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Liberal and Devout: The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment Within the Liberal Religious Niche

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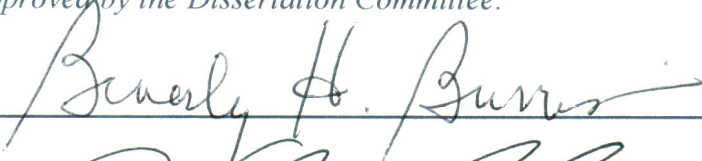
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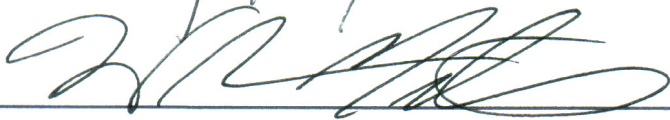
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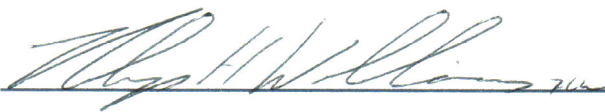
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**LIBERAL AND DEVOUT:
THE SOURCES OF ENTHUSIASM AND
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT WITHIN
THE LIBERAL RELIGIOUS NICHE**

BY

KEVIN LAPOINT

B.A., Psychology, California State University Fullerton, 1992
M.Arts, Sociology, California State University Fullerton, 2001

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Sociology**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2009

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As almost all PhD graduates have found, completing a dissertation is a long and lonely process. Collecting, analyzing, and reporting data usually requires years of working in isolation in front of a computer screen, and I suspect that this is one of the main reasons that half of all PhD candidates in the US never complete the degree. I therefore count myself among the fortunate few who had the personal and professional support needed to endure the challenges and finish this project.

I want to begin by recognizing my graduate advisor and dissertation committee chair, Dr. Richard Wood, for his invaluable feedback and guidance throughout my time in graduate school. Rich's shared interest in the sociology of religion and constant encouragement to think critically and keep writing—to "Go! Go! Go!"—kept me moving forward over the years.

I also thank Dr. Beverly Burriss and Dr. Bill Miller at the University of New Mexico and Dr. Rhys Williams at Loyola University Chicago for participating on my dissertation committee. Their insights and willingness to accommodate tight deadlines were greatly appreciated.

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ABSTRACT

This four-year qualitative study examined three culturally-lenient churches with loose membership standards in order to determine the *institutional dynamics that inspire participant devotion to liberal styles of religiosity*. Research locations included an *Episcopal* parish, *Unitarian Universalist* church, and *United Church of Christ* congregation. Extensive participant observation and thirty-six open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted with senior ministers, lay leaders, and new members revealed how the liberal faith communities primarily attracted cultural and social elites driven by postmodern, existentialist concerns. Churchgoers were committed to their inclusive religious environments because of the mix of **social, cultural, and/or mystical relationships** available within the groups, and that evoked enjoyable emotional experiences they interpreted as rare, highly-desirable, and “**sacred**” **commodities** in contemporary American society. The liberal religious consumers demonstrated how the Durkheimian concept of the sacred can be extended and evoked within communities that

collectively celebrate contemporary perspectives and **inclusive ideals** associated with *modernity*.

The researcher also discovered the critical role that “*spiritual but not religious*” seekers espousing mystically-oriented, monistic conceptions of Ultimate Reality can play in the growth and vitality of culturally-lenient faith communities. Two of the religious organizations in this study displayed the spiritually-oriented atmospheres and expressive uses of religious traditions, rituals, and practices that have been identified in so-called “*progressive*” mainline churches around the nation, and which some social observers have interpreted as demonstrating a supposed “return to tradition” by these groups. The current research, however, found that the two progressive churches were growing and thriving largely due to the participation of spiritual seekers and innovative ministers who held distinctly unconventional religious views, and who actively engaged in a process of *retraditioning* their denominational cultures so as to accommodate their perceptions of mysticism. The evolving cultural process of **progressive-mysticism** that resulted from these dynamics helped build growing **liberal-progressive coalitions** within the churches between new, mystically-oriented seekers joining the groups and more conventionally-liberal denominationalists, providing renewed enthusiasm for social justice activities, distinctive religious expressions, and overall organizational solidarity.

