



*something  
more*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **American religion is changing.**

Secular communities increasingly fulfill religious functions and new religious communities barely resemble their institutional forebears. Meanwhile, 3,500 churches close each year. To organized religions in crisis, our report issues a challenge: How might they transform to meet a rising generation?

After numerous interviews with denominational leaders and innovators, we're opening up a broader conversation. We're especially speaking to three groups:

- Leaders of religious institutions who accept that change is necessary
- Innovators at the edges of religious traditions
- Leaders of secular communities who are considering the religious aspects of their work

To illustrate the possibilities, we offer ten case studies of innovative communities from across faith traditions. All use practices and language that align them with a religious heritage, even when they have no formal connection to a denominational body. Most importantly, all cultivate a connection to that which forms the ground of our being. Here we call it:



## **Something More**

Since we care deeply about the efficacy of their work, we close by inviting religious institutions and innovators to reflect on three questions:

- How do we support change?
- What gets in the way?
- Who owns religion?

We wish for widespread collaboration in addressing the yearning for soulful community among Millennials. We are working to connect secular and sacred communities in the hope that they will join together in building foundations for a more loving world.

Thank you for reading, and please reach out if you'd like to connect!

Casper & Angie

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# FROM CRISIS TO TRANSFORMATION

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## **American religious community is in crisis.**

The Christian share of the U.S. population is steeply declining, while a growing number of Americans do not identify with any organized religion. Generational replacement of older affiliated Americans with younger 'nones' is the key driver for change, with 36% of 18-24 year olds describing their religion as nothing in particular.<sup>1</sup> As a result, more than 3,500 Christian churches close their doors each year.<sup>2</sup>

Alarm runs across faith lines, even to traditions that are growing. Young Muslims watch celebrity imams on YouTube instead going to mosque.<sup>3</sup> Buddhist practice is split from tradition in corporate mindfulness programs.<sup>4</sup> Over 70% of non-Orthodox Jews marry outside the faith.<sup>5</sup>

But America is not new to seismic religious change. The historian William McLoughlin provides a five-stage sequence to map earlier shifts in our landscape:

### **1. A crisis of legitimacy**

Individuals cannot sustain the common set of religious understandings that are meant to govern their behavior. Questioning widely-accepted beliefs and practices, they become uncertain about their own identity.

### **2. Cultural distortion**

Individuals conclude that their problems are not due to personal failure, but rather to institutional malfunction. They seek to change structures or reject them.

### **3. A new vision**

People begin to articulate new understandings of human nature, God, spiritual practices, and ethical commitments.

### **4. Grassroots innovation**

Small communities form, experimenting with religious structures in search of a better way of life. New practices provide personal meaning and opportunities for social change. Early adopters recruit others to join the path.

### **5. Institutional transformation**

The religious middle ground moves toward the new, precipitating large-scale transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Will the present crisis yield metamorphosis? If McLoughlin's pattern holds, change will require both creativity and courage. Certainly, from within institutions, these middle stages feel cataclysmic. Religious leaders witness the disappearance of communities to which they dedicated their lives. But even while grieving what is lost, they can do much to support the creation of what is to come. At this very moment, religious innovation is happening all over America. We hope institutions will be curious enough to see it, and brave enough to let it transform them.

# THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Religion-like communities are bursting forth in unlikely places. Many such groups form and spread as if boundaries between religions did not exist at all. In fact, the constructed categories of what is 'religious' and what is 'secular' are no longer the most helpful ways to understand how we are gathering and making meaning of our lives.

Our previous report, *How We Gather*, profiled some of these communities—from CrossFit to Camp Grounded—which fulfill traditionally religious functions in the lives of unaffiliated Millennials. We found that young people experience meaning and belonging in makerspaces, co-working hubs, dinner parties, fitness boot camps, and fan communities. And though the organizations count themselves secular, they demonstrate elements of religious polity, liturgy, and even spirituality. In fact, many unaffiliated participants in these communities have not left religion behind; rather, they are finding religious life wholly outside of its institutions.

