values, participants described a world that is flawed, but basically good. Melodie said “it’s hard to image a world where all the problems are fixed.” All respondents noted that the world is far from perfect, citing rampant wars, poverty, the environmental crisis and too much intolerance between different people, cultures and religions. However, every respondent also spoke at length about the hope they see for change. Seven participants said the world and its people are good, “perfect for us,” and filled with goodness. The majority of participants explained that what they dream of most for the world is that people would be more accepting of one another and be “more relaxed” when it comes to responding to differences. There was a call for humanity to be more inclusive, less judgemental, have more respect for one another, and to end needless conflict. Four expressed an understanding that all faiths are equal and trying to do the same thing. In addition, equity for all people (especially women) and love were noted by three individuals as primary desires for the world.

Further, a concern for the common good was expressed by ten participants in explicit ways. The common good was seen to be achievable through calling for governments and corporations to put “people over profits,” ensuring everyone has the basic necessities of life (and for one participant, ensuring there was no cost for basics like education, clothing, food, water, shelter), and compassion in times of need. Three participants made connections between their own privilege here in Canada and other parts of the world, and took time to be thankful for what they had (freedom, peace, enough to eat, etc.) and express a desire that others in the world might one day be able to experience this. There was a general sense among respondents that although there is trouble in the world, and reconciling differences is difficult, it is not impossible.
Four of the participants shared advice from what they had learned during their lifetimes concerning how change happens in the world: it begins with “me.” “I can be the light,” shared one participant. Another declared, “It’s not going to happen on its own, I have to change myself first.” Three others stated that they had the capacity to create opportunities for positive change to happen in the world around them. Two of the fathers interviewed shared that they wanted to pass on this good world to their children so they could enjoy it too. Living well, with love, compassion, respect, and acceptance, would help make that happen.

In other parts of our conversations, seven of the fourteen participants mentioned that they are active volunteers in the community, living out their values of love, support, community, compassion, and social responsibility. These responses show that the lived experience of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults is very different from their American counterparts as observed by Smith. Smith found in the United States emerging adults are “so focused on their own personal lives…that they seem incapable of even thinking more broadly about community involvement, good citizenship, or even modest levels of charitable giving.” He goes on to explain that it is not that emerging adults do not care, but they feel they don’t “have the resources to be concerned with such matters at this point in their life.” At least for this cohort of English-speaking Canadian emerging adults, this does not seem to be the case. The majority of respondents indicated that they volunteer on a regular basis and see this activity as an integral and necessary part of their faith and lives in general. The general attitude in respondents was one of compassion towards others and a desire to see some measure of equity and acceptance be more fully realized in the world around them.

193 Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 210
194 Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 210
Participants shared a considerable amount about their views of the world, the values they hold and the faith they affirm. It was obvious from observing their body language and listening to the enthusiasm and passion in their voices during interviews that their faith was central to the way they lived and how they viewed the world around them. But I had not asked that exact question. During the coding of the interviews I realized that I had neglected to draw the connection between faith and worldviews/values. I reached out to the participants via email and Facebook private message to ask if they could be explicit on the connection (if any). I received six responses shortly after the request.

Overwhelmingly, the answer was yes, faith is the lens through which they view the world. All six of the participants described for me how their movements, judgements, actions, and values arise out of their faith. For Yunika, her passion for social justice was learned at an early age in Christian schools in Jamaica and from her parents’ teaching her to use critical thinking. These days she is learning more about Jesus’ passion for justice which has been a pleasant surprise and an affirmation of her own “conscious recognition of inequity.” For Paul, Lana and Stephen, the inherent goodness in humanity and the world around them comes “directly from my faith.” Even though there may be “tragedies ahead it’s a great and comforting feeling to know that we will survive it,” says Paul, “My positive outlook on life comes directly from my faith.”

For Maria, there was an implied agreement that her values have risen out of her faith. However, a distinction needed to be made between the sources of faith: experience, family or “church”:

I firmly believe that many of my core values (compassion, forgiveness, selflessness, etc.) come from how I was raised, including my time in church. However, as I've gotten older, I've learned to negotiate and separate my positive/negative feelings towards the church and the outside world, because I think my current values and beliefs that guide everything
I do comes more so from people, experiences, etc. … once I saw that I was still seeing compassion, love, selflessness—in people and experiences that weren't connected to the church, I realized that I could have those same values in my life…I think I'm just wary of saying that my values come from one place/set of experiences more so than the other.

Values have been acquired through all three faith avenues, however, experience has become the primary arbiter of which values can be preserved and used and which ones will be let go.

### 4.4 Finding God in the Wilderness

Reginald Bibby, in his latest work, *A New Day*, interprets the 2010 Statistics Canada *General Social Survey* as a beacon of hope for Canadians concerned with the dramatic changes in the church. He asserts that over 65% of Canadians remain committed to personal spiritual or religious beliefs in their lives and 50% maintain some kind of regular religious practice or spiritual activity.\(^{195}\) He further states that one in two Canadian teenagers indicate they have spiritual needs, which includes one in three teens who indicate on the *Survey* that they never attend religious services.\(^{196}\) While these numbers are promising, they do not speak to the religious and/or spiritual experience of Canada’s emerging adult population in particular.

Emerging adults are the largest group in Canada to claim no religious affiliation (29%)\(^{197}\) and have the fewest of all the age cohorts attending religious services at least once per month (between 20-24%).\(^{198}\) However, as will be seen in the findings below, even with low public worship attendance, belief persists in the lives of this cohort. Most of the participants in this study reflect Bibby’s findings with respect to youth attendance, having been active, attending members of local congregations for the majority of their teenage years. As they moved past adolescence and realized more autonomy, their practice habits and some of their beliefs changed.

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\(^{195}\) Bibby, *New Day*, 17

\(^{196}\) Bibby, *New Day*, 18

\(^{197}\) Pew Research, “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 7

\(^{198}\) Pew Research, “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 12
What the findings below suggest is that English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults have become *bricoleurs* in their faith, moving out into the margins of the church (i.e., not participating any longer in congregational life) and taking with them the bits and pieces of faith that still hold meaning, cobbling them together with new ideas and information they find in the wilderness. While the journey at times is challenging, they are committed to it. They are finding God in the wilderness of the everyday world of work, recreation, solitude, and relationship. Their beliefs are surprisingly traditional and their practice decidedly religious in nature. For most, they consider themselves part of Christ’s church, believing that being a child of God extends beyond the confines of the local congregation.

4.4 (a) *Descriptions of God*

As Bibby has described in all of his recent works on the religiosity (or spirituality) of Canadians, belief is alive and well in Christian emerging adults despite their absence from public worship. Although participants indicated at the outset of the interviews that they had not really given much thought to how they would describe God, or what exactly they believed, they shared with me some significant insights which are both surprising and illuminating.

Of the fourteen interviews conducted, eleven participants described God in very traditional ways. Eight of the eleven used male pronouns and described God as a father figure with white robes, long white hair and “an awesome beard.” Some elaborated on the father figure image using contemporary media references to *The Simpson’s* television show and the character of Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* movie franchise. Others used words like creator, saviour, brother, friend and “that guy you visit at church.” Five explained their understanding of God as spirit but still used male pronouns. Many described a very human figure, “someone you might

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199 One of the fourteen participants described God exclusively using traditional imagery and language
see on the street,” “flesh and blood like us at one time.” One participant noted that she did not think of Jesus when she thought of God.

Although a very traditional image of God was prevalent throughout the majority of the interviews, it was all but once coupled with an equally strong abstract understanding. Twelve participants described God using a variety of terms including “being,” “bright light,” “entity,” “intricate spiralling web,” “the wind,” and “something out there.” Seven individuals perceived God with no image in mind and indicated that they could not conceive of a physical presence. Four participants indicated that traditional images of God “do not work” for them any longer (since childhood) and they have since turned away from understanding God in these traditional ways. A number of participants voiced conclusions that God was not gendered, or that it could be male or female. Only two used female pronouns exclusively and one referred to God as “Gaia.”

4.4 (b) The Character of God

In about half of the interviews, additional questions were needed to tease out further information about the participant’s understanding of God. For many, going beyond a simple description in either abstract or traditional terms, was a challenge. In these interviews we spoke about how God acts in the world, what kind of force (for good or evil) God is, and what attributes or characteristics the participant’s imagined God has. Approximately twenty-two distinct characteristics of God were shared. Of these, the most popular were that God guides us, loves us and is love, and is all-knowing. The majority of the rest of the responses were positive attributes and including caring, nurturing, correcting, forgiving, supporting, listening, encouraging, helping, having a sense of humour, gentle, calm, and wise. Two participants also described God

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200 Three of the fourteen participants described God exclusively using abstract imagery and language
(not exclusively) as both angry at times, and testing. Two also referred to God as magic. There was a general understanding that God is benevolent, universal but also intimate.

4.4 (c) A God of Relationship

In addition to specific qualities and characteristics of this divine being, eight of the participants described God in terms of a shared relationship. In these interviews, both men and women spoke about a God who purposefully and intimately acts on and within their lives, sometimes choosing to remove things and people (because it is beneficial), sometimes laying out options and allowing choice, all for the benefit of the individual. Four participants spoke at length about how God knows their path and has a destination in mind. They spoke of choices initiated by God but chosen by the individual, and a God that “leaves room for me to figure [my life] out.” Three respondents spoke passionately about how God challenges, corrects and encourages them personally and every human being, sometimes through direct conversation, to “be the best I / we can be.” For others, God is a gift giver, sometimes as reward, sometimes just because. For some, God is a known presence that can be felt physically, and related to through emotions.

Respondents who spoke about their relationship with God felt that God was and is a real presence in their lives who journeys with them (and with others), is the guide, the listener, and the constant friend who is there in every moment of life.

4.4 (d) How I Learned About God

Since the inception of this study, I have been fascinated by the metaphors of exodus and exile as they pertain to the life of the church in this post-modern, post-Christendom era. I have been curious to see if English-speaking emerging adults in Canada perceive God in a similar or different way than those of us raised and still active in the traditional church. In order to compare their experience with my own, I needed to be able to understand not only their
perception and image of God, but how they arrived at it. Since Christians are not born, they must learn the concepts of faith somewhere. It is an accepted fact in the study of faith formation that the majority of Christians learn their religion and/or faith predominantly from their family-of-origin. This is certainly the case with the majority of the participants in this study. Nine of the fourteen stated that they came to understand God first through their family. Three related stories of grandmothers teaching them prayers, reading Bible verses and taking them to church. Nine pointed to their family-of-origin as the initial source of their knowledge although some families practiced regularly and some were nominal. All the accounts centred around the family teaching prayers, doing devotions or home Bible study, and regular church attendance.

Nine participants also pointed to the church (congregation) of their childhood and youth as a strong factor in how they perceive God. Seven were very involved in the church in their youth, attending Sunday school and catechism, serving as altar boys/girls, and beingdeacons. For some, attending church was not an option but a family obligation. Yunika, originally from Jamaica, explains that she resented church as a youth because it took her away from being on the beach with her friends, and she “really didn’t make the connection between God/faith and attending church.”

Six participants explained that it was school and/or post-secondary education that heavily influenced their ideas about God. For two, comparative religion classes opened the door to curiosity and a desire to know more than what they had learned at home and church. For Jessica, being atheist in elementary school meant that she felt considerably different from her classmates. She realized that religion was a big part of the personal identity of those around her. Having “none” made her feel different, ashamed, and prompted exploration into scripture to find

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201 Hall, “The Future of the Church”
justification for “not believing.” For others, entering the world of post-secondary education saw the introduction of the concept of social justice, and the disciplines of feminism and philosophy. This proved to be fertile ground for exploring new ways of thinking which had been untapped in youth and within the teachings of family and the local congregation.

Twelve of the fourteen participants credited their own reflection, study, research and observations as integral to their present understanding of God. Only two did not mention exploring God on their own. Mark remembers facing distinct personal challenges in his early 20s which led him to spend considerable time reflecting on the nature of God, reconciling what he had learned in Sunday School and youth groups and what he was seeing in his life and in the world around him. Maria tells of feeling disconnected from the church and its teachings before she turned twenty-five. With great passion she explained how she learned that Christians were people who loved God, loved each other, and were kind, compassionate, and had a strong sense of justice. What she experienced was very different: members of the congregation “hating” each other, speaking ill of one another, complaining, refusing to do good work in the community, generally being miserable. She felt she had no other choice but to work through the hypocrisy she experienced in her local congregation, on her own. Christopher remarks that television and media have been significant in developing his understanding of God as the information presented uses scientific and historical perspectives (i.e., evidence) and provides opportunity to weigh the validity of what he learned as a child with what he knows now. Peter has had a passion for math and science all his life, and he finds that the only way to reconcile the relationship between science and faith is to do so on his own.
4.4 (e) Summing Up Participant Belief

Belief in God remains strong among emerging adults in English-speaking Canada. Despite their absence from weekly congregational worship, the faith they learned in childhood and teenage years remains robust and vibrant. It was initially surprising to me that the majority of the participants held a very conventional interpretation of God. However, given their mostly common childhood background in the church or at least hearing the stories of Christianity from an early age, their primary images and descriptions of God make sense as they are related to these early lessons. As noted by a few of the participants, while these early images are the “first things that come to mind,” they are not the only things. Most of the participants have, since childhood, augmented and adjusted their images of God to include other abstract concepts learned in their explorations online and in conversations with others.

That being said, their understandings with respect to the intrinsic characteristics of God, namely love and acceptance, while theologically correct, are not based on the teachings of the church, but rather their own lived experience. In conversations around the nature of God, participants did not refer to what they learned in childhood, nor the teachings of parents and family members, nor even Sunday School lessons. Rather, it is their experience interacting, speaking, and listening to God in their day-to-day lives that bring them to this place. It is interesting that they, the ones who have not been able to find a place within organized religion, claim a God that is accepting of them (as they are), and an embodiment of love, relationship, and nurture.

It is this God that compels these Christians to live lives dutifully with others in mind, seeking justice for the oppressed, fair and equitable treatment of others, and universal access to the basic necessities of life. It was interesting to note that as they spoke about their beliefs, there was no mention of an after-life, life after death, or heaven. Their beliefs focused on the needs of this
world and the living of this life. As they live this life, God is not absent but is decidedly ever-present, real and sometimes even tangible. God appears to be the one that has already experienced everything there is to experience, who knows all there is to know, and is ready to share that wisdom through a strong mentoring presence.

Most of the participants have made a break with their congregation-of-origin at some point (discussed further in the following section). Most have made a break with the beliefs of their family-of-origin as well, one of the outcomes of this stage of faith development. With the exception of one participant, these breaks have not been complete differentiation and denial of the beliefs of the family, but rather a re-alignment of their beliefs in which they let go of some things and pick up others (bricolage). Those who are at the end of the age range studied (near to or thirty years of age), are fairly settled in the beliefs that they hold and have reconciled the differences which exist between the beliefs of their parents and their own. Those who are younger, for the most part, are still making a path through the tangles of expectations, vulnerabilities, and awkward conversations with family members whose belief systems they no longer support. The process of achieving autonomy and differentiation is perceived as a hopeful one, as owning one’s own beliefs appears to be a critical and engaging task for this cohort.

4.5 Three Streams of Emerging Adult Practice

One of the great questions of the church for as long as I have been in leadership has been, “where are the young people?” For decades the church has pondered how to stem the tide of young people who leave faith communities which have nurtured them and been their home throughout their childhood. It’s not as if they are leaving to go somewhere else. They are simply leaving. Countless books have been written exploring every possible reason for their departure and offering a dizzying array of methods to entice their return. There seems to be a common
assumption that once a teen or emerging adult decides to leave the church, they leave their faith. Undoubtedly, there is some evidence that this happens (i.e., the increase of the “nones”). There appears to be a direct correlation between the decline in public worship attendance and the rise of the “none” (those who claim no religious affiliation), two areas which are changing at corresponding rates.