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Chapter 1:
Introduction

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

Over the past four decades, one of the most well-discussed changes to America's religious landscape has been the decline of its once-dominant mainline denominations (Wuthnow, 2000; McKinney, 1998; Hadaway, 1993). Although over 18% of Americans still officially claim membership in one of the mainline Protestant traditions (Pew Forum, 2008b) and many strong, vital mainline congregations continue to exist throughout the nation, signs of institutional decline are widespread and often easy to locate. Visitors walking into certain Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, Evangelical Lutheran, and other mainline churches across the country on any given Sunday will find pews that are either empty or filled exclusively with an older, aging generation. These moribund religious communities that apparently have a tough time recruiting and retaining members often stand in marked contrast to the dynamic evangelical mega-churches that have now sprung up in almost every major U.S. city and often draw thousands of enthusiastic worshipers into attendance each Sunday. Compounding the mainline's despair over this reversal of fortune, research has shown that many converts to Evangelical churches came from mainline denominations (Perrin, Kennedy, and Miller, 1997). Journalists and other casual social observers—eager to proclaim winners and losers in the competition for American souls—have widely concluded that mainline Protestant Christianity is dying, unable to contend with the greater security and cultural intensity that evangelical congregations are able to provide to religious seekers (Allen, 2007; Reeves, 1996).

This terminal prognosis, however, incorrectly assumes that all religiously-inclined individuals share similar emotional and psychological needs for strict, conservative styles of faith (Ellison, 1995). It is true that those who attend church every week do tend to be

more socially-conservative and traditionalist than average Americans (Pew Forum, 2004), and that these types of religious participants may therefore be attracted to stricter, more orthodox faith communities, including evangelical ones. But this cohort only represents one segment of the overall religious environment, and the percentage of Americans preferring such strict, fundamentalist-styles of religion is not growing (Smith, 1992). Instead, the nation's religious expressions continue to be shaped by the tremendously complex views of a diverse public. It is, for example, a well-known fact that almost all Americans believe in the existence of a Higher Power and most hold other spiritualized views about reality as well (Roof, 1993). The number of religiously-themed titles in bookstores and growing number of meditation and yoga classes attests to the public's strong, widespread religious interests. Yet over a third of the public reports not officially belonging to any religious community and almost half of all Americans say they rarely or never attend church (Newport, 2007). In addition, the number of people describing their religious identities as "none" has doubled since the 1990's to over 16% today, and this is the fastest-growing religious category (Hout and Fischer, 2002). Actual unchurched levels may be even higher, since researchers have demonstrated that self-reported religiosity rates are often exaggerated in surveys—being perhaps twice as high as stated patterns (Marcum, 1999; Smith, 1998).

These trends towards religious nonparticipation do not necessarily imply widespread movement towards atheism, although that rate is slowly increasing as well. Instead, they may reflect the growing disillusionment among millions of people with the way that religion as a cultural institution has become dominated by assertive, conservative viewpoints. As evangelical churches have grown in size and social

influence, they have often overshadowed all other religious expressions. For example, “born-again” converts will often describe themselves as having become “Christian,” despite the fact that they may have been raised in a Catholic or mainline Protestant faith tradition. Orthodox religions that promote this sort of stampeding confidence in exclusive beliefs and practices, though clearly appealing to the majority of highly-committed, active churchgoers who hold conservative views, are extremely alienating to less doctrinaire, inclusive spiritual seekers. In analyzing those who described their religious identity as “none” on national surveys, for instance, sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2002) found that almost all held moderate and liberal social attitudes. That so many Americans identifying as moderate and liberal are apparently turned off by what they perceive to be the nation’s available religious options reveals a potentially large, unmet demand for new religious expressions. Public frustration over the influence of the Religious Right in politics and society overall has also heightened anti-fundamentalist attitudes among millions of voters (Pew Forum, 2005; Bolce and De Maio, 1999; Bolce and De Maio, 1999). Such hardening attitudes due to the culture wars has undoubtedly generated more clearly-defined boundaries between the supposedly “truly religious” and those who fall somehow short of this ideal definition. It’s no wonder that many liberal-minded people have come to question the value of organized religion in general, which they may now view as a threatening, exclusively-conservative social institution. For this growing group of unaligned, liberally-oriented Americans, neither the more popular, conservative styles of religion nor the conventional mainline denominations have proven attractive.