Our study revealed six themes that comprise the cultural DNA of this growing movement. These are key experiences that unaffiliated Millennials seek:



## Community

Valuing and fostering deep relationships that center on service to others



## Personal transformation

Making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one's own body, mind, and spirit



## Social transformation

Pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good



## Purpose finding

Clarifying, articulating, and acting on one's personal mission in life



## Creativity

Allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play



## Accountability

Holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals<sup>7</sup>

Yet this list is incomplete. There is a seventh theme. These groups reach for it in their manifestos about the power of being together and part of a greater whole. When we gathered 50 of their leaders, we heard them return again and again to the 'common thread,' the 'collective well-being,' and the 'circle that encompasses us all.'<sup>8</sup> These fledgling communities are cultivating an experience for which they largely lack language. In fact, they are often startled by the gravity and attraction of what they find. Religious institutions have a powerful gift to share with them. Here we call it, Something More.



## Something More

Reaching for what matters most

# THE GIFT YOU HAVE TO GIVE

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To the rising generation, materialism says: your value is your capacity to consume. At their best, religious institutions show us there is more to life than this.

Whether you call it the profound, the transcendent, or even God, young America thirsts for that which forms the ground of our being. In everyday language, we mean what matters most: our love for family and friends, our guiding values, and our sense of connection to the natural world and all that is bigger than ourselves.

Secular groups often struggle to find language, imagery, and ritual to engage their communities in this conversation. By contrast, the religious groups in this report point toward it with some skill. Each is innovative yet grounded in a tradition - Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam - that gives form to its practices. Together, they demonstrate the best of tradition through rigor, depth, and humility.

Given the prevalence of the seventh theme, one might expect to see the other six in these religious communities as well. To our surprise, they are far less apparent than among the secular groups. Particularly lacking are patterns of upholding accountability, guiding purpose finding, and unleashing creativity. We suspect the absence of these themes may undergird the practical challenges the groups face in achieving consistent participation, sustainable finances, and scalable growth.

For the moment, American community is emerging in two incomplete forms: Meaningful secular communities grow rapidly but struggle to engage with life's ultimate questions. Imaginative religious communities pull from deep wells of wisdom but struggle to appeal to a rising generation.

Our report challenges religious institutions to honor this whole landscape as they ask: What would be life-giving at this moment? What can we offer, which would bring people together to hold each other accountable, discern purposeful work, stimulate creativity, participate in mutual growth, change the structures that bind - and fully and deeply experience Something More?

## TEN CASE STUDIES

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The following ten organizations are leading the way. We study them alongside sibling organizations across traditions, in hopes of illuminating the resemblances among their work, successes, difficulties, and discoveries. We also name ancestors from which new communities descend, inviting each to consider how its lineage adapts to the present day. Above all, we ask two questions: Which of the seven themes do these communities demonstrate, and how? And in what ways are they supported by existing religious institutions, if at all?

# POP-UP SHABBAT



Community



Something More

## TRADITION

Jewish

## ANCESTORS

Shabbat, Iftar, Eucharist, Potlucks

## SIBLINGS

Simple Church (Methodist), St. Lydia's (Lutheran), Root and Branch (Disciples of Christ), The Abbey (Episcopal)

Pop-Up Shabbat is a pop-up restaurant inspired by Jewish culture and tradition in Brooklyn, New York. Each gathering lasts three to four hours and includes “slightly socially engineered mingling, family-style dining, music, and a bit of Shabbat tradition.” Numbers are capped at around 40 to maintain a homey vibe, and partnerships with a local brewery and butcher assure a delicious meal. Each gathering has a theme, inspiring the cuisine and sometimes costumes. There is no Jewish boundary to participation; in fact, two of the founders are goys!

A spirit of open welcome is typical of dinner churches among Pop-Up Shabbat's siblings. So too is the connection to tradition. Many, like co-founder Danya Cheskis-Gold, have grown away from their religious upbringing, but find comfort and strength in familiar language or rituals. A second common factor is the struggle to become financially sustainable. Some have developed co-working spaces alongside dinner gatherings; others partner with local farms or restaurants. Pop-Up Shabbat attendees pay for a ticket in advance, helping to keep a high commitment rate, and Cheskis-Gold is developing a Silicon Valley financing approach of “three C's”: an engaged community (the dinner gatherings), high quality content (a bi-weekly newsletter), and commercial products (an online store).