It is my theory that not all emerging adults who leave the church leave their faith. Throughout my years in active leadership in the church I have encountered a considerable number of emerging adults who have left the church but who still identify as Christian and value their relationship with God. If there is any truth to the phrase I hear most in discussions with people of all generations when it comes to the church, “you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian,” then there is a gap in our knowledge about the current state of Christianity in Canada if we are not exploring the patterns and practices of those Christians who exist in the margins of the faith.

In Section 4.1 through 4.4 above, it is clear that there is a strong and abiding belief within the cohort of English-speaking emerging adults who identify as Christian here in Canada. As most people of faith do in our post-modern world, they have taken what they have learned in their childhood and youth and mixed it with their lived experience to arrive at a practical faith that assists them in their search for meaning and purpose. Unlike many Christians, however, they do not appear to engage in acts of public practice as a part of the growth and development of their faith. To date in Canada, no one has thought to ask them what it is that they do. The purpose of this project is to explore exactly that question in order to gain some insight into an emerging adult behaviour that continues to confound the church.
What I have discovered through the enthusiastic participation of the fourteen individuals interviewed was that they, like Christians I have known who actively engage in public worship, exist on a spectrum of practice. There is a distinct preference for personal or private practice, but also an equally popular need to be in conversation with a trusted friend or partner. Group practice (e.g., church attendance, Bible study, group conversations) is not a priority for this cohort, although most of them still regard occasional congregational attendance as part of their faith practice. What drives these people to practice is an intense desire to understand themselves, be connected to God, and live lives that have meaning in the world. Most draw strong correlations between how they live their lives and their faith. How they practice illustrates what is important to them at this time in their lives: self-knowledge, being connected to God, and being the best they can be in their everyday lives.

4.5 (a) Private and Personal Practice

When asked to describe their practice (or what they do to nurture and develop their faith), participants focussed predominantly on reflection, prayer, scripture reading, contemplation, other structured activity, and study. These were times that were not normally shared with anyone else, meaning that with one exception (to be explained in the next section), the private practices of this cohort are for their own growth and exploration. They are, moreover, entirely private and so intimate that they feel they cannot be shared with the outside world. Usually these practices take place in the same place – a bedroom, outside in nature, the car, riding a motorcycle, or simply alone at home. These places seem to be sanctuaries of sorts, private space offering an opportunity to escape from the chaos of the outside world.

202 Most participants use mental exercises employing words and images during these times of reflection, but for one individual journaling was also used.
All but one of the individuals interviewed spent considerable time describing sitting in quiet, thinking through life. More than half referred to this time as “reflection” in which they sorted through the day’s events, thought through troubling issues at work or with other people, sought guidance for issues they were facing, and expressed gratitude and relief for the good things in their lives. Melodie, one of the youngest interviewees, and the one notable exception here, remarked that the times that she spent in quiet reflection and contemplation were opportunities to ponder the “normal questions everyone asks” such as what is the nature of God, how the world was created, and what happens after death.

While private reflection was present in more than half of the interviews, prayer, both formal and conversational was by far the most popular practice noted by participants. For many, a distinction was made between a casual conversation with God (or with loved ones) and formal prayer. Yunika noted, “It’s not really prayer. It’s just me talking to God.” Most participants admitted (and some with no small amount of guilt), that they only come to God when things are not going well in their lives. Issues such as illness in friends and family, the ending of relationships, hard times at work or with colleagues, and anxiety around upcoming events, were opportunities to “call out” to God and seek guidance, vent, and try to find some answers. A number of participants remarked that they knew they should come more often in gratitude for the good things that had happened in life, while others were making it an intentional practice to show gratitude:

Sometimes there is a stressful situation [when I come to God]. But on the opposite spectrum too, it’s something I feel I should practice too. I feel I got to reach out and connect when the good stuff is going on in my life too. I want to reach out and say, “Hey! I am really happy today. This went extremely well. Thank you. I am sure you had something to do with it.” (Paul)
Being able to come formally and informally into the presence of God with needs, thanksgiving, and even just to “be with” is an important component of this cohort’s practice. It is interesting to note that for many participants, there was no correlation between the casual conversations one might have with God in the car, or alone in quiet, and the term “prayer.”

For some, bedtime prayer is something they learned from their grandparents and parents which has become part of their daily routine. It acts as an opportunity to close the day and remember that important connection with the source of their faith. For Lana, it’s both a connection to her deceased grandmother (who was the one who kept all of the family practicing) and one of the last remaining practices of her faith, which once included regular worship attendance and involvement in family religious gatherings. Now, because of work and other commitments, she misses those ties to the familiar and comfortable. Remembering and reciting the bedtime prayer taught to her by her grandmother keeps those ties alive and brings a sense of comfort and ease.

For Jessica, prayer had been mostly absent from her life until the recent breakup of her marriage. Months before the interview, feeling utterly abandoned, alone and suicidal, Jessica felt she could not continue to burden her family with the pain and loneliness she was experiencing. Her only recourse was to find and connect to God. During the painful first few months of her separation, she would pray every twenty minutes, looking to establish what she calls a “connection” through formulaic repetition (“God be with me. God hear my prayer. Jesus be with me. Jesus hear my prayer”). She experiences a physical, emotional connection with God and knows that “he is with me,” hears her, responds (sometimes verbally, sometimes through physical sensation or emotion), and provides the support and strength she needs.
In some instances, prayer was not necessarily and exclusively between the individual and God but could be with loved ones who have passed on. Two participants shared experiences where this casual but intimate conversation began with God but they had a sense that God somehow was replaced by a loved one, sometimes the one whom the conversation was about. There was no shock or feeling that this conversation was any less valid because of the transformation of God into someone they knew. It produced the same effect as prayer with God: comfort, guidance, a listening ear for those who are troubled.

Over half the participants in this project named private study as a key part of their personal and private faith practice. They regard the internet as a significant source of information and inspiration whenever they have questions or are curious about their own or other faith traditions and practices. Jessica, because her work environment is not conducive to prayer, searches for memes and inspirational quotes at times when she is feeling like she needs a spiritual uplift. Yunika was using the internet to find online Bible studies at one time. A number of this group remarked that it was also a dangerous place and one had to be selective in what one read because you could never be sure where a writer or source was “coming from.” Even with that caveat, participants spend a considerable amount of time “googling” or searching for information to feed not only their profound questions of faith, but also their natural curiosity. The internet provides opportunity for queries of a general nature and a chance to connect with others who are writing on specific topics of interest to one’s own spiritual life. Graham, who spends an average amount of time engaged with technology, remarked that he will sometimes follow the writings of a spiritual teacher (he mentioned Ram Dass, creator of “the Hanuman Foundation, a non-profit foundation meant to embody the spirit of service”), whose thought seems to be influential in

Graham’s practice of mindfulness and self-awareness. Four others noted that they too follow blogs at least semi-regularly but they are not necessarily Christian content. When they do access blogs, usually looking for information, they are very aware of what they do not want, and rarely, if ever, engage in the comments section. Jordan reads one or two feminist blogs regularly because it is a perspective she honours but also because it is an opportunity to learn how faith and feminism, regularly at odds and seemingly incompatible, can be made to co-exist in one’s life.

Finally, a small number of respondents incorporate yoga, meditation, guided meditation, martial arts and/or devotional acts into their private practice. Susan practices yoga and meditation every day because she says it allows time to focus, learn how to control her thoughts, and brings a sense of calm, peace and energy to her day. Cheryl likewise practices daily yoga but finds that doing it outside in nature without the confines of the walls of her home creates an atmosphere of peace and oneness. While there was no mention of any connection to God or spirituality with respect to engaging in these practices, they were considered to be times of quiet, reflection and rest which are integral to overall health. One notable exception was Graham. While not making an explicit reference to martial arts until the end of our interview, he stated that he believes the practice of *karate* was definitely a part of his faith journey but not necessarily a spiritual one:

Yes [martial arts relates to my faith journey], because it unified body and mind. I don’t know if I look at it as a spiritual thing, but it’s a centering thing. I guess there are spiritual aspects but I don’t look at it that way. I feel like it puts the body into perspective, it puts the mind into perspective. It connects the two. You practice until you bleed, but it’s your mind that keeps you going. I see it as three aspects: I see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit thing as a body, mind, spirit. The Son is the body, the Holy Spirit is the spirit, and God is the father, the mind. It’s a good way to think about it.

Regardless of the preferred method of private practice, emerging adults use these times to find calm, comfort, peace, companionship and relief from the stresses of life. For many, they are
looking for a connection with that which is outside themselves, whether it be God or that which lies deep within the self. There are times when they are looking for answers and trying to make sense of the world around them, other times when they are trying to think things through, re- imagine or re-focus themselves in order to be more authentic and live more fully into their faith. Their practice is an experience in intimacy with the Divine and a developing sense of their own true selves as they move and interact with others and the world around them.

The images and feelings emerging adults use when describing their private practice are profound and rooted in a knowing that a relationship with God helps to ground them in the chaos of life. They speak of feeling stressed, angry, alone, helpless, unsure, needing guidance, or adrift, when they come to these private times. But they also claim feelings of ease, calm, peace, comfort, companionship, connectedness with God and people, assurance, love, and compassion during and after. While some do not associate any specific images or feelings with their private practice, those who do conjure images that are serene and beautiful. Some imagine dark, blank spaces where there is focus, connection and clarity. Others imagine themselves sitting in the presence or God or with a loved one and feeling loved and together. Still others express being in bright light or the sun. Beyond their words, facial expressions, body language and tones of voice speak to precious moments when all is right with the world and the constant ambiguity of life is replaced with peace, calm, and hope.

4.5 (b) One-On-One Practice

It was not immediately obvious throughout the interview process that there were more than the two categories of practice (private and group), that I had imagined existing within this cohort. However, as I attempted to code the interviews it soon became apparent that while areas of private practice were fairly well defined (i.e., participants practice alone, no one else is
involved), group practice was shaping up to be something completely different. In all but one of the interviews, a unique practice arose that I had mis-identified as group practice. I realized that a new code needed to be integrated into the sorting and review of the data, “one-on-one practice.” Essentially, participants identified intentional, regular conversations that they have with a trusted other (either partner, spouse, sister, mother, or close friend) as an important component to their spiritual practice. Those interviewed made a distinction between those conversations that they have with a trusted party and generally initiate, and those that spontaneously occur in the contexts of everyday gatherings of family and friends. The latter tend to be relatively superficial and do not delve deeply into the issues and matters of faith. The former, however, are what some participants called “healthy conversations” that prove to be sources of comfort insomuch as they offer answers, guidance, and connection. It is within these one-on-one conversations that emerging adults explore their questions and understandings of faith with someone else who is either older, more experienced or mature in faith, or is someone whom they trust. The majority of these conversations do not happen online but face-to-face or via telephone as they are considered too important to relegate to an email or text message.

Participants were careful to describe specifically with whom these conversations can happen and with whom they cannot. For instance, Jordan explains that she rarely has important conversations about faith with family members since most of them are “evangelical Christians” and do not share her “moderate” views. She can have conversations with a cousin and a friend who, like her, share a moderate Christian perspective. Likewise, Graham, rarely has “deep conversations” with Christian friends because,

They are the polar opposite to how I see things. So if we were to speak of it, we wouldn’t get far into the conversation. I feel like they’re indoctrinated in a way that I don’t necessarily agree with or they wouldn’t be able to go further into the story. They would
be able to tell me something, but we wouldn’t be able to talk about it on a deeper level. Most of my Christian friends are naïve. They don’t think further than what they have been told.

Graham, instead, has important conversations with his mother who is a spiritual director and is able to go where he needs to go when necessary.

Cheryl, Jessica and Maria all have sisters whom they trust and with whom they have regular conversations about faith. For Cheryl, it’s an opportunity to ask hard questions and find some perspective, to “compare” religion and belief with someone who she knows will be open to her doubts and insecurities:

Well, me and my sister talk about it [faith] a lot. I think for a while I wasn’t talking to anybody about it because I had lost my faith and I was kind of embarrassed to admit it to people. But when I did tell my sister, ever since then we talk about it all the time and I feel like she has brought me back to it. I talk to her about her relationship with God so that I can compare it to mine. Or we talk about life after death, that sort of thing.

Having no congregational connection of her own, Jessica refers to her sister as “my pastor,” someone who will listen and provide some helpful feedback and observation on how Jessica is practicing and the growth and changes she sees. In addition, Jessica’s sister knows her well, understands her struggle with her faiths and what she believes, so she trusts her. Maria’s sister is still regularly involved in church, and as they are very close personally to one another and speak to each other every week, the conversation often turns to religion, belief and the church:

The only person I know I can talk to about it [religion and faith] is my sister because when it [conversation] happens with other people I know, I just immediately crawl into a shell and clam up. I am not afraid to tell people that I am a Christian. I will tell it openly. But with my sister, we talk once a week...usually I just went to church or I just talked to a friend and I see something so ridiculous that I call her and say, “Listen! You gotta hear this and it’s so dumb!” It will turn into a discussion about whatever and then lead to faith and then we will talk about it that way. For me and her, it sort of rolls out. 99% of the time it comes from me complaining about something.
For Paul, Peter, Susan and Mark, these important conversations happen with their partner or spouse, sometimes because the conversation concerns their family and faith issues that are arising in their family life (e.g., how a child should be introduced to faith) or simply because there is no one else with whom to talk.

The majority of participants claimed that they have no close friends who are Christian or mature Christians. Most friends are atheist, agnostic, of another faith, or spiritual but not religious. While there is a desire for honest and significant discussions about faith, conversation partners are rare. When they do happen, they are opportunities to explore meaning in life, “bounce ideas” off another person, and ask the profound searching questions of the soul that they so rarely have the opportunity to explore with anyone else.

4.5 (c) Group or Public Practice

When I introduced the concept of group practice to the participants, I was generally met with long pauses and with questions about what I meant by the concept. It was obvious that for many, there was discomfort and for some guilt, around their lack of group practice. In preparing the Interview Guide I had assumed that public practice meant attending group discussions, Bible studies, public worship, alternative public meetings related to faith and the like. I soon realized that I needed to expand even my own definition of what public practice could mean to include more casual interactions such as camp reunions, family discussions, and impromptu gatherings of friends. However, as the interviews progressed, there arose a distinction between impromptu gatherings and the one-on-one conversations participants were having with conversation partners, namely, the depth of conversation and meaning that was gained or not. Participants described casually speaking about life after death, the meaning of life, God and the like at the cottage with friends, or other social gatherings, but they did not expect these conversations
would offer either the answers they were looking for or any great revelation. Likewise, conversations in the workplace were more exploratory, information-sharing times that scratched the surface of belief but did not plumb the depths of meaning that intentional one-on-one conversations were able to. That being said, office space conversations were never intended to be anything more than points of contact and times to share information. In contrast, participants sought out one-on-one conversation partners with the intention of asking burning questions, seeking advice, confirmation or explanation on matters of faith, and sharing the profound, intimate aspects of their faith that only a trusted companion could explore with them.