This raises the question of what sort of faith communities might satisfy these

seemingly disillusioned individuals, if any at all. Are there any styles of organized religion that liberals could find fulfilling, exciting, and worthy of their commitment? Recently, research has begun to suggest that perhaps there are.

Studies have shown that there are many churches defined by distinctly liberal cultures that are thriving today in every region of the country (Taussig, 2006; Wellman, 2002). Methodist minister and academic scholar Hal Taussig analyzed over 1000 of these flourishing, specialized groups, including both mainline Protestant congregations and “Roman Catholic resistance” associations (composed of Catholics who are critical of various Vatican teachings). Overall, these communities shared many of the broadly-inclusive traits of more typical, struggling mainline congregations, including tolerance for social and intellectual diversity, a humanistic impulse towards charitable service, and an emphasis on critical interpretations of their faith traditions. Liberal organizational principles such as these that tolerate individualized interpretations and applications of a faith tradition have almost always been found to have a negative effect on institutional stability (Tamney, 2005; Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, 1995). Yet Taussig found surprisingly-high levels of spiritual vitality and collective enthusiasm among the liberal groups he observed. He wrote that the participants “like expressing themselves spiritually in . . . participatory worship, expressive and arts-infused worship and programming, a reclaiming of discarded ancient Christian rituals (for example, baptismal immersion and anointing with oil), a wide variety of non-Christian rituals and meditation techniques, and development of small groups for spiritual growth and nurture.” In addition to developing and engaging in these diverse spiritual practices, the religious groups were also confidently re-interpreting Christian traditions in order to better reflect

their passionately-held, inclusive spiritual values. This not only included reforming Christianity's historical gender boundaries so as to fully include women and GLBT persons, but also softening Christianity's historical claims of ontological superiority so that spiritual wisdom might be incorporated from other religious and secular traditions. The similar types of theological, ritualized, and moral innovations emerging from within these various groups—and their clear sense of spiritual passion and direction fueling the changes—led Taussig to conclude that they were all part of an emerging religious movement he called “progressive Christianity.”

Episcopal theologian and academic Diana Butler Bass has also identified distinct types of thriving mainline congregations throughout the nation that are defined by renewed uses of ancient rituals, liturgical forms and spiritual practices (2006; 2006a; 2005; 2004). Her research examined churchgoers in a wide-range of mainline Protestant denominations, and discovered a significant minority who were enthusiastically developing and dedicating themselves to what she labeled “intentional religious practices,” such as meditation and contemplative prayer, walking labyrinths, expanded use of liturgies in worship services, and more extensive charitable activities for oppressed groups. Participants did not engage in these activities because of normative expectations from their congregation or faith traditions, but solely because of their own interests and sense of personal fulfillment that the practices engendered. Like Taussig discovered, certain dynamic mainline communities are attracting participants who demonstrate broad religious enthusiasm and spiritual focus, providing a source of energy and renewal for these atypical congregations.

Diverse Consumers in a Religious Marketplace

Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke proposed a model for understanding the overall diversity of religion in America. Their theoretical framing begins from the premise that all styles of religious culture evolve out of a common desire by people to curry the favor of the supernatural. In exchange for some type of spiritual reward, religious humans throughout history have engaged in culturally-defined practices and beliefs designed to please the Higher Power(s) perceived to be in control of the universe's gifts.

Ever since the Enlightenment ushered in modernity, however, secularism and individualistic values have been challenging traditional religious assumptions and social patterns. Modernist cultural forces undermine the authority of religious institutions to dictate which specific practices and/or beliefs are needed to gain divine favor and raise questions about whether supernatural powers are able and willing to act on humanity's behalf or if these non-empirical, supernatural forces exist at all. In addition, because divine forces may not exist or be willing to act, humans must ultimately rely exclusively upon themselves and their societies to obtain the rewards available in the physical world. Thus, Stark and Finke noted, historically-rooted religions emphasize strict, time-honored norms and social conformity in order for humans to obtain God's blessings, while today's widespread modernist notions instead promote personal freedom and innovation based on the conviction that individuals alone are responsible for their own fortunes and future.