Dinner gatherings are enormously promising sites for the future of religious community. High quality conversation, helping to prepare food and clean up, and a familiar context all bode well for Millennial involvement. However, questions remain about the formality of religious leadership; for example, Pop-Up Shabbat has no ties to a synagogue or denomination. One growing edge will be to mobilize the growing network of guests beyond the dinner table and into serving the broader community.



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*“At our first event we had planned Shabbat dinner with broad conversation about rest and renewal. Instead, halfway through the gathering, someone asked when we were going to bless the candles and the wine and everyone joined in to demand a blessing! I hadn't expected that at all, but it's now a staple of every meal.”*

- Danya Cheskis-Gold, Co-Founder

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# LAUNDRY PROJECT



Social transformation



Something More

## TRADITION

Faith-Based But Unaffiliated

## ANCESTORS

Langar, Almsgiving, Soup Kitchens, Tikkun Olam, Zakat, Seva

## SIBLINGS

The Whole Person Economy Satsang (Buddhist), Five and Two Foodtruck (Methodist), Let's Share a Meal (Sikh), Bend the Arc (Jewish), Faith Christian Fellowship (Presbyterian Church in America), Church Under the Bridge (Ecumenical), Hazon (Jewish)

By assisting low-income families with meeting a basic need, the Laundry Project works to turn laundromats into community centers of hope. Volunteers pay for laundry and assist with washing and drying, entertain children, and create a caring space at the laundromat. Former youth pastor Jason Sowell had no organizational plan when he started showing up at a local laundromat in Tampa Bay, Florida, but volunteers now operate in 13 cities nationwide. Sister organization Laundry Love describes the work as 'modern-day foot washing'.



As for many of the Laundry Project's siblings, dignity is central to the work. Once the sheets and clothes are in the machines, volunteers and visitors engage in conversation and foster friendships in a near-party atmosphere. Meeting people where they are, providing practical support, and gathering outside of a religious building are all key.

Though the Laundry Project receives some donations from local churches, it has no affiliation to a denominational umbrella, nor does it find it easy to partner with churches that use service as a recruitment mechanism - a way of 'reaching' a new audience. As a result, finding a sustainable funding strategy remains a challenge. Although it steps back from explicitly denominational or religious language, the connection to Something More is vital at the Laundry Project and its sibling organizations. For example, Jewish social action group Bend The Arc enables often unaffiliated 'Jew-ish' organizers to reflect on their activism through Jewish spiritual frameworks and teachings.



*"We don't typically talk about religion, or even Jesus, but our volunteers are definitely aware of the spiritual work they do. Many are actually agnostic or atheist! Typically, we hear from volunteers that, 'If the church was more like this, maybe I would be more into it.' People want to do the work. Often the talking gets in the way."*

*- Jason Sowell, Founder*





# LIVING SCHOOL FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION



Accountability



Personal transformation



Purpose finding



Something More

## TRADITION

Catholic

## ANCESTORS

Yatras, The Hajj, Seminary, Ancient Greek Philosophic Schools

## SIBLINGS

Search Inside Yourself (Buddhist/Secular), The Hatchery (Evangelical), Juniper (Buddhist), Christian Motorcyclists Association (Ecumenical), Ta'leef Collective (Muslim), Headspace (Secular)

“Do you long for wisdom elders and companions to share your spiritual journey?” asks the Living School, a two-year program of spiritual growth, theological education, and community building. Founded in 2013, it combines reading - particularly the medieval mystics, contemplative practice, and coursework, with online discussions and in-person gatherings in New Mexico. More than half of the Living School’s participants are over 50, and most come from Catholic or mainline Protestant backgrounds.



Like other learning journeys such as Search Inside Yourself, a self-development program that grew out of Google, many participants find greater spiritual nourishment from the program than in their own home church or community. The highly rigorous application process ensures a committed group of participants who are clear about their purpose in taking part. Further, crucially, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and other faculty are able to bridge the gap between the ancient mystics and our contemporary context in a way that allows people to embrace their tradition with authenticity and understanding.

Capped at 180 students per year, and now with a waitlist, the challenge is not to recruit new participants but rather to ensure that they apply their learning in community after the program ends. And with a \$3,500+ tuition fee, creating a funding structure that enables a wider pool of participants will be an important next step.