Of all the participants, only one considered public or group practice to be his primary faith practice. Christopher explained that he had been attending a Bible study at work, which he loved, since it took a scripture passage and made its teachings relevant to life and work. It was a great time to talk about faith, how the Bible relates to life and gave him something to take away, think about and work on, unlike his experiences at church where “you just sat there, listened, and then went home.” When questioned about his perception of what happens within public worship or “at church,” Christopher referred back to his time with the Bible study group, being the most recent and comparable experience in a public gathering. After the interview, Christopher indicated he was leaving that day to attend a men’s retreat with some friends who had tried it and recommended it. Even though he had never attended such an event in his past, he was excited to try something new in order to feed his faith.

For the majority of the remaining participants, group or public practice, meant participating in or knowledge about what happens in the local congregation. Although ten made comments about their interactions with “church” at some point in the discussion around public practice, only eight remarked that they considered it a part of their regular practice. That being said, attendance at
public worship was not a regular occurrence, (i.e., less than six times per year) or one that
equalled the quality of one’s private practice. That is to say, for many, “going to church” was
often a family obligation or reserved for special occasions (e.g., weddings, funerals, baptisms).
It did produce opportunities to have one-on-one or family discussions around the topic and
quality of the sermon, for instance.

There seemed to be an overall mild appreciation for public worship. For Paul, the act of going to
church was deemed helpful as the preacher spoke, for the most part, in practical ways and related
the message to everyday life. For Lana, (who doesn’t have the opportunity to attend worship
regularly because of work and other obligations), it feels like “home” and there is a sense of
comfort and belonging. Yunika shared that although she is attending more regularly now because
she lives with family members who go to worship every week. She admits that if she was not
living at home, she would not be going to church. Even though she tries to take notes and listen
to the sermon, and is now imagining that singing (which she loves) would be a “ministry to the
congregation,” public worship is not a priority in her faith journey. While there is a modicum of
respect on behalf of most participants when it comes to public worship and a desire in about a
third of them to attend at least occasionally, it does not seem to be an integral part of their overall
practice. Section 4.5(d) will explore some of the thoughts and feelings behind this and look at the
reasons associated with this cohort’s general disaffection with their local congregations.

Finally, there were a few indications that impromptu conversations with co-workers, friends,
family and others were also considered part of an individual’s practice. Those who did speak of
these interactions felt very strongly that sharing their faith and talking to others about faith in
random circumstances (e.g., at work, at the cottage), was a way of practicing publicly. Unlike the
one-on-one conversations, these conversations were equally instigated by the participants or by
another. In both cases, discussions centered on church culture, individual practice, and philosophical thought. There was a distinct awareness that if one were to speak too deeply about one’s beliefs that others could be offended, which was something they wished to avoid. Paul became very energetic and enthusiastic as he spoke about conversations that he has with co-workers who come predominantly from other world religions and who are interested in understanding Western Christianity more. While Paul will not initiate the conversation, he actively engages because it’s an opportunity to learn “more about myself and what I believe” as well as help others understand his “religion.” Jessica views discussing her practice with others as an opportunity to “open doors” in case others, feeling like she does (i.e., without many supports), would like the chance to talk and explore their faith. She feels that this is part of her “spiritual responsibility” and through these discussions, she will be held accountable to live the life she claims she lives:

I feel there is an element that if I truly want to call myself Christian and follow what is important to him [God], compassion, humility, strength, integrity, perseverance, that also comes from him expecting me to spread the word. I think another aspect of it is because … I have found true strength, encouragement and love in the worst of times, I don’t think that I would have that if it wasn’t for him. If I can provide that to another human being, then it’s not just my spiritual responsibility, it’s my social responsibility. I don’t have all the answers, I don’t have unlimited funds, I don’t have endless supply of food in my cupboard…but I can give you an outlet when no one else is listening. I can give you a little bit of hope even if you don’t want to call him “God.” …and I need to make sure that someone is holding me accountable. I do not follow traditional means of religious practice, so I don’t have a pastor to go (waves finger), “What are you doing? You want to call yourself a Christian but behave that way? Come on now!” So at least by articulating it, people are going to hold me to a certain standard.

While some of these conversations happen in an online environment (e.g., chat room, social media, etc.), the majority are face-to-face so that all the nuances of human communication can be observed and beliefs respected. In addition to the conversations mentioned above, Mark and Melodie often engage in more philosophical discussions with friends around the big questions of
life. While not necessarily focused on God, spirituality, or even religion, these conversations swirl around issues of life after death, thoughts and feelings around suicide, and the general meaning of life and all it entails. Those engaging in these conversations don’t necessarily see them as an integral part of their spiritual practice, but they do remark that when they think about times when they have engaged in spiritual and/or religious discussions, this is usually how it happens.

The interviewees for this study rarely shared their feelings about group and public religious practices, but when they did these varied markedly from individual to individual. For some, because these interactions happen with people whom they would rather not engage on religious issues (as in the case of conservative-minded family members), they often feel frustrated, as if they were being judged and had then to be on the defensive. Some felt cold and closed off because of negative experiences they have had either in group discussions or in their previous involvement in congregational life. At the other end of the spectrum, some who have had positive experiences related feelings of being engaged, comforted, and supported whenever they have attended worship services or special events in a congregation. These same participants spoke about feeling enlightened during worship and experiencing a time of being “stress-free” and away from the cares of the world. Still others used images of home, family and childhood memories with “sunshine streaming through windows.” Unlike private and one-one-one practice, feelings and images shared with respect to public and group practice are divided and heavy with memories both positive and negative.

4.5 (d) The Challenge of Faith and Changes in Practice

As part of my attempt to gain a more complete understanding of English-speaking Canadian emerging adult faith and practice, I asked each participant to explain what changes, if any, had
occurred during their lifetime with respect to their practices. It was no surprise that each one spoke at length about their life and the reasons why they continued, discontinued, and adopted specific practices. These discussions, however, were interwoven with reflections on the changes that had occurred in each individual’s faith. As noted in Section 2.3 above, emerging adulthood is a time of dynamic change and upheaval in faith and identity. While some patterns did emerge from the interviews that point to and confirm the theory of emerging adult faith formation, what was more important was to be witness to the stories themselves and to hear for the first time, this cohort speak truthfully about their connections to faith, the church (both the institution and the congregation), and their ongoing practice.

**Leaving Church**

More than half of the participants, when asked about significant changes in their faith, told stories about leaving the “church” in which they had grown up. For some, the choice to leave church was easy because it had been an obligation and had never really been part of their faith and their own relationship with God. No longer being required to go to worship by parents and now old enough to make their own decisions about whether or not to attend signalled the first significant change in their faith practice. Those who made the decision to leave say they did so because it had never meant much to them anyway. They confess that they do not miss “church” and have found other ways to feed and nurture their faith.

For others church had been central to how they related to God, and they shared memories with respect to how involved and dedicated they had been in attending weekly worship as well as classes and youth events. Some had responsibilities in the church or were actively engaged in and by worship. Being active in congregational life and worship offered them much comfort as
they experienced companionship and intimacy with God through a loving community. As they moved out of their teenage years and became of working age, jobs took some of them away for either a period of time or permanently. Others changed their habits of attendance in response to what was happening within the congregation itself. For Cheryl, the first congregation she was involved with as a teenager seemed “chaotic” at times and at other times “very sad.” She thinks back and concludes that maybe if her congregational experience early on had been better, she might not have “lost faith.”

Maria grew up in a Christian home but not with strict Christian parents. The entire family has attended the same congregation her entire life. Maria took solace in lessons from Sunday school and worship services about the qualities of “godly people,” that they are “loving, compassionate, helpful, humble, generous, forgiving and accepting.” As Maria came to the end of her teenage years, she began to notice a disconnection between what a godly person was supposed to be like and the people in her congregation actually did. She was unable to reconcile the infighting, exclusion, political maneuverings and “hatred” she experienced in her congregation with what people who loved God and each other should be doing. So, in her words, she “drifted away.” Now, Maria says, “I no longer try to associate with Christians. I don’t want anyone to mistake me for “that type” of Christian.” Instead of attending services, she spends time working on herself, specifically in the areas of humility, forgiveness, and acceptance.

Jordan grew up in a church-going family and still finds a great deal of comfort whenever she has the opportunity to attend. Most recently, she attended her great-grandmother’s funeral and was surprised to find a sense of peace and comfort while reciting the Lord’s Prayer. She also feels profoundly connected to God and the people around her when singing well-known hymns as they provide an opportunity to relax and rest her mind. After drifting away from church during her
later teenage years and early twenties, she returned and began to attend regularly. She enjoyed
the little community and its sense of “togetherness” and acceptance even though she was the
youngest person there by decades. Over the course of the past few years, however, a number of
key people she loved within the community have died. The culture of the community seems now
to have changed (less joyous and accepting, more petty and exclusive), and she now feels
uncomfortable attending. She hasn’t been back in more than four years and while she misses it,
does not intend to return. Instead, Jordan finds the relationships and community she needs in the
work and volunteering she does.

While the local congregation, its activities, people, sacredness and ritual was an important part of
the emerging adult’s childhood and teenage years, the attachment for the vast majority of this
cohort is no longer there. For some, memories of time spent in the congregation evoke nostalgia.
For others, they arouse grief and confusion that both they and the church have somehow
changed, and that change cannot be undone. For still others, anger and frustration has turned to
ambivalence. “Church,” the institution has been left behind, with few, if any, regrets.204

Crisis & Changes in Life

Not every person I interviewed had been involved in congregational life for all or part of their
life. Less than half of participants had nominal connections to the church when they were
growing up either through parents or grandparents bringing them to Sunday School, occasionally
attending with friends, or going to church camp. Coming from homes that were not particularly
“religious” or were outright atheist, the changes that most of these individuals have experienced
in their faith and practice came because of a crisis moment (or moments). For Stephen, growing

204 The experience of English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults who are marginally connected to the
church and who feel like outsiders in traditional congregations where they have no pre-existing relationships is
supported by Joel Thiessen’s study, The Meaning of Sunday, 77
up in a non-religious home and suffering from depression as a teenager and then falling suddenly, seriously ill, it was the prayers of elders from his grandmother’s congregation that “saved my life.” Later in life, struggling with alcohol addiction, Stephen received a “wake-up call from a friend” and decided to return to faith and practice, sometimes with a faith community, but mostly on his own. In Mark’s case the moment of crisis came recently after he became a new father. While he has always maintained a belief in God and practiced his faith privately, he has noticed an increase in his prayer time now that his son is in the world. In addition, he has had more discussions with his wife around attending worship for the sake of their child. Likewise, Paul didn’t grow up in an overly religious home (parents both believed in God but were not church goers), but he always felt close to God and learned his values from that faith. He too has a young child and has noticed a change in the frequency of his times in worship and in conversation about faith with his wife. He also notes that there have been some changes in worship attendance in his extended family and he hopes to have a conversation with them to find out why. Although Paul did not have any regular experience with church as a child and youth, he finds a great affinity with public worship, a sense of home, and opportunities to learn and grow in his faith.

Three participants in this study each had recently been through a break-up with their significant other, and each one shared about how difficult their journey has been on multiple levels. They each come from different church backgrounds: Jessica grew up atheist and has only been sporadically to public worship. Yunika grew up Christian and attended a congregation weekly with parents but felt that to be an obligation she owed to her family. By contrast, Maria grew up Christian and was active in congregational life until her teen years. But each one realized in retrospect that before their breakup they were not practicing their faith as intensely or
purposefully as perhaps they might have. Each one was devastated by the experience and in the months that ensued, spent significant time exploring the meaning behind what had happened as well as questioning her personal identity and purpose in life. For Jessica this meant developing and growing her faith, making it such a central part of her life that it would become a prerequisite for a future partner. For Yunika, it was a time of profound introspection and realizing that she had been “chipping away at [her] principles” and now needed to rethink her life and purpose. Music seems to help with that process, especially music that has a strong social activist message. For Maria, it was time to re-evaluate her youth and early adult years. She made the decision to let go of a number of practices, priorities and beliefs in order to live more authentically into whom she is and the life she wishes to live.

Although not all of these three stories are concerned with a turning towards God in particular, they are distinct examples of how re-evaluations of faith during emerging adulthood lead to shifts in belief and practice. Each of these young women now have a more refined sense of self, values, and purpose. They spoke of how they know better “what they are looking for” in a potential partner, something that appears to hinge of the value of self-integrity and authenticity (i.e., being true to themselves). They know as well that the God who walked with them through these difficult times is a God who can be trusted. Faith as well has become more firmly embedded as a non-negotiable going forward, meaning they now realize that they had at times taken it for granted. Now, faith is guide and a grammar for living.

Education and Exposure to New Ideas and People

Regardless of whether participants grew up in within the church or not, or whether they were active or had marginal affiliations with a local congregation, all have been influenced by
exposure to new ideas, people and relationships as they have matured. These new encounters have “opened” them up to different ways of thinking about faith, different from what they had learned in Sunday School, worship or from their family-of-origin. For some, comparative religion classes in high school and philosophy in post-secondary, revealed new possibilities with respect to faith and belief, but they also raised doubts and questions. For example, Melodie explained that she had always gone to church like all the other women in her family mostly because it was what she knew. Once she entered her senior year of high school and took a comparative religion class, she began to reconsider the beliefs she had been taught in Sunday School classes. Other religions seemed to have just as much validity and truth as the one in which she had been raised, so she began to ask herself why she should follow the teachings of only one religion or any at all. For many of the respondents, learning about other religions led to challenging long-held beliefs which undermined their once-regular practices.

For others, exploring new concepts introduced to them by friends, television shows or internet sites led them to reconsider whether they should live a life without religious practices and to rethink their once-nominal concern with their own spiritual life. Participants shared that these encounters have “spoken” to them and they have begun to live a different way, more focused on self-awareness. In the case of Christopher, who was “born into” a local congregation, watching television programs about the history of religion and the archaeology of the Middle East have presented interpretations and perspectives on the Christian faith that he had never considered. These opinions have led him to question his own beliefs, deciding to let some go that seemed to be unsupportable by historic and archaeological evidence. For Susan, involvement in the local congregation as an altar server was always something she enjoyed. At one point in her later teenage years she had a conversation with her mother’s friend who was a practicing Wiccan. It
was a faith and practice that seemed to Susan to make more sense than what she knew in the pomp and ritual of her local congregation. The connections to Earth and the elements made her feel more “grounded” and she began to study more about the faith. She now sees herself as a Christian-Wiccan and is able to tell her faith story through the symbols and metaphors of the natural-based faith rather than the Christian ones. For example, when speaking about God, Susan makes a deliberate connection between some symbols of the Divine used in Wicca (e.g., Mother Earth, wind, sky). However, she explains that the Holy Spirit is wind, the Sky is Father God (wise, all-knowing, in control) and Mother Earth (nurturing, compassionate, strong) is likewise God. Both the Earth and sky are two parts of the same entity, but with different characteristics. Together they make a whole, which Susan explains, “makes more sense” (i.e., that God is both male and female).

Participants who have been influenced by people and media which present a different set of beliefs or perspectives that challenge childhood faith assumptions are developing their own spiritual practice to nurture that growing awareness and interest in faith and spiritual things. In many cases, starting a new relationship or working with people who are interested in religion and spirituality, has led to reflections on the whys and hows of faith and practice. This, as evidenced by a handful of people within this study, has precipitated change not only in practice but in the depth of the individual’s faith. Paul shared at length about the conversations he has in his workplace. Many of his coworkers are immigrants from India and Asia and are curious to know more about Christianity. He explains that they will ask him to explain certain Christian beliefs or symbols that they have encountered here in Canada and do not understand. In the act of explaining, Paul remarks, he has gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for his faith: “If you are going to explain something or teach something, you have to know it first.” He enjoys
these times because they help him appreciate the nuances and particularities of his faith which in turn, encourages him to believe more.