A minority of Americans are either religious fundamentalists or atheists, representing those who exclusively embrace one worldview over the other. The vast majority of the public, though, falls between these two extremes. Most people hold both

religious and secular interpretations of reality in tension and place varying levels of value on each. Some are closer to the stricter, fundamentalist side of the spectrum, preferring cultural products that promise certain religious rewards in exchange for clearly-defined behaviors. Others are drawn more towards the liberal side and those cultural styles that celebrate individuality and human potential. Stark and Finke labeled this complex social environment a “religious marketplace” where social institutions and cultural products have developed around six specific categories of people who each prefer distinct types of cultural narratives, symbols, practices, and communities. These religious market niches range from those demanding “ultra strict” cultural products to “ultra liberal” ones, with most of the public being drawn to differing combinations of the two styles.

This broad theoretical perspective thus recognizes that the nation’s religious tastes have long been tremendously diverse, and different people prefer particular cultural styles and environments. Even before the rise of the Religious Right and alienation of many liberals from organized religion, only specific types of individuals were likely to “buy” conservative Christian narratives and participate enthusiastically in evangelical-style churches. Similarly, others were more likely to be drawn to and excited by more liberal, less orthodox ideas and religious approaches. The religious consumers who compose these various market niches ask different questions, whether consciously or not, about the nature of ultimate reality, the meaning of human life, and what constitutes a sacred community.

Evolving Mainline Churches

Mainline churches have historically served multiple types of religious consumers at once, just as the Roman Catholic Church continues to do today. Both liberal believers

and stricter conservatives may theoretically find something fulfilling and meaningful in the mainline's intentionally broad cultural styles that have strategically evolved over the past 200 years to welcome people from several religious niches. Mainline denominations tend to embrace moderation in their messages and membership requirements, allowing enough freedom for liberally-oriented participants to feel comfortable but retaining enough traditional Christian forms for stricter believers to be satisfied. This "niche straddling," as Stark and Finke called it, can be a successful long-term strategy for churches since a larger segment of the overall public can potentially be drawn into the organizations. However, this wide net approach also makes an institution more vulnerable to competing organizations that develop cultural styles more narrowly targeted just to people in specific religious niches.

This probably explains why evangelical churches were able to convert so many mainline participants over the past 40 years. The unique cultural styles that arose out of evangelical communities beginning in the late 1960's, including innovative forms of worship, simplified salvation messages, an emphasis upon the authority of the Bible, and an infectious enthusiasm for traditionalist religious ideas, proved extremely attractive to stricter conservatives who were only marginally satisfied with their moderate mainline denominations. Conservatives within mainline churches, then and now, may perhaps experience varying levels of discomfort in their congregations, whether because of the questionable faith commitments of liberal members sitting next to them in the pews or because their national church's moderate positions on social and theological issues do not adequately reflect their own more traditionalist attitudes. One study of Presbyterian churches, for example, found powerful tensions between liberal and conservative

members over central Christian teachings (Hoge, Perry, and Klever, 1978). Perpetual unease within mainline institutions might explain why religious conservatives have shown such an attraction to evangelical churches where stricter cultural styles and social values not only predominate but are celebrated using innovative, enthusiastic techniques.

Most mainline churches today continue to straddle multiple consumer niches ranging from stricter to more liberal, thus reflecting the variety of religious preferences held by their diverse participants. Within this loose ideological framework, there is even room to include local congregations that have joined the so-called “evangelical renewal movement” (ERM). These distinctly-conservative mainline churches have adopted many of the musical and worship styles of other evangelical groups, and are composed of enthusiastic believers who hold stricter, more traditionalist beliefs and practices (McKinney and Finke, 2002).

Despite the efforts of these ERM churches to spread more conservative views within their national organizations, though, research shows that those participating in mainline denominations have generally been moving leftward towards greater social liberalism. This is clearly revealed by a major change in the dominant political identities of churchgoers. Whereas the majority of mainline Protestants in the 1960’s identified with the Republican party and its more conservative values, most members today are aligned with the Democratic Party (Pew Forum, 2004; Manza and Brooks, 2002; Manza and Brooks, 1997). Much of this ideological shift is probably due to the departure of large numbers of conservatives, but it may also reflect the mainline’s growing ability to attract religious consumers in specifically liberal market niches. With an ever-decreasing need to appease those with stricter religious styles, and most remaining members now

sharing more liberal, inclusive values, many mainline congregations are inevitably freer to target their cultural messages and approaches specifically to liberal religious consumers.