Rohr has been at the periphery of his Catholic tradition for some time - deeply rooted but radically open to new thinkers like Ken Wilber and new forms of engagement with his students. This approach can serve as a model to denominational structures as they seek to serve a new religious landscape. Communal growth experiences such as the Living School and Hatchery LA - a residential new community incubator - may yet become the fuel that renews faith communities, training spiritually grounded leaders to engage the world outside.



*“We’re not a seminary or university, nor a program for personal enrichment, although it’s a little of all those. It’s a monastery without walls.”*

*- Richard Rohr, Founder*



# BUDDHIST GEEKS



Community



Personal transformation



Accountability



Something More

## TRADITION

Buddhist

## ANCESTORS

Jewish Diaspora, House Churches, Underground Railroad, Revival Camp Meetings

## SIBLINGS

Parish Collective (Evangelical), The Lasting Supper (Ecumenical), Buddhify (Buddhist), The Table (Ecumenical), Mipsterz (Muslim), Still Harbor (Ecumenical)

Buddhist Geeks is an online community of Buddhist practitioners exploring how a 2,500-year-old lineage intersects with rapidly evolving modern technology in a global culture. The network started in 2006 as a podcast that grew to 100,000 listeners within three years. An early attempt to build deeper community had mixed results. Hundreds came to the first in-person gathering from across the country and meetups continued to grow, but the organization needed significant readjustment to find the successful model it has today. Buddhist Geeks now offers online meditation spaces on Google Hangouts, one-to-one teaching, an in-person retreat, an annual conference, and at-home Life Retreats, in which small groups of peers deepen their practice together. With 110 paying community members, Buddhist Geeks has found a financially sustainable model and is training new facilitators and teachers to expand capacity.

An online community often serves a niche audience; The Lasting Supper especially appeals to ex-evangelicals, for instance. So too, Buddhist Geeks gained a predominantly male following. Leaders Vincent and Emily Horn were admirably proactive in their response. They changed the logo to feature a woman and set about creating a hub for Big Tent Buddhism that honors many lineages, traditions, and systems of practice – continuing the theme of breaking down ‘denominational’ boundaries.

This active move toward social change is an important next step for online communities, and they can look to fandom organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance and new media creators like VlogBrothers to learn how to mobilize widely distributed members.



*“We went too far in the direction of being self-organized and ended up too decentralized. In the end, we built a community we didn’t always want to be part of and couldn’t lead. Largely because of that, we never got off the ground financially. That’s where our mentor really made the difference. Without that coaching, we wouldn’t have made it through the dip.”*

– Vincent Horn, Co-Founder



# RELEVANT MEDIA GROUP



Creativity



Something More

## TRADITION

Evangelical

## ANCESTORS

Stained Glass Windows, Huffaz, The Ramayana, Spirituals

## SIBLINGS

The Work Of The People (Ecumenical), Hillsong Colour Sisterhood (Evangelical), iDisciple (Evangelical), On Being (Multifaith), Church of the Larger Fellowship (Unitarian Universalist), Ritualwell (Jewish), Darkwood Brew (Ecumenical), Horatio (Ecumenical)

Cameron Strang founded RELEVANT Media Group because he couldn't find a Christian platform that spoke to his peer group. Though unaffiliated with any denominational structure, RELEVANT reaches over two million 20- and 30-something Christians every month through a print magazine and online platform.

It's easy to dismiss a media outlet as consumerist, but when RELEVANT invited its podcast listeners to come to a live recording, 800 showed up from across the world to attend. Their reasons speak to the spiritual home RELEVANT provides: "You guys are my church, my weekly connection with other Christians who see the world as I do." "I got hurt in my church and I didn't walk away from God because of your podcast." "I started listening in high school and moved to different cities and different jobs, but this has been a stable part of my life."

The ability to belong to a virtual RELEVANT community is crucial. Tellingly, many who follow RELEVANT content do not belong to a congregation. Similar communities like Church of the Larger Fellowship, an online Unitarian Universalist worshipping community, are now official congregations within denominational polity.