In summary, participants experienced significant change in their beliefs from childhood until present day, the depth of their faith, and how they practice it over the course of their lives to date. Some of these changes led to removing unwanted, toxic, or unnecessary activities, practices and beliefs to make room for more authentic expressions of a maturing faith. As explained in Section 2.3 above, they are working through the tasks of emerging adulthood, balancing intimacy and isolation, differentiating from the beliefs and practices of their family-of-origin, and establishing their own identity as well as a faith they can truly call their own.

4.4 (e) The Issue of Online / Offline Practice

A significant issue going into this study concerned the exact role and use of media in English-speaking Canadian emerging adult life and specifically religious life. Given my experience of having to integrate online content which, at one time did not exist, I was interested to see how emerging adults who have always had the Internet as a part of their lives, use it. For generations born before me, the way that Generation X and Millennials use the internet can be confounding. For those of us in Generation X, we have evolved with it and it is now, for many of us, seamlessly integrated into the way we live and work. For Millennials, the internet has always been, so its usage is part of everyday life. They have not had to consider how to implement it, they just do. This means, then, that understanding exactly how they do this may help to understand the overall culture and context of this dynamic generation.

Heidi A. Campbell has written extensively on understanding the nuances and practices of religion and the online universe. Just as the introduction of the internet revolutionized our daily
lives from business, to home, to education and more, so to it has changed the face of religion. Campbell argues that changes to religion as it has integrated a greater internet component mirrors contemporary society.\textsuperscript{205} She states that “online technology use and choices cannot be easily disembedded from offline contexts and so requires looking at how offline practices guide online beliefs and behaviours.”\textsuperscript{206} Essentially, many emerging adult adherents to religion will employ a unique fluidity between online content, ritual, and experience and their live offline lives which may include discussions, rituals, and practices that they undertake day to day. There is a propensity to include within this combined practice a “hybridity” of belief which may include “religious language rituals, ideas and artifacts from multiple traditions or interpretations, even those previously seen as nonreligious,”\textsuperscript{207} what Campbell and others refer to as bricolage.

Campbell argues that this “networked religion”\textsuperscript{208} operates quite differently than what those who have been involved in traditional religion are able to easily recognize. Because the internet can be seen as a “spiritual hub”\textsuperscript{209} and the lived practices of the faithful are essentially private in nature, the role of the church appears diminished and arguably threatened. While this is undoubtedly playing out in our English-speaking Canadian context (given the decline in church attendance over the past number of decades), there is an understanding that finding religion online and engaging in conversation and practice through the internet is not a substitute for offline or in-person involvement but rather a supplement.\textsuperscript{210}

As shown in the interviews described in this study, emerging adults experience a certain amount of disconnection with the church. While some have experienced negativity and exclusion, others

\textsuperscript{205} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 65
\textsuperscript{206} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 65
\textsuperscript{207} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 67
\textsuperscript{208} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 67
\textsuperscript{209} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 76
\textsuperscript{210} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 69
simply have never had a connection with the local congregation. For many of the participants, there is something they desire missing in the church: relationship. Some participants indicated that relationships have never existed for them because “going to church was an obligation,” or there was a generation gap as there was no one there close to their age with whom they could really connect. For emerging adults, relationship implies trust, and trust is essential in order to have open, honest conversations about the sensitive and important issues of faith. Campbell claims that many “members joined online communities in order to meet specific relational needs, yet recognized that they could not fully meet social needs and a desire for shared embodied worship experience in this context.”\textsuperscript{211} Participants have encountered a different way of being online, and have found acceptance, openness to new ideas, and a willingness to engage in what they feel is honest dialogue about faith, belief, and practice. Common comments from participants around this issue include that they are able to read articles that friends and others have posted on Social Networking Sites like Facebook that present new ideas about faith. They are encouraged by these postings because they express ideas with which they agree. They in turn share the post on their Facebook pages. Sometimes online conversations start because of these postings and sometimes people just click “like” to show they agree. These online interactions indicate the mutual respect or appreciation of a belief or faith concept that the participant has “put out there.” Knowing that others appreciate what they are sharing is important but perhaps more significant is the confidence that they have to share their beliefs and faith online with others. If they find something that really speaks to them, they want to share it so that others may have the chance to be inspired, encouraged, or challenged. They realize, however, that online interactions do not provide the social stimulation they need. So they take this online experience back with them to their offline contexts and begin looking for people both who are able to meet

\textsuperscript{211} Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 69
the needs they have had met online (honest discussion, genuine interest, and a safe place to
explore and ask questions) and satisfy the need for live, face-to-face, social interaction.

It appears that most of the Christian emerging adults in this study prefer face-to-face encounters
and discussions, but online, telephone and social media opportunities are also used. These
emerging adults seem to embody Campbell’s findings that “through sharing new ideas and
reinterpretations of symbols related to religious practice, an experiential environment is created
allowing the group to be together yet separately live out their spiritualties.”212 For instance,
during the draft stage of preparing this thesis, I sent my findings to the cohort for their review
and comment. Jessica immediately emailed me to say that she not only was looking forward to
reviewing it, but would relish the opportunity to review it with the other participants in a group
setting so that they could compare experiences and stories. There is evidence that not only
emerging adults, but most “wired” individuals do seem to find meaning in life through this
“bricolage”213 of religious belief and practices, a practice once done in private but now talked
about openly online and offline.214

Susan’s story (above) and her ability to weave together Wicca and Christianity is one such
example. Not only does she speak with friends about her faith, but she explores online resources
for information to inform these conversations. The free interchange of ideas and practices online
has created a “conversational space”215 where one’s ideas and lived practice and experience
encounter the ideas, practice and experience of others in ways never before seen in our history.
True, there exists the danger of even further individualism. However, as evidenced in the
interviews conducted in this research project, that is generally not the case. None of the

212 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 78
213 See Section 2.2(f) for a description of bricolage
214 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 79
215 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 80
participants indicated that they only use the internet to learn and grow in faith. Instead, when asked if they had such conversations predominantly online, the overwhelming answer was “no!” For each participant, it was important to explore and use the tools at hand, but it was vital to turn to trusted relationships, in person, for ratification, challenge, support and closure. This is part of the process of “negotiation and change” that characterizes not only the emerging adult stage of the life cycle, but also the practice of religion in general.216 It is the reality of this wired world we live in that faith, belief, and practice exist now in two realms: offline and online. There is a desire in the hearts and minds of emerging adults for there to be balance between these two worlds. They need to remain free to explore and learn through online social interaction, writing, reading and researching the topics and nuances of their faith. But they also desire faithful, mature, open-minded Christians whom they can meet in person and with whom they can develop relationships and walk together through the confusing and challenging parts of a life lived in faith.

4.5 (f) Summing up Emerging Adult Practice

Emerging adult practice in marginalized Christians appears remarkably similar to many publicly practicing Christians I know within my own ministerial contexts, both past and present. There is an intense desire to connect with God (or Spirit or the transcendent) in an intimate way, and a desire to integrate that relationship not only in the private times but also in one’s engagement with the world. Like many practicing Christians of all age groups, those who attend public gatherings and those who do not, conversation partners are desirable to engage in meaningful dialogues about the inner workings of faith and one’s relationship with God. It is important to

216 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline,” 85
find someone with whom to have intimate conversations and to gain perspective, but the prevailing sentiment among emerging adults is that it is unlikely that many will be found.

Prayer, scripture reading, music and time to reflect and uncover meaning are all integral parts of emerging adult practice which most of the time is spent privately. Attending organized public worship is not regarded as a necessary part of one’s spiritual life, although for some it would be an appreciated supplement if time permitted and acceptance could be found. Although the pilgrimage these faithful are on is similar to generations who have gone before, one notable exception remains: this group of travellers have access to resources never imagined forty or fifty years ago. With instant access to information and webs of relationships existing in both physical and virtual planes, their experience of life is dramatically different than anything we have ever seen before. There is a desire on behalf of many to connect or reconnect with the church (for some any congregation will do), but little hope the institution will be able to make the leap to meet them where they are. The best that they can hope for is the occasional peer or adult who is more mature in their faith who could one day become a vital conversation partner.

4.6 Emerging Adult Perceptions of “Church”

Emerging adults are very open and forthright when it comes to discussing the church (both the institution and the local congregation). Most have vivid memories of both the good and the not so good parts of congregational life. Many have served in significant ways in the life of the church in their teenage years as deacons, lay readers, altar servers, and choir members. Only two of the participants in this study had a neutral perception of church. Thoughts about church rarely enter their minds, and its existence doesn’t really make a difference in their world or in their lives. The majority of emerging adults involved in this study spoke of the “church” using both
negative and positive reflections with equal passion and intensity. For better or for worse, their experiences in congregational life have impacted and shaped them as Christians.

*When the Church “Works”*

Participants were happy to share a great wealth of their personal experiences and thoughts on the local congregation and the church as institution. Stephen remarked that it was important to share the good things about the church because “mass media makes it sound like the church is all bad. People don’t hear the good things.” Thirteen of the fourteen interviewed had positive things to say about their past experiences and perceptions of “church” is today. Half of the participants appreciated the traditional side of the local congregation, such as the “beautiful buildings,” singing, worship, rituals “like communion and the Lord’s prayer,” and communal prayer. For four participants, “church” was a “place of healing,” “love,” “nurture,” and helping in the community and the world. “Pushing for the right causes matters,” remarked one participant, and emerging adults will find that attractive. An opportunity to learn about scripture and God was cited by three participants as a key positive for the local congregation. For only one participant, “sharing ideas of faith” had been a positive experience and something that she missed from her days of regular attendance. Finally, half of the participants shared that the local congregation, when it works, is like “home.” It is a place where people can be together and experience true community. One participant remarked, “It’s not about what’s going on in their heads, but being together.” When the local congregation is at its finest, it is a safe haven, a sanctuary, where true community is lived out in prayer, worship, and learning.
The Darker Side of Church

There was consensus among the participants that congregations don’t always “work.” There are strong negative perceptions residing in the hearts and minds of English-speaking emerging adults in Canada who have had prior experience with the church. For the most part, participants did not pinpoint the rituals or public worship as areas of discontent. However, eight did refer to public worship as “boring,” “too strict,” or something they had “grown out of.”217 One felt that the act of worship was “depressing” and another indicated that she felt people went only out of “obligation” than any real sense of the sacredness of it. With twelve of the fourteen participants commenting on negative perceptions of the church, none cited the actual faith practice of the church (i.e., sermon, music, prayer, ritual) as a reason why they have stayed away.218 Instead, emerging adults referred almost exclusively to the behaviour of the people in the local congregation as the main reason for their negative perception. At the centre of these reflections are experiences in the local congregation of in-fighting, exclusion, conflict and judgemental attitudes. Participants shared that while the congregation is supposed to be a community centred

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217 It is interesting to note that a definition of boredom exists, and may serve to be yet another explanation or point of entry into understanding the alienation of emerging adults from church culture. According to Charles W. Nuckolls, “Whitehouse suggests that boredom is a naturally uncomfortable state of mind induced by the repetitive actions characteristic of religious ritual in its ‘doctrinal mode.’ Boredom is a ‘burden,’…and a predicament normal human beings eventually seek to relieve through periodic revitalization and recourse to the ‘imagistic’ mode of religious ritual, an experience of temporary sensory excitation…[and]… ‘all’ [doctrinal faiths] forbid specific stereotyped expressions of boredom during their most high-frequency ritual performances.” (Charles W. Nuckolls, “Boring Rituals,” in Journal of Ritual Studies 21 (1) (2007): 33) Further, “The bored individual experiences tension that he or she cannot release, and represses the conflicted desire by assuming an attitude of indifference” (39). While this may seem like an obvious understanding of the issue of boredom, Nuckolls continues to offer an eye-opening explanation of the actual “function” of boredom. Nuckolls states that leading scholars compare “the bored person to someone who has forgotten a name and asks others about it. The central problem of the psychology of boredom, therefore, is not primarily under-stimulation, as the common sense view suggests, or even a vague ‘proneness’ to finding certain situations tedious. Rather, boredom is the inhibition to activity and the simultaneous urge to do something” (40). This discussion around boredom parallels an attribute of emerging adulthood, namely the need to be active and engaged. The rituals normative to church culture are too restrictive and do not engage the desire for activity so central to emerging adulthood.

218 It is important to note as well that the majority of participants were involved in local congregations that had a traditional worship service. That is to say there were no bands, technology, or other currently used accoutrements associated with contemporary worship geared to attract emerging adults.
on the principles of love, compassion, nurture and unity, sometimes they do not act like they are. Too often, “fear,” “intimidation,” “judgement,” and petty conflicts over “budgets, agendas and other political matters,” are the face that is shown to those involved in the community. For one participant, this side of Christ’s church was “too risky” to encounter again.

In addition to the poor behaviour exhibited in some congregations and the less than exciting quality of public worship, nine of the fourteen participants spoke at length concerning the disconnection they have felt and experienced in the local worshipping community. Participants explained that most times there are “no youth” or other people their age, or if there are, they are “not like me” (that is, moderately minded). Still others felt that as women they were not represented in the leadership of the church in general, and therefore were excluded. For two participants, white middle-class privilege was a definite deterrent with respect to the possibility of re-engaging with the church. “Affluence” and the prevalence of “white middle-class” were seen as negative aspects in a congregation. Some remarked that this privilege included straight privilege too, along with an aversion to being open, affirming and able to speak lovingly about the needs and rights of the LGBTQ community.

Overall, congregations were seen as difficult places in which to encounter and build meaningful relationships with other Christians. There was an overwhelming sense that those within the faith community had little in common with the lived experiences of those outside of it. One participant remarked that “the church is like a bubble. Everyone in the room has a key, but if you don’t have it, you don’t get in.” It is also notable that even though the emerging adults in this study held strong, negative perceptions of the church manifested in the local congregation, equally strong, positive perceptions were also present. In fact, these emerging adults appeared to be disappointed in the local worshipping communities in which they had been involved. This is
particularly so because the lessons that were taught there concerning love, unity, compassion, and hope, were not being lived out. The potential to live these gospel truths was still hoped for, and still recognized as the preferred way of being for the congregation. Emerging adults are, however, pragmatic and while they dream that the church could correct its behavioural and relationship issues, there is little hope that it will actually happen. Because of this pragmatism and the abiding desire of emerging adults to be part of a faith community where they are accepted, nurtured, loved and encouraged in their faith (and that includes having meaningful conversations about God and faith), they have created their own networked communities that for them have replaced the local congregation.

4.7 Wisdom Passed On

Participants were asked near the end of each interview to offer a word of advice to other emerging adults who were likewise practicing their faith outside of traditional congregational life. It was my impression going into these sessions that emerging adults are keenly aware that while they may practice the majority of time on their own, they are not alone. In their own words, they normally don’t have too many “Christian” friends with whom to speak about their faith, and the church is not included in their list of essential relationships for the most part. I was curious to see what they would offer as advice to others who, like them, were making this pilgrimage seemingly on their own. While a few of the participants were hesitant to offer any kind of advice to anyone, most were happy to oblige and offered words of encouragement to their fellow emerging adult Christians. Their comments centred around three main areas: (a) recognition that faith is important if not critical in life, (b) it’s important to talk about it with someone else, and (c) it’s not going to be easy.
“Keep searching and trying.” “Faith is important. Believing in God is important.” “Find a way to keep in touch with God.” Words such as these were offered by over half of the participants in the study. A third of respondents encouraged fellow solo Christians to make sure that they did what “feels right” and not to be discouraged. Others explained how searching the internet, reading, watching television shows on religion or history of religion can be helpful, and still others pointed to the local congregation as a great place where one could explore faith. Keeping an open mind about what one encounters on the journey seemed to be at the same time a critical part of the path to greater understanding and a caveat of what to expect as one explores the nuances of faith online and offline. A primary goal for most participants was to keep and nurture a “connection” with God; however, that entity is understood:

If you feel your faith is strong enough to find God on your own and in a way that feels good for you and makes you feel more connected to him, then that connection is not any less valid just because you aren’t part of some massive group that claims to all believe in the same things. I would encourage true independence in finding God and in following that path. (Maria)

Undergirding all of this advice is the understanding that a relationship with God and nurturing the self and spirit is vitally important to life. Given this cohort’s desire for guidance and affirmation as they navigate their ever-changing, always challenging context, having that constant source of comfort, companionship and assurance is necessary to meeting life head-on. There was agreement from all the participants that “going it alone” was okay and a completely acceptable way to explore faith. Only one participant remarked that one should not “do it alone” as there is too much at stake in one’s life to be truly and utterly alone. That being said, Jessica, like the vast majority (eleven of the fourteen) offered encouragement to seek out a conversation.