Just as Taussig discovered in thriving “progressive” churches, some innovative communities are working to redesign their faith traditions in ways that are proving extremely attractive to religious liberals. While evangelical communities became expert at serving their niche market of stricter believers, some mainline churches have apparently become similarly adept at understanding and satisfying the needs of distinctly-liberal religious consumers. Not only would these innovative, more enthusiastic cultural styles probably appeal to the existing liberal members of these churches—many of whom may be inclined to participate more fully in congregations that overtly reflected their values, but the faith communities may also be attracting the growing number of unaffiliated liberal spiritual seekers in the religious marketplace. Over two decades ago, sociologist Benton Johnson (1985) declared: “If the liberal churches are to recover their strength and cultural influence they will have to make liberal Christianity more relevant and compelling to its own constituency.” The emerging success of distinctly progressive churches seems to demonstrate that many liberals are once again finding organized religion worth their time and energy.

There are, actually, many longstanding institutions that have developed distinctly-liberal religious styles designed to appeal to those alienated from more widespread, stricter religious organizations. Out of the Protestant tradition, Stark and Finke identified the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ as primarily serving consumers in the liberal and ultra liberal religious niches.

These three organizations have not only taken officially-liberal positions on a range of social issues, from gay rights and abortion to war and poverty, but provide their members with a broad flexibility when it comes to the interpretation of their religious traditions. They therefore seem best positioned to promote specific cultural products that appeal to consumers who prefer liberal styles of faith. Some of their local churches are already large and growing, and this may explain why at the national level the Unitarian Universalist Association has been slowly increasing its overall membership since the 1980's (Cowtan, 2002) and the Episcopal Church was likewise expanding throughout the 1990's (Hadaway, 2004). Certain liberal religious consumers are evidently finding their needs satisfied by these organizations, and continuing innovation by these groups may lead to even further growth and expansion.

An Overlooked Religious Minority

Perhaps because they occupy such a small segment of the religious marketplace and tend to be less visible among the nation's dominant, conservative religious expressions, liberal consumers have not been well-studied by social researchers. Only two published studies could be found that specifically examined the distinct views and practices of Unitarian Universalists (Elliott and Hayward, 2007; Lee, 1995), while no recent research has explored just Episcopalians or UCC/Congregationalists alone.

Instead, sociological theorists and researchers have tended to rely on broad, generalized understandings of religious liberals. These consumers are known to usually occupy more privileged social classes (Homola, Knudsen, and Marshall, 1987; Gerth and Mills, 1958), be more highly-educated (Tamney and Johnson, 1998), hold liberal positions on a range of social and political issues (Evans, 2002; Narvaez, Getz, Rest, and

Thomas, 1999; Davidson, Mock, and Johnson, 1997; Gay and Ellison, 1993; Green and Hoffman, 1989), show high tolerance for diversity and change (Streyffeler and McNally, 1998), and be shaped by socialization and background experiences that predispose many of them towards more liberal worldviews (Loveland, 2003; Wilson and Sherkat, 1994; Ozorak, 1989; Hunsberger and Brown, 1984).

Their accumulation of higher levels of cultural capital overall has presumably reduced their ability to find absolutist interpretations of religious traditions compelling, not only because other sources of diverse knowledge are deemed valuable but because their more numerous cultural tools and/or material resources tend to improve their ability to succeed in the physical world without the need to exclusively rely on divine Providence. This presumed association between elite statuses and weaker commitment to traditionalist religiosity may explain why members of liberal denominations continuously rank highest, on average, in education levels, income, and occupational prestige compared to other American churchgoers (Pyle, 2006; Davidson, 1994).

Although these general traits help expand the sociological understanding of these distinct religious consumers, many gaps remain. There is almost no information, for example, on how religious liberals *across denominations* think about and experience their unique styles of faith and practice. It would be valuable to understand the sort of preferences and priorities that liberal consumers share in common, including their diverse ways for articulating their religious priorities. Theoretically, any spiritual narrative or symbol that clearly articulated a vision rooting modernist-individualistic priorities within some religious tradition might prove to be attractive to this group. But there doesn't appear to be any literature demonstrating this, or providing details of what liberal

churchgoers collectively tend to find most meaningful in their religious experiences.

What are the sources of enthusiasm and commitment among liberal religious consumers? In answering this central research question, the present study explored the complex motives of liberal churchgoers and the styles of religious culture capable of satisfying this niche group's unique demands. By examining these complex dynamics, the research provides rich sources of information about the people and institutions who make up this distinct, often-overlooked segment of the religious marketplace.