RELEVANT's work speaks to the changing way that Millennials engage with faith institutions: they want a community of peers, to express identity, and to engage secular culture intelligently and faithfully. Media platforms can now grow into helping their audience live out their values through meetups, as well as opportunities to serve their local communities and create their own content or artistic projects.



RELEVANT



*"There's a generational disconnect between the church we grew up in and the faith we wanted to play out. We find God alive and speaking in all forms of life, even if those are nominally secular."*

– Cameron Strang, Founder



# THE NEIGHBORHOOD HALAQA



Community



Personal transformation



Something More

## TRADITION

Muslim

## ANCESTORS

Havruta, Halaqas, Bible Studies, Wesleyan Small Groups, Recovery Groups

## SIBLINGS

Not So Churchy (Presbyterian), Middle Circle (Spiritual But Not Religious/Lutheran), The Crossing (Episcopal)

The Neighborhood Halaqa in Washington, D.C. hosts a weekly circle for peer-facilitated spiritual and personal reflection. Traditionally, a halaqa involves teacher-led theological study, but The Neighborhood Halaqa rotates facilitators and avoids a formal teaching structure. Attracting 'un-mosqued' Muslims and those at the margins of mosque community life, The Neighborhood Halaqa focuses conversation on lived experience of Islam rather than doctrine.

Each gathering starts with a reading from the Quran and a check-in, an opportunity "to be raw with ourselves and one another, creating a basis for care and trust." A discussion topic follows, with self-selected issues ranging from Islamic concepts and practices, to the role of women in the community and Islamic prophetic traditions.

In a culture where young Muslims particularly struggle with feeling judged for their different forms of Islamic practice, mutual respect in the community is key. The recognition that diverse faith perspectives enrich the group is an ingredient also found in Lutheran-founded Middle Circle - a community in San Francisco that emphasizes shared values. Despite an intentional choice not to affiliate with a mosque, there's a real surge in attendance during Ramadan. Two other groups have started and there are further plans to grow.

Defining membership and developing new leaders are challenges for Nada Zohdy and her team, given the transitional nature of participation. As similar spiritual communities grow, finding the line between openness and accountability will be crucial.



*"I came to understand the meaning of real community in a way I'd never come across before in my life - and I'd spent my childhood attending various mosques."*

*- Nada Zohdy, Co-Founder*



# SUNDAY ASSEMBLY



Community



Creativity



Something More

## TRADITION

Secular

## ANCESTORS

Churches, Mosques, Temples, Synagogues

## SIBLINGS

Mishkan Chicago (Jewish), Bodhi Spiritual Center (Centers for Spiritual Living), Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (Muslim), Community of Hope (AME), Against The Stream (Buddhist/Secular), Romemu Shul (Jewish), Ikar (Jewish), Dwell (Christian Reformed Church), Lab/Shul (Jewish)

Sunday Assembly is a secular congregation that celebrates life. More than 65 congregations around the world gather to “live better, help often and wonder more” by singing along to well-loved pop songs, listening to an interesting talk, staying around for tea and cake, and volunteering in the community. Replicating a traditional Anglican worship service, Sunday Assembly sought to create a community for those who liked the idea of church but didn’t believe in anything particular.

Both co-founders are comedians, so production values for the larger congregations are high and humor is used throughout. However, moments of introspection can often be less polished. With such rapid expansion, another challenge has been maintaining consistent quality across locations.

Tradition with a twist brings these siblings together; whether it’s combining Jewish prayers with yoga (Romemu Shul) or Buddhist meditation and punk rock culture (Against The Stream). Welcoming multiple theological perspectives is crucial, even for the non-religious. Sunday Assembly’s New York congregation split to protect its commitment to celebrating life, rather than celebrating atheism. Indeed, Sunday Assembly’s lead organizer in The Netherlands is a Christian.