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219 All of the participants at one time or another used the word “connection” while speaking about their faith experiences and practices.
partner, someone “you can talk to” and whom you trust. As shown in their own life and practice, having someone in your life who can be a confidant, someone to “bounce ideas off of,” to compare their experience of the life of faith with others, and to explore the questions about the purpose of life that cannot be easily answered on one’s own, is an absolutely necessity.

While having that one trusted person is an absolute minimum among this cohort, about half of the participants said it was important to seek out groups of people and specifically the church. Sometimes being in a group, they said, “takes the fear away” or gives you the start of “a grounding” in the faith. Sometimes, many participants shared, when practicing by yourself you might find that you need to be “realigned” and need to step into something “more organized” so that you can get your bearings again. Some participants saw in the local congregation an opportunity to meet other people just like you and to find the reassurance that “you are not alone.” For others, it provided a chance to “whet the appetite” for greater integration of faith not only with one’s private life but in the greater life of faithful people everywhere. The one caveat that they had was that one should never feel guilty about not attending worship services. If connecting with an established community is not an option, then one should “build one around yourself” where there is accountability, support, and the opportunity to explore faith issues.

Overall, the greatest piece of advice these emerging adults offered was to find a travelling partner, someone who could be trusted to have honest, open conversations, be ready to challenge, support and encourage, not only to help you grow, but to be witness and co-participant in a significant part of life. In a world that seems to be increasingly secular on the surface and faith appears to be relegated to the margins, companionship is key.

One of the primary reasons these emerging adults find companionship to be so critical to one’s faith journey, is that the path of faith is not an easy one. Participants related their own struggles
with incorporating faith into their lives and shared their stories of loneliness, isolation, doubt and fear. The advice they offer to others is to recognize that there will be times, many times, when that fear, doubt and loneliness will be overwhelming and one will wish to end the quest. However, the benefits of a life of faith far outweigh the struggle. The moments of revelation, self-understanding and clarity are worth the times of uncertainty. “Don’t stop just because you feel alone,” says Paul who grew up in a home where church attendance and religion were not regular parts of family life:

I feel it [faith] is something we all need to hold onto or look into because sometimes life is rough and you need a little bit more: something you can’t see to believe in or would like to hope that there is something out there, or someone out there watching over you and looking out for you. Helping you through whatever you need to get through.

Not only will one discover challenges in one’s own life where faith can be a support and guard against fear and doubt, but one will also experience opposition from religious people as well,

I think as Christians, anybody, forget about being Christian, we are human [and] naturally drawn to people who possess the same beliefs as us. We identify with people when we believe in the same causes and when we agree on things. It’s just human nature for us. So when we meet another person who says that they are Christian or whatever, it would be natural for us to maybe see that person again or talk more to that person. That is normal. But if or when that person decides to say something stupid or [that] disappoints you, I think my advice would be to not allow that to discourage you from continuing to find God, because God is still there. (Maria)

Participants highlighted the need for an individual to be willing and able to discern and know their own beliefs as well as their own faith tradition. Essentially, a Christian must be willing to reflect on one’s own practice and belief to see if it is right and “on-track.” The reasons a believer should do this is so that s/he may overcome possible doubt and confusion which might prevent the person from continuing in the faith. Jordan states “critiquing one’s own beliefs is necessary” as this process is a part of growing, maturing, and developing faith and the connection with God.
Graham explains that the life of faith is one that needs to be constantly worked at and nurtured. Discouragement can happen when things don’t seem to be going the way they are supposed to and when one takes the stand that revelation, clarity and understanding will just come naturally. He tells of a time when he expected faith just to happen for him, but not that long ago he realized that if he is going to learn and grow, it is ultimately up to him to do it:

Don’t give up. Keep practicing and learning because that is the only way you will get what you are looking for or achieve what you want. That’s the only way to do it. If they are feeling lonely... that is all part of it too. You keep searching. You keep trying. That’s the only way you will find it. It’s not going to fall in your lap. You shouldn’t be discouraged and you should be proud of yourself for keeping on keeping on.

Regardless of the fear and loneliness one might feel, participants overwhelmingly agreed that this is a good path and the results of the hard work are worth it. Ultimately, if meaning and understanding in life are going to come, then one needs to actively seek them out, fully aware that there will be times of fear, loneliness and doubt. If one is willing to work through these, you will achieve your goal.

As Fowler and his fellow theorists of life cycle theory explored in Section 2.3 (a) explain, emerging adulthood is not an easy period. It is a time especially fraught with uncertainty, loneliness, and the search for identity and meaning. As these participants’ advice illustrates, the struggle is between intimacy and isolation and the quest to know and be known. Among the emerging adults observed in this study, there is a deep and abiding faith here that exists regardless of the state of the institutional church. Their commitment to find meaning, to establish one’s own faith and belief and to be a child of God in the world is a strong one. Although they have chosen a path through the desert that leads away from what we know as the institutional church of the modern era, they have a destination in mind: a new land where
acceptance, compassion, justice, openness and honest dialogue exists, grounded in faith and love. And it is God who leads their way.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

5.1 Summing up Emerging Adult Practice

Coming into the interviews I anticipated to discover some great new practices that emerging adults had gleaned from their wide-ranging networks and communities. I expected to see rituals of all kinds that had sprung from their desire to maintain the traditions of the church. I imagined that they had created substitutionary rituals which could be paralleled in public worship. I was, at the same time, afraid that there would be no religious practice to discover as so many who have sat on the sidelines wondering about this cohort have thought. I was mistaken on all accounts. What was shared with me instead was on the surface not earth-shattering but it was still inspiring and surprising.

Emerging adults practice their faith in a remarkably similar way to what I would consider the “average” Christian. They spend time in prayer (conversational and formal), reading, research, engaging in intentional silence, listening to inspiring music, volunteering, and engaging with others in conversation. For most, their practice is part of their daily routine. Some came by their practice through family teachings and others on their own. Regardless of where they learned or acquired their practices, the time when they engage in these practices is a sacred time where the cares of the world are stilled and they can be alone with God. This “transcendence” takes place in their most “intimate and everyday social places”\(^{220}\) like bedrooms and offices, outdoors on the deck or riding a motorcycle.

At the heart of their practice is the desire to be known. Their belief in a God of love and acceptance meets them where they are; their God listens, guides, comforts and accepts them fully.

\(^{220}\) Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 83
and unconditionally. Their time with God is time to think and reflect on their lives, to consider the meaning of actions, events and experiences, and to map out how they should proceed. With the crush of expectations from work, family and volunteer obligations (not to mention the constant barrage of information from media use), private practice is time to refocus and to be still.

Although their participation in group practices such as public worship is rare, this cohort does practice regularly one-on-one with a trusted friend or conversation partner. These conversations take place within the safety of an established relationship where openness, acceptance and honesty are valued and shared. There is a desire on behalf of many of the participants to find others with whom they could speak, but they expect that such people are hard to find. This urge to be in relationship with others of faith (not necessarily Christian faith), is consistent with the findings of Day and Rogaly who, in their research in the UK determined that emerging adults feel very strongly that they belong to a “wider ‘community’ of like-minded people,” some of whom they meet face-to-face and some they know on-line.221 This finding runs contrary to conclusions made by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in the US, that youth (and by extension, emerging adults) are not the “profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous” individuals many claim them to be.222

The greatest learning I take away from the interviews is that these individuals believe they are part of a community that does not see them as part of it. Yet, they continue to believe, practice, and find ways of creating community around themselves. Where Davie claims that Christians in Europe “believe without belonging”223 what has become clear is that this cohort believes AND

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221 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 83
222 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 83
223 Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945, 193
belongs, but they belong to a community that they have imagined for themselves. Day and Rogaly argue that people rarely change their beliefs because of changes in their “life course” but will because a “change in relationship” has provoked it:

A sense of belonging may change over time and place as people physically move or change the ways they imagine themselves in relation to specific places, but, Day concluded, these changes are always relative to the social relationships that were important to research participants within a web of inter-locking discourses.224

The Christian emerging adults involved in this study may have moved away from Christian institutions, but their belief persists. They have a strong and vibrant faith that they have pulled together from the remnants of their past and what is available from the present. They gather themselves into community, a new expression of the local congregation that worships, prays, reflects, even sings, together across geographic space and through fibre optic cables. Day declares that “communities are brought into being by people who imagine and create them, who believe in them, who feel they belong to them (and that others may or may not do so).”225 The emerging adults involved in this study believe they belong to Christ’s church, regardless if others may not believe it to be so. Although they exist in the margins of the church, their community, as abstract as it may seem to those outside of it, is a real and tangible expression of the love of God and the unity to which the Spirit calls us all.

5.2 Lessons for the Church / Mentors

In light of the voices of the emerging adults who participated in this study, there appears to be a number of areas of contemplation and reflection for the church, the local congregation, and for those who are drawn to be mentors to this cohort. While there are no immediate or straight paths that any of these groups can take to engage emerging adults where they are, I hope to raise some

224 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 84
225 Day and Rogaly, “Sacred Communities,” 86
topics for discussion in this section to begin the conversation. It is helpful to remember that these emerging adults are not asking the church (or by extension, the local congregation) for anything. In the interviews conducted for this study, no questions were asked around the topic “what can the church do for you” and so participants made no specific request in response. However, through the discussions, it became clear that there is a place for the church in the lives of English-speaking Canadian Christian emerging adults, and that they have needs that can be met by that church. Before that can happen, congregations will need to engage in much discussion, dialogue and relationship building with emerging adults. In addition, the church will need to discern if its current structures, programs and culture are willing and able to make space for something new and potentially different than what they have known until now.

*Rethinking “What is the Church?”*

At the heart of this project is the recognition and inclusion of those who sit on the margins of the Christian faith, namely those who claim and live the faith but are not “members” or active participants in a local congregation. This project may be easily dismissed by those who take a hard line on who qualifies as a member of the church. They may not consider this cohort of emerging adults to be Christian as they are not seen in worship. I argue that we need to create a more expansive definition of what constitutes membership in the church, returning to the spirit of the New Testament and its descriptions of early gatherings of the faithful. For example, in the new church movement today there is an ongoing search for an alternative to the traditional “membership” model of the local congregation. Cognizant that faith communities must have some measure of protection (e.g., with respect to vision and direction of the congregation), new congregations are adopting “participant” models to enable greater inclusion in the life and
In our changing times, the church must revisit its beliefs to ensure we are being faithful to the whole message of the Gospel, and not our own need for control and survival.

I was raised with the notion that the church was the assembled body of believers, all of whom professed faith in Jesus Christ, met together weekly, supported (financially and otherwise) the ministry of the congregation and greater church, and professed as one community a shared truth, belief and mission. This was the way “church” was in my childhood, teenage, and early adult years. It wasn’t until my late twenties and early thirties (early 1980s) that I began to hear people speak about how it was possible to be Christian and not be active participants in a local congregation. Now it is a regular statement that I hear from many individuals at dinner parties, on SNSs, and in conversations one-on-one and in groups. If Bibby is correct in interpreting his data (and I think he is), and if the participants in my study are any indication, it seems to be a new truth that has emerged: one can follow the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, claim the name “Christian,” and not be a part of a local congregation.

The challenge is what exactly is the nature of the church? While I am no ecclesial expert nor will I claim to present a comprehensive explanation of the nature of the church in these pages, as a member of the clergy and a Christian, I do have a theology of the church which may challenge some traditionally held notions of what the church is. Over the course of the Doctor of Ministry

\[226\] The following is an example of what is happening in one “new” congregation in New York, NY (St Lydia’s) and is being considered for my own congregation. The understanding in many participant model congregations is that a “participant” has been an active person in the congregation for a set period of time (e.g., minimum six months), is involved in the activities/programs/worship of the congregation, and gives regularly (either time or financial support). When it comes to decision making, consensus tends to be the favoured method in new congregations except in the case of decisions that need to be made concerning the building (if any) and the vision/purpose of the congregation. In these cases, a vote may be taken, however, a congregation will most likely try to reach an accord first. To determine who is able to vote, this decision is left up to the participants to decide if they are ready. These decisions are vetted by the leadership team. (Further details of this model and process may be found at http://stlydias.org/wp-content/themes/stlydias/img/rule-of-life.pdf).
program I had many conversations with peers and professors around what it means to be a member of the church. Given my adherence to the principles of the Restoration Movement\(^\text{227}\) (including its openness in interpretation of scripture and the tenets of faith), it is a foreign concept to me that some might consider only “members” in a local congregation as part of the church. Some of my conversation partners made allowances and included those who have been baptized but have lapsed in their attendance, but not all of them have been this permissive. I do understand that there are many in our English-speaking Canadian denominations that hold these opinions of what it means to be included as a member of the church. However, I challenge these assumptions as too limiting and exclusive.

When we turn to the Biblical witness to understand what the church is, it is described by Paul as “the Body of Christ,” (Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12ff) those who follow the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Its purpose was to share in life together, nurture and care for one another (Galatians 5:13-14, 6:2) and look after those who were suffering or in need (Matthew 25:44-46). Douglas John Hall, in his last public lecture in 2013,\(^\text{228}\) argued that Paul describes a church that was established to encourage communal learning and prayer. We know from the

\(^{227}\) For those unfamiliar with the Restoration Movement, Mark Toulouse in his article “‘A Holy Sameness’: the Declaration and Address: Lingering Influences Afflicting Disciples,” (Discipliana, Fall 2011: 5-18) describes the philosophy of the Restoration Movement in this way: “Sidney Mead... argued that there were three religious ideas ‘prevailing during the Revolutionary epoch in which the denominations began to take shape.’ He defined these three ideas as follows: ‘The idea of pure and normative beginnings to which return was possible; the idea that the intervening history was largely that of aberrations and corruptions which was better ignored; and the idea of building anew in the American wilderness on the true and ancient foundations.’ The Declaration and Address [penned by Thomas Campbell, one of the founding fathers of the Restoration Movement] represents all three ideas. One could describe them as the heart and soul of the Disciples reformation, that notion historians have referred to as the ‘restoration’ of the primitive church. … The first notion of ‘pure and normative beginnings to which return was possible’ is affirmed in the early sentences in Campbell’s document where he emphasizes the need ‘to adopt and recommend such measures ... as would restore unity, peace, and purity to the whole Church of God.’ … Thomas Campbell's belief that there existed a normative ‘simple original form of Christianity’ that ‘intervening history’ corrupted is clearly expressed in rather antihistorical ways. He argues that the contemporary church can ‘take up things just as the apostles left them; that thus disentangled from the accruing embarrassments of intervening ages, we may stand with evidence upon the same ground on which the Church stood at the beginning.’ The way to Christian unity, he argued, was to direct Christian ‘attention to first principles, clearing the way before them by removing the stumbling-blocks - the rubbish of ages, which has been thrown upon it’.” (6-7)

\(^{228}\) Hall, “The Future of the Church”
Second Testament and other documents from the time\(^{229}\) that worship, the sacraments, and the rituals of the community also took place within this community. However, nowhere in scripture does it limit the definition of the church and its membership to those who attend public gatherings. I believe Paul calls the church universal to spread its tent wide to include as all who follow the teachings and life of Jesus, regardless of whether they hold congregational membership or attend weekly worship.