*“Everyone is welcome, regardless of beliefs - this is a place of love that is open and accepting. We say in the Charter that we don’t do supernatural but we won’t tell you you’re wrong if you do.”*

*- Sanderson Jones, Co-Founder*



# HOUSE FOR ALL SINNERS AND SAINTS



Community



Personal transformation



Creativity



Something More

## TRADITION

Lutheran

## ANCESTORS

Vatican II, Radical Reformation, Reform Judaism, Prophets, Mystics

## SIBLINGS

Bushwick Abbey (Episcopal), Forefront Church (Evangelical), Because Jewish (Jewish), Judson Memorial Church (Baptist), The Kitchen (Jewish)

At House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS), innovating with integrity starts with deep roots in tradition. Nadia Bolz-Weber has become somewhat of a celebrity for her particular brand of church and the language she uses to describe it. Yet the combination of ancient and new at her church is part of a larger move toward grounding innovation in tradition, which can be found from the Episcopal Bushwick Abbey, a queer-friendly community grounded in faith, art, justice, scripture, and holy communion, to Because Jewish, a project striving to create “experiences that speak to people living in today’s world using the language, lessons and music of the past.”



HFASS follows the ancient liturgy, sings the old hymns, and includes a time of “Open Space,” which is for prayer and engaging the Gospel. The ethos is “anti-excellence/pro-participation,” meaning that the liturgy is led by the people who show up. The pastors offer the Eucharistic prayer and typically the sermon; but congregants lead the other parts of the liturgy from where they sit.

HFASS is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Bolz-Weber has been thoroughly supported by her Bishop, who she calls “extraordinary.” Beyond that, however, the congregation is “not even close” to uniformly Lutheran. Only a quarter of the 250 regular attendees are Lutheran. Here again, belonging is relational, not denominational.

The combination of unapologetic Christianity and radical openness is a vital feature that HFASS shares with similar churches. “Pastor Nadia is Lutheran enough for all of us,” the website reads. Like Richard Rohr, Bolz-Weber models how denominational bodies can engage the modern world – religiously anchored and thoroughly in conversation with secular culture.



*“I have this hunch that people really find Jesus compelling, and they see what Christianity really could be. But what they see instead is an institution that tries to protect and promote itself. I think they want to have a place where they can speak the actual truth about themselves in the world and they don’t have to pretend.”*

*- Nadia Bolz-Weber, Founding Pastor*



# GATHER THE JEWS



Community



Purpose finding



Something More



## TRADITION

Jewish

## ANCESTORS

Birthright, Little Sisters of the Poor, YMCA, Faith-based Summer Camps

## SIBLINGS

Mountain Goats & Co (Muslim), Millennial Mormons (Mormon), The Young Clergywomen Project (Ecumenical), Boston Muslim Young Professionals Network (Muslim), Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (Muslim)

Gather the Jews is a hyper local network of news and events facilitating Jewish life in Washington, D.C. Set up as a newsletter among friends in 2010, it was largely dismissed by mainstream Jewish institutions until it grew to 400+ participants who regularly showed up at events.

Open to Jews across denominations, as well as those whose Jewish identity is cultural only, the website hosts a job board, housing board, full events calendar, list of local rabbis and organizations, and information on kosher dining.

Things have changed as the community has attracted resources from established foundations. Co-Founder Aaron Wolff argues that a key ingredient for the success of the network in the early stages was not hosting institutional Shabbat dinners but inviting network members to host one another at their own homes. Nowadays, Gather the Jews has grown so that it not only hosts a weekly Shabbat dinner but also has two staff and a community rabbi. A clear transition from friendship network into institutionalized organization brings with it new challenges and opportunities.

Scaling Gather the Jews to other cities has been a real challenge as so much depends on the rich and varied social networks of founders. Even with significant financial backing, new networks have struggled. Questions of leadership, accreditation, and formation become increasingly salient as innovators sidestep formal hierarchies.



*"People are committed and invested in making something greater than themselves. Being part of the creative process is central for our community. I love knowing that people are organizing ride shares and swapping business start-up advice through this community. That's what community life looks like!"*

- Aaron Wolff, Co-Founder



# LIFE TOGETHER



Community



Personal transformation



Accountability



Social transformation



Purpose finding



Something More

## TRADITION

Episcopal

## ANCESTORS

Monasteries, Convents, Sanghas, Kibbutzim, Catholic Worker Movement

## SIBLINGS

Valley and Mountain (Methodist), Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives (Unitarian Universalist), The Sanctuaries (Multifaith), Moishe House (Jewish), The Bartimaeus Community (Evangelical), Space12/Vox Veniae (Evangelical)

Life Together is a community of young adults committed to personal and social transformation. The goal is church renewal; church is envisioned as “a school of love” that is “not defined by what it believes but by how it loves.” Founded to develop the leadership of Episcopal seminarians, Life Together has become the most consistently successful training ground for future priests in the diocese.

Headed by Arrington Chambliss, the project has grown, now hosting 27 fellows spread across various service organizations in the greater Boston area. Fellows receive practical skills in communal living (nonviolent communication, covenant formation, and using the enneagram); prophetic ministry (community organizing and leadership skills); and contemplative spiritual practices - particularly prayer. Free counseling and weekly external prayer partners help to resolve community conflicts and ensure that participants thrive in sometimes challenging situations.

Life Together, UUC and the Moishe House network all demonstrate the desire, particularly among Millennials, to live intentionally in a deeply rooted and socially engaged way - whether religiously affiliated or not. Given the widespread interest in communal living around the country, as evidenced by secular initiatives like Pure House in Brooklyn, we hope that Life Together and its siblings will meet the challenge of scaling without losing integrity.



*“The two years I spent in Life Together marked the turning point in my life. For the first time, I found myself surrounded by Christians committed to both personal and social transformation: seeking to deepen their relationship with God and each other, while working to realize God’s dream of justice for all people. In the process, I rediscovered my faith and my purpose. And my own ‘long loneliness’ came to an end.”*

- Nick Hayes, Life Together Alumnus





# A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

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Taken together, these case studies offer hope for the transformation of American religious life. But they also point to real and potential stumbling blocks. Here are a few questions we hope will be considered in clearing a path.

## HOW DO WE SUPPORT CHANGE?

A glaring recurrence in these case studies is the strained relationship between innovative communities and their denominations. Some innovators are sheltered by an ally higher in the hierarchy, but denominational bodies seem largely at a loss as to how to serve them. In fact, support is so poor that many rising leaders choose to sidestep affiliation altogether, rather than contend with political battles, mismatched services, and hostile suspicion. Even those who maintain the connection describe themselves as often on the verge of leaving.

For denominations, embracing innovation is no easy task, especially when it means flipping assumptions and systems upside down. But upstart communities are not the only ones who get to innovate. How might denominations get creative about serving these bold leaders and their tribes? An affirming mentorship presence, connective tissue to other innovators, and practical support like health insurance and financial services (if not a paycheck) could be a start. Denominational structures have a huge opportunity to honor, witness, and shepherd those who are working to bring religious community into the 21st century. This begins with an openness to the possibility that flourishing will look remarkably different.

## WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Too many institutional leaders, having devoted their lives to their community, feel as if they have failed when numbers shrink. This has led to a culture of shame. Yet in a society so rapidly transformed by technology and globalization, it is no wonder that our religious lives, too, are changing. We invite leaders across traditions to tune their hearts to a new key of imagination and hope, exploring the unexpected ways that their decades of experience may yet bear fruit.

## WHO OWNS RELIGION?

Without permission, people are rejecting and changing their inherited religious structures. Some are relating to Something More with no structure at all. In America today, a fifth of the unaffiliated pray daily, Christians are 'done' with church, and growing legions of meditators bring their practice to work. Who among them gets to claim religion? And who might claim it, if 'religion' meant something new?

Excitingly, cultural changes invite us to discover new experiences of religion. Rather than idealizing the forms of the past, the groups in this report gesture toward how religious life might grow into the future. These communities bear the fruit of tradition - offering the chance to serve others, experience beauty, practice love, and come home to our true selves - all while embracing a spirit of inquiry into Something More.

And just as Pop-Up Shabbat's participants demanded a traditional blessing, we will continue to seek that which grounds our being. We invite religious institutions to change so that more of us may become closer to that which never changes.

# WHAT WE WISH FOR

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We wish for religious organizations to embrace their own transformation.

Religious and unaffiliated Americans feel wonder about the universe in equal measure.<sup>9</sup> We wish for them all to be welcomed into deep communities that stimulate discovery and formation. Within and without organized religion, innovators are already working to address Millennials' hunger to learn a different way of being; to ground their daily lives in Something More. We wish for established institutions to support and join their efforts.

Language is a critical barrier to entry. So many people feel offput or divided by the language of religion that we wonder how much of it can be salvaged in the decades to come. We wish for a widespread creative effort to develop language that speaks to the religious and spiritual lives of a rising generation. This effort must start with listening.