I argue that the church today must consider a far more expansive understanding of what it means to be church, to include those who live their faith in the margins. Peter speaks to a greater inclusion in the (then) current understanding of what constitutes the church, in the story of his vision of the great white sheet descending from heaven (Acts 10). The vision takes place between two arguments, both in his home community, which prompts his journey. The first argument finds Peter’s community debating whether or not another community of believers who are not circumcised (“following the rules,” back then) are actually true believers, and the second argument when he returns with his findings. Peter interprets the vision as a message from God to see those who have been declared acceptable by God as exactly that, acceptable. The message he comes to understand from the great white sheet is that although people may practice in a different way, may seem to contravene human-made rules or rituals, or may have a different culture, they are all living faithfully the lessons of love taught by Jesus, and are all blessed by God and beloved in the Divine sight. I consider this story to be one of the great reminders to the church to be aware of our exclusionary tendencies and to discern how God may be working in other ways outside of our structures and customs to bring the whole world into one body. Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthian church who appear to be divided with respect to which leader (and his

\(^{229}\) E.g., The Didache
followers) hold ultimate authority and truth\textsuperscript{230} is likewise a clarion call to the church to look more expansively at who is included under the banner of Christ’s church.

While there are definitely reasons to limit membership in the church,\textsuperscript{231} these reasons are often based soundly in our own desire for survival. I believe we practice with a measure of unfaithfulness to and distrust in the power of God as a transformative force in our world when we neglect to include those under our own banner with whom God is working outside of that banner. Specifically, those who participated in this research project claim the name “Christian” and live by the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. They live with compassion, love and acceptance of those around them, intensely aware of and intent on finding solutions to the imbalances and injustices in our world. They claim unequivocally that the way they live is informed by their faith. It appears that they are living the Gospel and are doing the work of the “church.” Yet, many do not consider them part of the body because of their absence from worship services. The first call to the church universal and the local congregation that arises out of this study is a call to prayer and discernment around who constitutes the church. Emerging adults may appear to practice differently than we do, have a different culture than the one with which we are familiar, and may have passed up on our rituals, but they are practicing faithfully, a part of the great white sheet being offered to the Canadian church to consider.

\textit{The Slow Work of Relationship}

As discussed in Section 2.1 concerning my theology of ministry, I described how relationship is at the very core of all ministry. In our post-modern, post-Christendom, post-denominational

\textsuperscript{230} “What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:12-13)

\textsuperscript{231} For example, to ensure sustainability – members usually financially support; and to ensure accountability – members have the right to vote.
context, this need is acute and timely. We live in a “throwaway society”\textsuperscript{232} based on consumerism and market-driven economics. Not only are our products designed to fail and be replaced (built-in obsolescence), but we have learned to apply this principle to the relationships we have with one another. Once people appear to cease to be useful to us, we sever bonds and move on. We are so conditioned by this society and the lightening-fast pace of technology and communication that we have lost track of the art of slow, intentional relationship building. The emerging adults in this study, who have never known any other kind of reality, struggle with this. As revealed in their comments, they are searching for others who are like themselves to build relationships that will produce environments of safety, trust and vulnerability. They know, intrinsically, that such relationships have durability. They also know that they have been unable to find those relationships within the confines of the church or the Christian faith. There is an opportunity here for both the church and the local congregation to respond.

I am often asked by peers with whom I have shared some of my findings, “what is the church to do? How do I explain this to my people in the pews? What should be the response of the church?” My response has been, teach the people (who have a desire to learn) three things: (a) how to be an active listener, (b) how to explore the internet not as a seasoned church-goer, but as a thirsty new Christian looking for answers, and (c) what life is like for the average emerging adult. Each of these things must be approached not with the expectation that one will gather just enough information to simply relate to emerging adults (or perhaps entice them back to church), but with a hope to truly understand, empathize, appreciate, and accept them for who and what they are.

\textsuperscript{232} Cambridge Online Dictionary defines “throwaway” as something that is “made to be destroyed after use: We live in a throwaway society (= one in which things are thrown away as soon as they have been used).” Cambridge Dictionaries Online, (Cambridge University Press 2015), accessed August 30, 2015, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/throwaway
It is not enough to simply learn and empathize. One must go to where emerging adults are: coffee shops, libraries, music venues, beaches, break rooms, campuses, and inside our homes and the homes of our children, with the intent of being with them, regularly. Conversations will begin and will, at first, be superficial. But building relationships takes time. The more we invest to understand their culture and lived experience, not for any other purpose than to be supportive of them in their journey, the more they will share. What emerging adults have told me is that they desire conversation partners whom they can trust to be honest, open, and willing to explore sometimes difficult and uncomfortable aspects of faith. The church is poised to be those partners, even mentors, in a very unique and powerful way if we can leave the safety of our worship times and spaces, learn what life is like for others, and go to where they are. As Daloz-Parks describes in her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, the greatest gifts we can give to emerging adults are a listening ear, a stance of openness, an honouring of their journey, and a sharing of our own.

**Tell the Old, Old Stories**

Following one of the interviews, the participant and I sat and chatted for a while about things not directly connected with this study. We spoke a little about theology and her interest in possibly pursuing some sort of theological education. A variety of topics arose concerning Jesus, faith, ancient traditions, the history of the Bible, the role of women, and personal faith journeys. In relation to a question she posed concerning the role of grace in a life of faith, I responded with a reference to the story of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:25-34). Although she was very well read and familiar with the Bible, she claimed to never have heard the story before. I told the story of how the woman reached out in belief to touch the robe of Jesus and was healed of her bleeding problem. I explained that the act of healing in that moment was grace – a gift given without reason. Even though the woman was technically “unclean,” Jesus did not chastise her but
responded with love and affirmation, yet another example of grace. The participant was intrigued by the story and the example of one way to explain grace (albeit rudimentary). It was an “eye opening” moment for her and she eagerly engaged in working more with the story and its possible meanings. We spoke for a short while about what it could mean and how it related to her present questions. After the discussion, she responded that she needed to read more fully and explore more of these stories that she had never heard but were proving to open up new avenues of revelation for her. This response is not uncommon with the emerging adults I encounter in my ministry context. They are able to recall a few of the stories they heard while in Sunday School or from family members or at other times in their youth. Most of them are from the First Testament (e.g., Noah, Daniel, Eden, Goliath). But few know more than that. Yet they have a desire to hear more about the stories from the Bible and begin to dig into what they could possibly mean.

Central to this desire to know more about “the good book” is an earnest quest to understand more about God. Each of these individuals is doing the hard work of maturation on many levels. As Fowler and his peers describe in Life Cycle Theory, emerging adults are moving away from cognitive, emotional and spiritual ways of being in childhood towards a new, more complete and comprehensive understanding still to come in their adult years. Part of this process means taking the old stories they heard and the faith they learned from family and congregational life and choosing what to take with them and what to leave behind. For them to do this, they must be able to reconcile and build on their understandings of God, the nature, characteristic and activity of this Being that guides their lives. In order to have a strong, mature faith, they need more mature visions of what God could be. We know that much can be learned from books on theology and religion. However, faith is better understood and learned from the lived
experiences of those who travel the road with us. Just like these individuals came to faith in their childhood through the relationships that nurtured them and lived faith around them, so too will they grow and mature through the interaction, guidance and mentorship found in relationships with people of faith. Presumably, the easiest place to find these people is in the local congregation.

I have heard from numerous emerging adults over the years that they are looking for substantial and open discussions around the topic of God. They are searching for real people who can share not only the great goodness they have experienced as people of faith but also the struggles, trials and questions they have experienced as well. Emerging adults can find a wealth of information on the internet and in the countless self-help books on library shelves. What they cannot find there is meaning. Too often the local congregation has tried to attract emerging adults with high tech, contemporary music, and creative worship styles. While these may attract a few, the participants in this study found that these are superficial and irrelevant if real content is absent. There is a distinct opportunity for the church to reclaim its “sacrality” and become a community where God is talked about, celebrated, and explored, something Christian emerging adults in Canada are actively seeking.

5.3 Revisiting the Exodus

A key difference in the metaphors of exile and exodus is the perceived image of God held by those who follow one or the other of these motifs. For the ancient people of Israel, living in Babylonian exile for a few generations, God is both the one who sent the people into exile as punishment and when their time is done, redeems, forgives, and returns them to their home. God in this metaphor is Judge and Redeemer. Unlike their future kin languishing in exile, the ancient Hebrew people, being led out of centuries of Egyptian bondage are not returning home. They
have always been nomads. Now God is leading them to a place that will be their first home, a home created for them. God in this metaphor, for the ones who once were slaves and now are free, is Redeemer, Saviour and Creator.

Although the difference in the stories may seem negligible (primarily the return to home vs the creation of a first home), it becomes more pronounced in subsequent generations. In the exile metaphor, those who remembered Jerusalem (home) would have, as was their custom, told the stories to the next generation: stories of God, memories of home, teaching the faith to their children. Two generations spent time in Babylonian exile. Enough time, perhaps, that those who had been exiled from the city would be returned to it, along with their children. Home might be remembered first hand, or at least understood vicariously through one’s elders who most likely had been there.

For the ancient Hebrews, however, it had been over 400 years since they had been free people. There were no longer any living relatives who could retell firsthand the accounts of being the free children of God. Being an oral culture, tales of the past were undoubtedly told. However, there would have been no first-hand memory of home remotely accessible to anyone living. The prospect of a home created for them would have been a dream come true. As they entered the desert, the story of the salvation by God of this new nation would be told, as was their custom. For those who remembered leaving Egypt, their image of God would have been Redeemer (the one who rescued or recovered them from slavery) and potentially Creator. However, those born in the desert, not slaves like their grandparents and parents, but nomads for the first time in recent memory, were heading for a home that could only be imagined (as it didn’t exist yet). For them, God was Sustainer, Guide, Leader, Protector, the One who makes the path to home and leads God’s people there.
The image of Redeemer, while still known by the nomadic generation, is primarily the image of the previous generation. The new generation, born in the desert, knows the images which are sacred to their forebears, for they would have been told the old stories. But it is not their lived experience. Born after the Exodus, they were not rescued or recovered from the slave masters as were their parents and grandparents. Their experience is of wandering in the desert, where an intimate God sustains their life, makes the path, offers choices, listens to prayer, feeds them, and leads them to a vision of home.

In listening to these fourteen emerging adults, it is not surprising to me that the image of Redeemer, a traditional expression of God, did not come up once in any of the interviews. In only one interview was God referred to as “saviour” which was a direct inference to a time of severe illness wherein the participant felt God had saved his life. The overwhelming understanding of God throughout the interviews is that of Guide. God, to these emerging adults, is a being of incredible strength and compassion who leads unequivocally towards the best possible end: home. None of the participants articulated what the end result of their journey would be. None of them spoke of an afterlife or anything other than this life right now. But the prevailing sentiment was that God had a plan and was leading each of them (and for some, the whole world) towards goodness, harmony, and peace.

Participants spoke boldly about their understanding of God as a being they can come to whenever they have lost their way. They spoke of their times in conversation with God, as times when they are able to “clear [their] head” and regain calm and purpose. They do not relate to God as a being who has drawn them out of something and into something new. Rather, God has always been there, waiting to be discovered, ready to lead the way, and prepared to help them return to the path when their wandering takes them too far off course. They express intense
gratitude for the attention and care that God shows them and many of them wish they would come more regularly with thanks rather than with problems.

5.4 Next Steps in My Ministry

I am deeply grateful for the courage and enthusiasm of the emerging adults who participated in this study. Not only did they share their wisdom, perspective, and sacred moments with me, but they opened my eyes to the nuances of the lived experience of a whole community of believers who have become disconnected from Christ’s church. Although the temptation is great to focus solely on “getting the word out” to others in congregational ministry about how this group sees the world and practices their faith, the purpose of the Doctor of Ministry program is to strengthen and develop my own ministry within the community. To that end, the following are personal observations that I have gathered through this incredible process that have direct implication in my ministry at Sugarbush Christian Church and as a clergy person here in Canada.

Teaching in the Congregation

One of the key lessons that I have taken from this experience is that emerging adults are looking for conversation partners to travel with them on this joint pilgrimage of faith. They struggle to find people who are willing and able to be vulnerable and have conversations about the nature of God, the meaning of life, the authority of scripture, and all manner of questions of faith. I have tried to nurture an attitude of openness and questioning in this new congregation I pastor, but will continue to work on developing individual skills and experiences doing exactly this. I see even more so now the importance of the local congregation being a community that fosters not only knowledge of God, scripture and the tenets of faith but also a place where one can find people of like minds, willing to engage in dialogue, theological reflection, and active listening,
and mutual exploration. The onus to develop this kind of community is not only on my shoulders as pastor, but lays squarely on all who take part in God’s ministry. Therefore it is critical that all those who are willing to, will be mentored and trained to be mentors of one another. We will continue the process we have begun of creating self-replicating leaders within the congregation not only for our own benefit, but so that when they engage other communities (congregations or otherwise), they will be able to foster and teach there what they learned in their home congregation.

**Focus on Relationship**

As detailed in Section 2.1 above, my theology of ministry has been mainly centred on building strong, authentic relationships within the community of believers which make up the local congregation and within the surrounding neighbourhoods. I have been mostly focused on building these relationships within the congregation itself. There have been moments when I have felt threatened by the new relationships that emerging adults have developed outside of the congregation with leaders and other faith communities they have encountered. This feeling most likely arises out of a fear that they will find something better in another community and leave our congregation. I now realize that emerging adults are building networked communities around themselves and are capable (in fact, comfortable) being part of multiple communities at the same time. This kind of behaviour has the potential to pollinate multiple discussions simultaneously with best practices, key messages and emerging perspectives, to the betterment of all involved. I am resolved to put aside the fear of losing the emerging adults within my congregation and embrace the gifts Tapscott and others (quoted in Section 1.2 (a) above) have identified, gifts of connectivity, scrutiny, customization, corporate integrity, openness, entertainment, play, relationship, speed, collaboration and innovation. In addition, I see now the need to widen the
scope of relationship building beyond the confines of my own congregation into, for me, the unknown of online communities and discussion groups. While I am involved in a few online groups, I do not really “know” the people involved. I see the benefit of developing these relationships and expanding my own networked community so that I may encounter new ideas and the reflections of others, to inspire myself and help to build the connections with others.

Be an Advocate in the Wider Church

Over the past four years while being involved in the process of starting a new congregation out of nothing, I have become acutely aware of how different “new church” is from older, more traditional congregations. The energy, newness, freedom, and uncertainty creates a community that is bold and willing to take risks, is creative and open to innovation, and has a flexibility and openness to whatever may come. While I believe that many in my denomination in Canada are excited about the new work we are undertaking here in Guelph, many more appear to dismiss the observations, energy and momentum we bring and attempt to share, as something that can only happen in a new congregation. I am hopeful that the experiences shared by emerging adults within the context of this project will be a gateway for congregations in my denomination (and perhaps others) to begin the hard task of realigning priorities, recognizing and developing the skills of mentorship and accompaniment they already have, and celebrating where God is calling the church today.

Because of this project, I feel that I can be an advocate for listening more broadly to the fringes of the faith, to listen for the voices that we do not regularly hear. I believe that listening to emerging adults is but one of the constituencies not being heard by the practicing congregation. Emerging adults who do not practice in the local congregation are on the fringes of my own
ministry, however, that is not the case for every Disciples congregation in Canada. I look forward to opportunities to work with other congregations to explore what their fringes may look like and who may be there waiting to be heard.

Explore and Celebrate

Exploring the fringes of my congregational ministry led to noticing one group of faithful people whose voices had never been heard. Listening to their stories was not only inspiring and challenging, but it has opened up countless other avenues, questions, and areas of potential study. While I would love nothing more than to dedicate my life to listening to more lives, it is not practical for one person alone to explore and map the lived experiences of English-speaking Canadian Christians. I hope that this study inspires others to take one of the questions raised here and to begin the process of addressing it. In the meantime, I will continue to digest what I have learned, and continue to work with emerging adults wherever I find them. I will celebrate their stories and the journeys they are on to find meaning and God in their lives. I will celebrate the gifts the church, both institutional and the local congregation, has to offer those who venture forth on this pilgrimage here in Canada. And I will celebrate that mysterious gift of grace that comes to open eyes, hearts and minds, not only of emerging adults, but all who have an inclination to live faithfully into the footsteps of Jesus Christ, fearlessly serving, loving and uniting us all into one body. <>
Appendices
Appendix A: Thesis Proposal

The Missing Voice:
Discovering the Alternative Faith Practice of Christian Emerging Adults in Canada

February 20, 2015

By
Rev Jennifer Garbin, BA, MDiv

A DMin Thesis Proposal
Submitted to the DMin Thesis Proposal Committee
Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfillment of the
DMin Thesis Proposal Evaluation and Defense
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Ministerial Context

In 2011, I responded to a call from the Disciples of Christ New Church Ministries arm and a local congregation to come to Guelph, Ontario to begin a new church plant. There were a handful of people from a dying church who dreamed that something new could happen in Guelph, and I was given carte blanche to create a new, sustainable community of Disciples. The sale of the church’s building has funded this enterprise since its inception. I was brought in as a “parachute drop” planter, meaning there was no community within which to begin to build, and the location was new to me (I had only one connection here). My task was to move in to a neighbourhood that I deemed needed a new congregation, begin an assessment of what was here and what was needed, and then begin to gather people together into a new faith community. My DMin studies proved to be an excellent jumping off point to begin conversations with emerging adults and youth whom I met in my first few months.

Encountering someone interested in how emerging adults do faith, rather than expecting them to conform to existing paradigms seemed to be something new and exciting for them. Most had tried church before and had tales of disappointment, dismissal, and heart-break to tell. But many were willing to take a chance to try something new.

I pastor this now-growing congregation of approximately fifty individuals, more than two-thirds of whom are under the age of thirty. Sugarbush Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a non-traditional expression of church, has no permanent home, but rents space in a cafeteria for weekly worship in the West end of Guelph, a mostly-working class, young, ethnically diverse area, nestled within the suburbs of a rapidly growing progressive city. Over the past three
years, I have encouraged participants to build strong relationships with one another and from there, programs will arise which attend to the needs of the groups which form organically.

As pastor, I perform all the duties of any other pastor: I interpret the vision, preach, lead studies and classes, baptise, perform funerals and weddings, visit and provide pastoral care, and perform a variety of administrative functions. As a church planter, I spend the majority of my time in a mentorship role, working with youth and emerging adults to train them in leadership skills and assist them in exploring their vocational identity. Since many do not have any substantial prior involvement with the church, nothing can be assumed when it comes to forming leaders. While I may know the traditional “way of doing things”, I am also a learner and leave space for these new leaders to add their wisdom to the role.

I have come to understand in this transition from traditional to non-traditional expressions of church that all ministry arises out of relationship. We are called to love everyone, our neighbours and our own selves. This love comes out of the love that we know in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of Divine Love, the essence of God. We are made in the image of God and like God, are inherently wired for relationship. No ministry can happen unless we are in relationship with God and others.

Likewise, the church is the community which has come together through that very same love and for the purpose of learning, prayer, worship and service. In the local community, people of faith come together, first as strangers, learning to become friends. As relationships grow, mutual support and encouragement strengthen individuals (and by extension, the community) for service to the larger community (the neighbourhood, city, country, world). As members of
the community return for communal times of worship, study, and so forth, dialogue occurs, ideas are exchanged, scriptures are explored and experience is more deeply connected to faith.

Many involved with traditional Protestant congregations have become accustomed to this process happening within the walls of a church building, or within the boundaries of the community of faith: people from the same community come together to share their experiences with one another, growing and challenging one another, so that a fuller understanding of God (and the subsequent life of faith) can be explored and realized. However, if individuals do not actively engage with the practicing community, how do they come to understand, grow and experience encouragement and support? What influences do their voices have (if any) in the life of the church? How do they engage in ministry and mission if they are not visibly part of an existing community? How can we respond to the call to be “one body with many members” (1 Cor 12:12) if some of those parts (or members) seem to have no relationship with any other part of the body? If we are to be faithful to the call to truly be one body, then we must begin to consider those voices and experiences outside of the traditional expressions of the church, to include them in our shared experience of the Divine.

Despite what current research in Canada may say,¹ I do not think the church in Canada is dying. I believe, rather, that it is changing in ways informed by trends in social networking, communications, media, technology, and the rise of new, non-traditional expressions of Christian community. Just as personal interactions, communication and a host of other day-to-day activities have been drastically changed and transformed by advancements in technology,

¹ For example, Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church, by James Penner, Richard Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Désorcy and Rick Hiernstra (2012).
so too for many, has the daily practice of faith. At the time of my ordination in 2006, email was just becoming a regular mode of conversation. We still faxed documents, printed newsletters, consulted bookshelves of commentaries, and shared faith stories face-to-face in meetings and groups. A mere nine years later, I communicate with a host of emerging adults through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We use a website and social media to disseminate congregational information and plan face-to-face events through these same resources rather than printed materials. When we do meet in person (which is still regularly), we talk about the articles we read online and challenge each other to “google” concepts and authors, to test out our beliefs and theories against those in the “rest of the world” we have encountered online. My parishioners send me articles or compilations which other persons or groups have put together to challenge, explore or explain the doctrines of the church, scripture, and the living out of faith. We engage these online articles as well, adding in our own viewpoints, beliefs and learnings to ever-growing list of comments, beliefs and worldviews shared openly on the internet. All of these online documents, thoughts, sharings and engagements are open to the eyes and commentaries of virtually anyone else on the planet who would like to see and/or comment on them. We create webs of interconnectivity with people we know and some we do not, around ancient thoughts in a medium perhaps never imagined by those who first penned them.

It is a different world today than it was nine years ago, not only for the everyday living of it, but for the living of faith as well. The church has not even scratched the surface of what this means to the body of Christ, the dissemination of information, the discipling of followers, and the gathering of the body. It is my belief that there are many Christians “out there” who use
technology and media to learn, grow and explore their faith, rarely engaging face-to-face with a physical congregation. The longer I serve in pastoral ministry, the more often I will encounter these people, and the more I will need to understand and open myself to the possibilities previously unexplored for the living practice of faith.

1.2 Thesis Statement

Which leads me to the central question at the heart of my DMin studies and which will drive my upcoming research: How are Canadian emerging adults who identify as Christian but who do not participate in a regular way with a local congregation create a new embodiment of faith, or a new expression of Protestant church in Canada that stretches the current definitions, presuppositions, and understanding of what it means to be church? In essence, how do they live out their faith? What sort of practice do they engage in in order to live out their faith and understand the Divine?

2.0 Theoretical Exploration: Theology of Ministry and the Area of Specialization

2.1 Theory at Work & in the Study

Biblical

I will explore and develop the theme of exodus during this study. I have been challenged in the past to use the theme of exile (as is popular at this time in the North American church’s life). However, operative in a theology of exile is a communally recalled notion of “home”. Emerging

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adult Christians have never known a strong church, central to life across boundaries. In discussions with emerging adults both inside and outside of the church, it has become clear that for many them, the church is not home (safe, secure, welcoming, etc.), for the most part, it is alien and unknown. To explore the theme of exodus, however, brings a different sort of movement to the study and explores a key assumption of my own: that emerging adults in this day and age, are similar in their faith experience and understanding of God to those people of Israel who were born in the desert, after leaving Egypt (Ex 10:33-19:25,32:1ff). Generation X (of which I am a part), were children when the church first started to experience its initial decade of decline (from the 60s to 70s). We are the ones who are like the children leaving Egypt, with a vague memory of institution, power, and place (and even home). Those who have come after us have only known a wandering church, one that searches for identity, new understandings of God, learning and unlearning what it means to be children of God. Together we search for a new home, a new expression of Christ’s church, a sort of promised land where we are able to flourish and bless the nations.

Key authors that are a part of this discussion include but are not limited to: Sharon Daloz Parks, Walter Brueggemann, and Douglas John Hall.

**Developmental Psychology**

This study is grounded in faith life-cycle theory. This theory describes and theorizes how individuals go through stages of cognitive as well as spiritual development as they age. Extensive reading in

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this field has yielded a rich, thick description of the emerging adult cohort including the key tasks of this stage, the challenges they face, and the developmental issues that define this group. A Western phenomena, emerging adulthood in this postmodern age is a challenging group for those who are older in age and/or more advanced in faith formation stage, partly because of its relative newness in the lifecycle (and corresponding limited research). Helping to define this cohort for the Canadian context is critical to understanding their spiritual practice.

Key authors that are part of this discussion include but are not limited to: Nancy Ammerman, Jeffrey Arnett, Tom Beaudoin, Reginald Bibby, James Fowler, Bonnie Cushing and Monica McGoldrick, Christian Smith, and Grace Davie.

**Anthropology**

Much of our modern faith practice centres around ritual: going to a building/community for worship, the worship service itself, scripture reading, daily meditation, Eucharist, Baptism, to name a few. Anthropological thought around ritual suggests that these actions, undertaken together in

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community, not only proclaim the values and worldview of a community, but also enact those beliefs in real time.\footnote{16} Rituals serve as common language and grammar for the community as it explores its purpose and helps to define who they are. But rituals also require interpretation and to be re-interpreted regularly, as often their purpose and meaning become assumed. Many times, emerging adults, having been absent from congregational life (and often, having no parental exposure to Christian ritual) possess a limited understanding of what these ritual mean and their purpose. Because of this and congregational prescriptions around these rituals (ie, to reflect in silence and to not openly participate), those who are unsure of the meaning and purpose of these rituals become bored and/or disengaged and the ritual loses its efficacy.

Key authors in this section include but are not limited to: Catherine Bell,\footnote{17} Clifford Geertz,\footnote{18} James Clifford,\footnote{19} and Victor Turner.\footnote{20}

\textit{Pastoral}

As noted in Section 1.1 above, relationship is central to the practice of ministry. We are called into relationship with God, the self and the other, according to Jesus’ great command (Matt 22:36-40). Relationship is how we begin the process of understanding, appreciating and loving ourselves, God and those with whom we share this planet. I believe that while we are to live intentionally into love (and relationship) each and every day on our own (our own private practice), we are also to live intentionally together in communities (for Christians, this is the church) centred around Incarnate

\textsuperscript{16} Catherine Bell, \textit{Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108
\textsuperscript{17} Catherine Bell, \textit{Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)
\textsuperscript{19} James Clifford and George E. Marcus, \textit{Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography}, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1986
Love, the Christ. If we are aware that there are those who follow Christ, but who are for some reason (their own or reasons forced upon them) unable to be part of a physical community, love demands that we seek them out, to search for some commonality with them, and to expand the circle to include as many as who wish to be included under God’s banner.

Key authors in this area include but are not limited to: Sharon Daloz Parks,21 Clemens Sedmak,22 and Jürgen Moltmann.23

2.2 Assumptions Operative in the Study

1. It is more and more apparent, that Christian emerging adults are choosing to practice outside the church. It is my assumption that it is our duty and responsibility to seek them out – not to force them into any established community – but to build relationships with them, gain understanding and draw the circle wider so that their voice, their experience of God, their practice may be heard, noticed, included. It is my further assumption that engaging this cohort, like any other encounter with “the other” will provide an opportunity for self-growth and greater self-awareness for all Christians, as well as offering potential for greater appreciation of the diversity of Christ’s church and spiritual practice.

2. Emerging adults are engaged in a stage of life in which identity formation, differentiation from parents – and, in addition, exploring relationships and meaning are key tasks. These undertakings make understanding and interpreting the emerging adult context difficult. However, studies show that this cohort has a high degree of spiritual interest and that many among them had a profound faith. My impression is that the young adults that I have

encountered over my years of ministry and who have never shown an interest in organized
church participation are people of deep faith who are searching for meaning through the
teaching of Jesus Christ, but who are doing so on their own.

3. Ritual is a critical part of human social and religious life. Therefore, an operative
assumption in this study is that those emerging adults who identify with Christianity are
engaging in ritual in some way, are doing so outside of the traditional community. These
rituals they enact may hold similar values and worldviews to the rituals undertaken within
the traditional community. They serve to build up community, disseminate values and
worldviews, and allow them to be lived out in real time during the participation in the ritual.

4. While the prevailing Biblical metaphor for the church’s lived reality today is exile (as argued
by the likes of Walter Brueggemann,\textsuperscript{24} etc.), the metaphor which seems to resonate more
strongly with emerging adults is exodus. The call to remember and yearn for home is a key
component and strong motivator of action in the exile metaphor. However, emerging adults
have no memory (shared or otherwise) of a strong church, a “home” to which they can
return. They are, rather, searching for a place to call home, and are oftentimes unsure
exactly what “home” might mean. The theme of exodus highlights a key assumption: that
emerging adults in this day and age, are similar in their faith experience and understanding
of God to those people of Israel who were born in the desert, after leaving Egypt.
Generation X (of which I am a part), were children when the church first started to
experience its initial decade of decline (from the 60s to 70s). We are the ones who are like
the children leaving Egypt, with a vague memory of institution, power, and place (and even

\textsuperscript{24} Brueggemann, \textit{Hopeful Imagination}, 92
home). Those who have come after us have only known a wandering church, one that searches for identity, new understandings of God, learning and unlearning what it means to be children of God. Together we search for a new home, a new expression of Christ’s church, a sort of promised land where we are able to flourish and bless the nations.

3.0 Methodology (of Action in Ministry)

A brief online survey to identify prospective candidates will be offered to emerging adults who identify as Christian but who are not actively involved with a local congregation. These individuals will be selected using snowball sampling. In my capacity as pastor and youth leader over the past 20 years, I have access to large field of emerging adults with whom I have worked and/or encountered. It is my intention to recruit potential participants from those known by and referred to me by emerging adults with whom I am familiar (acquaintances). The sample size will be under twenty (20) participants provided theoretical saturation is achieved. Following the qualifying questionnaire, participants will be invited to participate in one-on-one interviews either in person or via web cam to describe their spiritual practices. Each interview will be audio taped. Participants will be asked if they will be willing to participate in any potential follow-up questions.

In addition, if time permits, I would like to also have at least one opportunity to engage in group discussions with the young adults around the topics that arise out of the initial interviews as being important/critical to them in their faith development and search for meaning in life. I want this to happen in order to observe how young adults discuss faith and the religious/
spiritual with one another as a group as opposed to one-on-one. This session would be audiotaped.