Crucially, we wish for institutions to privilege curiosity over self-preservation. What might leaders at the center learn from leaders at the margins who are engaged in meaningful work with those outside? Might they be willing to measure success by the spiritual growth of new communities, more so than by the growth of their denominations? Over time, we expect that loyalty to these new endeavors will, in fact, yield loyalty in return.

We wish for broad collaboration in addressing the acute yearning for soulful community in America. Secular innovators are valuable partners for this project. They offer thriving networks of diligent, values-led practitioners who are already engaged in making meaning and combating isolation – and who have much to gain by the wisdom and resources of religion. We are working to connect secular and sacred communities in the hope that they will join together in building foundations for a more loving world.

If you would like to be involved in this conversation, please contact us directly. We'd be delighted to hear from you.

Casper & Angie

## FURTHER READING

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# FOOTNOTES

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1. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.
2. Shawna Anderson, Jessica Hamar Martinez, Catherine Hoegeman, Gary Adler and Mark Chaves, “Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2008, 47:321-328. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, including non-denominational Christian churches like Trinity Grace Church in New York City and Soul City Church in Chicago and hipster-friendly Soho Synagogue in lower Manhattan, which are growing among Millennials.
3. Conversation with Yusufi Vali, Executive Director of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center.
4. “The Mindfulness Business: Western capitalism is looking for inspiration in eastern mysticism,” *The Economist*, November 16, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21589841-western-capitalism-looking-inspiration-eastern-mysticism-mindfulness-business>.
5. “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.
6. William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12ff.
7. Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather* (Cambridge, 2015).
8. We brought together 50 community leaders for a weekend-long gathering at Harvard Divinity School in November 2015.
9. “Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>. At least 74% of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and religious ‘nones’ feel wonder about the universe several times a year or more.



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Romemu Shul / Simple Church / Root and Branch / The Kitchen / Pop-Up Shabbat / The Abbey / Valley and Mountain / Laundry Project / Five and Two Foodtruck / Bend The Arc / Share a Meal / Monday Night Mission / Church Under the Bridge / GLIDE / The Whole Person Economy Satsang / Redeemer Lutheran Church / Faith Christian Fellowship / Laundry Love / Search Inside Yourself / The Living School / The Hatchery / Juniper / Center for Progressive Renewal / Tech Chaplain / iDisciple / Darkwood Brew / Ritualwell / Hazon / Desiring God / Youthworks / BeThinking / Relevant Magazine / The Work of the People / Rethink Church / Hillsong Colour Sisterhood / Convergence / Horatio / Reboot / Ta'leef Collective / Unorthodox Celebrations / Headspace / FaithStreet / Buddhist Geeks / Buddhify / Church of the Larger Fellowship / Parish Collective / The Lasting Supper / Sanctuary Collective / The Table / Pure House / Moishe House / Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives / Life Together / The Bartimaeus Community / The Mix / Space 12 / Vox Veniae / Still Harbor / The Sanctuaries / Lab/Shul / Mishkan Chicago / Neighborhood Halaqa / Not So Churchy / Middle Circle / Bodhi Spiritual Center / Sunday Assembly / The Crossing / The Sanctuary Boston / Community of Hope AME Church / Solomon's Porch / Against The Stream / Houston Oasis / River Church / Soho Synagogue / Galileo Church / On Being / The Work Of The People / Quest Church / The Common Place Church / The Riverway / Blue Ocean Faith / Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center / Ikar / Dwell / Hope Hill / South Wedge Mission / Theology on Tap / Bushwick Abbey / Humble Walk / House for All Sinners and Saints / Forefront Church / Because Jewish / Gather The Jews / Mountain Goats & Co / Mipsterz / Millennial Mormons / Boston Muslim Young Professionals Network / The Young Clergywomen Project / Christian Motorcyclists Association / Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality / Judson Memorial Church / Hot Metal Bridge / Thresholds / Center for Progressive Renewal / myPraise / FaithFreaks / Lifetree Cafe / Cabaret Church / The Shout / Sacred Space / ReImagine / Integral Church St. Petersburg / Soul City Church / Trinity Grace Church

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