While effort will be made to attend to numerous important variables that may influence or skew results (e.g., age, stage, single/married, have/don’t have children, student, rural/urban, etc.), it is beyond the scope of this study to be fully representative of all demographic groups in the emerging adult cohort in Canada. In addition, it is beyond the scope of this research to evaluate the spiritual practice of Canadian emerging adults who are regular attendees and/or participants in local congregations, and/or those Canadian emerging adults who do not identify as Christian.

Appropriate security measures will be put into place to ensure anonymity and security of all data gathered. Electronic data will be encrypted according to the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board requirements and hard files will be stored in a locked cabinet in a secure location. Once transcribed, audio recordings will be deleted.

I anticipate that the collection of data from the one-on-one interviews will take about one month to complete. It is my intention to transcribe the interviews, completing initial coding as I proceed. Coding will develop as interviews progress and cannot be left until all interviews are complete, as new lines of questioning and potential theories may arise from successive interviews. During the process of transcription and coding, I will write memos documenting behavioural points of interest and concern, new ideas, concepts and questions, and developing theories and observations. These memos will provide a base for the final paper, augmenting
and explaining the data and clarifying not only initial codes, but secondary codes and potential axial codes.

Once coding and memoing is complete, analysis of the data commences. I anticipate it will take three to four weeks to analyze the assembled data, make connections with memos and request additional clarifications from participants (if needed). If it is possible to include a group interview and discussion, this would take a minimum of one to two weeks to transcribe, code, memo and analyze. Time limitations may make this unfeasible.

Once analysis is complete, writing up the findings may take up to three months as I wish the participants an opportunity to briefly review and comment on any major themes that I may be able to identify. Although I am not speaking with their voice in my own writing, I want to honour their voice in whatever conclusions I am able to draw. I anticipate that I will be able to complete this project by June 2015.

My position / function within this process is partially that of the one who observes and documents the practice of this select group. It is my task to ask open-ended questions which allow for the free-flow of stories from the participants about their faith and practice. In addition, my task is also to attempt to interpret these actions and practices in light of the greater church and to ascertain what similarities and differences may be inherent within them. As there may be new faith practices that until now have not been recognized as such, some explanation and or drawing of parallels may be needed for the traditional church participant who may read my findings. I am also a learner, exploring spiritual practice among a group with whom I have some opportunity for ministry, but who lack a full understanding of their lived
experience. As our world, culture, understanding and technology changes, I will need new skills to attend to the pastoral needs of those with and to whom I minister.

4.0 Results (of Action in Ministry)

It is anticipated that the one-on-one interviews and potential group discussions will produce data specifically on the lived experience of emerging adults Christian faith practice here in Canada, which to date and to my knowledge, have not yet been explored. It is my intention to learn firsthand from Canadian Christian emerging adults how they practice their faith outside the walls of the traditional church, why they practice the way they do, and any emerging theories which might explain why their practice is different and/or similar to that of the traditional church.

I anticipate that through the process of interviewing each subject, I will become aware of a greater set of pastoral needs and faith practices than I am presently aware.

5.0 Analysis and Application of Results and Limitations of the Study

This study will seek to uncover and examine the spiritual practice of emerging adults using the qualitative method of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory research allows for data to be collected through a variety of avenues: field work, notes, memos, documents (online and print) produced by respondents, interviews and focus groups. This project will utilize primarily one-on-one interviews which will be analyzed and sorted through a system of open coding, codes
not predetermined until interviews take place. Open coding allows for the inclusion of new codes to be added as new themes and patterns emerge. Once coding is complete, auxiliary axial coding will link relevant, related or complementary themes and patterns. As with most grounded research, links, patterns, themes and theories deduced by me, will be discussed with the research participants to ensure that their voice, not mine, has been properly interpreted and represented.25

5.1 Risks and Limitations

The most obvious risk and limitation is that young adults will not be interested in participating. I anticipate that there may be times of emotional distress for participants which may arise from discussions around personal experiences. Participants will be made aware of this potential before agreeing to participate in the study.

I will need to monitor my own preconceptions, interpretations and conclusions so as not to unduly influence the participants or their reflections and data. It will be critical to allow questions to arise organically from the responses of participants.

It may occur that because of these interviews, participants may become engaged in a local congregation. In which case, their information is valid at the time of the interview and remains valuable as insight into the practice of this cohort. At the time of their participation in a local congregation, however, they will be eliminated from further participation in the study.

25 This paragraph is an amended extract from author’s unpublished essay “Methodology Action in Ministry,” March 2012.
An additional limitation will be the scope of the experience of traditional church. I will not be able to describe “traditional church” for all people and for all time, but it will be purposefully restricted to the Canadian Disciples of Christ. I believe that parts of this study, while not being universal in nature, will be applicable or at least applicable in part to other traditions and expressions of Christian community.

6.0 Conclusion, Implications and Further Questions

I expect the study will contribute to my growth as a parish minister specifically through the process of listening, engaging and dialoguing with a generation which has become inaccessible to many of us in parish ministry. It is my expectation that I will learn new ways of proclamation which will take into consideration their culture and needs, new ways of biblical interpretation which reflect their reality (making the gospel contextually relevant!), and new ways of pastoral support to this generation. With respect to the greater context of church and society, there has been, for as long as I have been actively involved in church life, a desire to meet the needs of all of God’s people, especially those who cannot find a place in the established way of doing things. It is my ardent hope that this study will open up new avenues of discernment, discussion and dialogue that give relevance and credence to new ways of being church, new ways of spiritual expression, and new ways of understanding God.

This will be a transformative process on many levels: for myself as I evaluate how and why I undertake the task of Christian ministry (specifically church planting), for those who participate as they are “heard” and have an opportunity to participate in Christ’s church on their terms;
and for the greater church as it struggles with where God is leading it next. As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada embark on a new vision in 2012 to create 50 new congregations across our nation over the next 10 years, this research will prove invaluable to those genuinely attempting to minister to/with the “spiritual but not religious” young adults in our country, in their culture, their context.

There is potential also for this research to add to the existing, sparse body of knowledge currently available on the Canadian religious (Christian) context and our future in what many call our post-Christendom world.

This study is relevant to the mainstream, Protestant church in Canada primarily because for generations we have watched young adults leave the church and not come back. Like climate change, we saw the signs 40 years ago, but didn’t act on them. Now, the church is in a critical state, missing at least three full generations from its body. We have tried to create programs to attract young adults, but in my preliminary research and discussions, we have not always or actively tried to listen and learn from those we try to reach. If we are to live into God’s dream for the church, if we are to be relevant in today’s world and continue to provide vital ministry to all of God’s people, we will need to be more creative, take more risks, step out and be willing to change who we are. Perhaps the key to our transformation comes from the margins of our own community. It is my hope to learn enough to enable me to access that voice not with the intent to bring it into line with the doctrine of the church, but rather to hear it, discern with it, and allow myself (and hopefully others) to be open to the possibilities it presents. The need for a study of this kind is immense and timely. To date, there are no studies being done in Canada
on emerging adulthood spiritual practice. As the church seeks to address its own changing context, we will need to begin to take deep and serious interest in how Christians who find no affinity with traditional church are finding spiritual fulfillment. Not for the purpose of bringing “them” into the fold, but so that we can better understand how to engage this marginal community in mutually beneficial ways, and to better appreciate the dynamics and breadth of expressions of Christian faith in Canada today. Further, more work needs to be done here in Canada to understand our own specific context. Too often we make assumptions that all information and research being undertaken in the United States is 100% transferable. However, there are significant cultural differences between our two countries that make direct inferences from the American to Canadian context inaccurate at best and errant at worst. It is hoped that this study will encourage others to begin to examine more closely their areas of expertise and interest here in Canada in order to build significant scholarship for contemporaries and future generations of church leaders to use to better our shared ministry.

Finally, it is hoped that this study will provide a much needed opportunity for Canadian Christian emerging adults to share their unique experience of living the faith in this day and age. In order to understand this faith we live, the God we serve and the church with which we have been entrusted, we need all voices to be recognized and heard. To date, emerging adults living out their faith in the margins and have had no forum in which to share their experience, faith and practice. Whether we be in exile or exodus, we are all searching for home. We need all voices to help us find it. <>
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Appendix B: Ethics Board Approval

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 31518

May 1, 2015

Dr. Brian Clarke
EMMANUEL COLLEGE

Rev. Jennifer Garbin
EMMANUEL COLLEGE

Dear Dr. Clarke and Rev. Jennifer Garbin,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "The missing voice: Discovering the alternative faith practice of Christian emerging adults in Canada"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: May 1, 2015
Expiry Date: April 30, 2016
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager
Dear Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a study exploring the spiritual practice of Canadian emerging adults (ages 18-30) who identify with Christianity but do not participate in a local congregation. The study is being conducted as part of a Toronto School of Theology Doctorate of Ministry thesis at the University of Toronto.

This study consists of a one hour interview either face-to-face or via internet. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up call in the event the researcher requires further information. All components of the study will be conducted solely by me, Jennifer Garbin. All interviews will be audio recorded.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to stop participation at any time. There will be no financial compensation.

Information provided during this study will be kept completely confidential. Please see the attached consent form for a more detailed explanation of how information will be kept private.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the following information and consent form and return it to:

Jennifer Garbin at jennifer.garbin@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have any questions about the study please email me at the address above or call me at (519)-826-5767.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Rev Jennifer Garbin, BA, MDiv
May 5, 2015

Study Name: The Missing Voice: Discovering the Alternative Faith Practice of Christian Emerging Adults in Canada

Researchers: Rev. Jennifer Garbin, 30 Grandridge Crescent, Guelph, Ontario, N1H 8G1, 519-826-5767

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this research is to explore the spiritual practices of Canadian Christian Emerging Adults (ages 18-30) which may lie outside the purview of the traditional church and its practices.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You will be asked to participate in a one and one half hour interview either in person or via internet. You may be asked to participate in a potential follow-up call should the need arise. All interviews will be conducted solely by the researcher, Rev Jennifer Garbin. All sessions will be audio recorded.

Risks and Discomforts: While we do not foresee any risks from your participation in the research, you may experience some emotional discomfort as a result of sharing your experiences. Every effort will be taken to protect your anonymity. In addition, should you wish to share online content (blogs, social media content, etc), every effort will be made to keep your identity confidential, but privacy when it comes to online content, is a difficult area to maintain strict and absolute control over.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: This study may open up new avenues of discernment, discussion and dialogue that give relevance and credence to new ways of being church, new ways of spiritual expression, and new ways of understanding God. It is an opportunity for Canadian young adults to share their experiences and have their voices heard with respect to their unique expressions of faith and practice.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence your relationship with the researcher, or nature of your relationship with the University of Toronto either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide, up to and including the date the data is to be analyzed. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, the University of Toronto, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. In the event that you do become active in a local congregation at any point during the period of this study, the researcher kindly requests that you inform us of your decision. Active engagement with a congregation will eliminate you from further participation. However, data collected up to the point of your engagement is still eligible for inclusion in the study if you so consent.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Written notes and recorded observations will be taken by the researcher and the sessions will be audio recorded. All data collected will be transcribed and coded so that no personally identifying information is visible on them and they will be stored in a secure location accessed only by...
the researcher. The data will be heard or viewed only for research purposes and they will be erased after being transcribed and coded. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Rev Jennifer Garbin either by telephone (519) 826-5767, or by e-mail (jennifer.garbin@mail.utoronto.ca). Alternatively, you may contact Prof. Brian Clarke (Thesis Advisor) at (416) 585-4539 or the Ethics Review Board at (416) 978-6899. This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian TriCouncil Research Ethics guidelines.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I______________________, consent to participate The Missing Voice: Discovering the Alternative Faith Practice of Christian Emerging Adults in Canada conducted by Rev Jennifer Garbin. I understand that I will be audio recorded during the interview(s). I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________
Participant

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________
Principal Investigator

Members
Emmanuel College – United • Knox College – Presbyterian • Regis College – Roman Catholic, Jesuit • St. Augustine's Seminary – Roman Catholic, Diocesan University of St. Michael's College – Roman Catholic, Basilian • University of Trinity College – Anglican • Wycliffe College – Anglican, Evangelical

Affiliates
Conrad Grebel University College – Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre – Mennonite • Huron University College – Anglican Institute for Christian Studies – Reformed • Waterloo Lutheran Seminary – Evangelical Lutheran
Appendix E – Initial Qualifying Online Survey

1. What is your age? ______ (if above 30 or under 18, survey is complete)

2. Do you consider yourself to be Christian? Y N (if no, survey is complete)

3. If you are baptized, at what age (approximately) did this take place? ______

4. Do you have a home congregation? Y N If yes, please provide name/denomination (if known): ___________ (if Y skip question 4)

5. Have you ever been a member or regularly attended a congregation in the past 5 years? Y N If yes, please provide name/denomination: ___________

6. Do you attend worship services? (Choose one) Never   On Special Occasions (Christmas, Easter, weddings, funerals)   Less than 6 times/year   At least once per month  Weekly (if answer is “never” or “special occasions” survey continues)

7. Do you attend small group activities at a church (ie, young adults group, Bible study, Pub study, men’s/women’s groups, etc)? (Choose one) Never   Less than 6 times/year   At least once per month  Weekly

8. Are you willing to take part in a one-on-one interview concerning your spiritual practice (interview will take approximately 1-1.5 hours)?  Y   N

9. If yes, please provide contact information: Name, phone number, email

(Please note: all italicized bracket contents above are intended to be outcomes generated by the survey and will not be printed in any way, shape or form.)
Appendix F: Interview Guide

1. Please describe for me how you imagine God (characteristics, attributes, etc).

2. How did you come to understand God in this way?

3. Please tell me how you go about practicing your faith? What do you do to grow in faith, get close to God, learn about Christian faith, etc?

4. What are the most useful things you have access to (people, books, internet, social media, etc) to help you on your faith journey?

5. How much of your practice is private or personal?

6. Would you describe for me your private or personal practice?

7. What sorts of images or feelings do you associate with times you practice in private?

8. How often do you interact with other Christians to talk about faith?

9. Would these interactions be usually face-to-face or online?

10. Please describe a typical interaction for me.

11. What sorts of feelings and images do you associate with times you practice with other people of faith?

12. Please describe what sorts of values or truths or worldviews these interactions speak to (for both alone and with others)

13. Have you experienced any changes in your faith practice in the last year (or two)? If so, would you describe for me those changes and what prompted them?

14. Would you please describe for me your perception of what happens at a public church/worship service, bible study, etc.? What are your observations of public or congregational practice?

15. What advice would you give to a young adult Christian here in Canada who is practicing their faith outside of a traditional faith community?

16. Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during the interview?
17. Is there something else you think I should know to understand your faith practice better?

18. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

19. Would you be available to speak with should I have any further questions?
APPENDIX G: Non-Verbal Cues Collection Sheet

Interviewer: _________________________ Time: __________________________
Participant: __________________________ Location: _______________________
Date: ________________________________

**OBSERVATIONS:**

| Relaxed Posture | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | Q9 | Q10 | Q11 | Q12 | Q13 | Q14 | Q15 | Q16 | Q17 | Q18 | Q19 |
|-----------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| At ease         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Confident       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Direct          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Decisive answer |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Hesitates       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Poor Eye Contact|    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Great Eye Contact|   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Uses Hand Gestures |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Nervous         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Unsure about answers |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Honest and Sincere |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Passionate about |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Quick Response  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Relaxed         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Rolls Eyes      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Wrings Hands    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Rubs Eyes       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Shakes Foot     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Looks away      |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Frowns          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Laughs          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Searches for words |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Smiles          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Angry           |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Sad             |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Emotional       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Enthusiastic    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |

**General Comments/Observations:**

________________________________________________________________________
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