Study Methods

Setting

Because of niche straddling, a wide variety of mainline churches have religious liberals participating. However, the most obvious place to identify and gather data specifically on liberal consumers are in self-identified liberal churches where their concentrations are highest and religious cultures have evolved that are intentionally-designed to meet the needs of this group. In selecting liberal churches as settings for this study, four factors were deemed important.

First, because the study focused on liberals as a broad segment of the religious marketplace, it seemed appropriate to locate multiple self-identified liberal congregations from different denominations. This allowed liberal churchgoers to be compared across organizational boundaries to determine the ways in which they are both similar and different from one another. Stark and Finke listed the Unitarian Universalist Association, Episcopal Church, and United Church of Christ as three of the primary institutions serving liberal religious consumers, since each denomination has taken distinctly liberal positions on most social issues and because their religious cultures allow participants to

broadly interpret and individualize the faith traditions. Therefore, one church from each denomination was included in the study.

Second, in order to restrict the scale of the study and eliminate geographic region as a possibly confounding variable, all three local churches were chosen from the same community.

Third, each of the churches needed to be either large and/or growing, in order to demonstrate their ongoing ability to provide desirable cultural goods and services that fulfill liberal consumer demands. Only if lots of people were participating in these congregations could their distinct cultural products be confidently viewed as accurately reflecting the preferences and priorities of the liberal religious niche.

Finally, to ensure that the local congregations fully shared the inclusive, liberal values and perspectives of their national denominations, each community needed to be on record as being “open and accepting” of gays and lesbians. This designation indicated that not only did the local church support gay rights in general, but that the congregation’s leadership, usually in conjunction with some type of membership-wide voting process, had formally agreed to welcome gay and lesbian participants into their religious community. This sort of step was a clear indication of a church’s embrace of liberal, inclusive social values. Being officially-supportive of gays and lesbians in congregational life distinguishes liberal churches from stricter ones, even within the same denomination (Olson and Cadge, 2002).

Upon the basis of these four search criteria, three churches were chosen in a mid-size city in the southwestern United States. Studies have shown that compared to the nation as a whole, the western region of the country has higher percentages of people

detached from organized religion (Newport, 2008; Jones, 2004). Even in those western states where religious participation levels are closer to the national average because of concentrated LDS or Catholic populations, the same regional, secularizing influences would presumably continue to affect all those who are unaffiliated with Mormonism and Catholicism. These regional dynamics makes any area of the western U.S. a seemingly ideal setting to study liberally-oriented market segments who exist on the boundary between traditionalist and secular worldviews, and the liberal churches seeking to serve them.

The first faith community selected was an Episcopal church that the local diocesan office described as one of its most progressive parishes in the state. Founded in 1950, Saint Luke's Episcopal Church had indeed become a widely-recognized center for the area's liberal political and religious voices (NOTE: All names of churches and persons in this document have been changed to protect confidentiality). Not only did the parish host a number of the larger community's civil rights and social action conferences, but under the 25-year leadership of Rector Tim Barnesworth, the church developed a number of innovative, progressive religious styles, including weekly contemplative prayer/meditation gatherings, critical theological discussion groups, and a broad, public acceptance of gay and lesbian participants. Today, the church is a burgeoning, 750-member community that recently launched a multi-million dollar building campaign in order to expand facilities and accommodate the ever-growing number of parishioners.

Community Unitarian Universalist Church was the second liberal religious congregation included in the study. Of the area's three UUA-affiliated groups, Community Church was by far the largest and oldest. Founded in 1952, the organization

has since grown to become one of the 25 largest Unitarian Universalist churches in the country. With over 800 current members, the church continues to expand by promoting itself as a distinctly “liberal religion.” Much of the congregation’s success is credited to senior minister Rachel Corrigan, who was called into her current leadership post in 1988. Under her guidance over the past two decades, the congregation’s cultural tone has gradually shifted towards more spiritual themes and topics. Whereas many UU churches around the nation today lack any cultural remnants of their Christian heritage or even any sense of lingering spiritual interest, Corrigan has instead worked to reclaim a variety of religious languages and practices, weaving them throughout the congregational culture. This has included the expanded use of rituals and meditation in Sunday services, greater discussion in sermons of what she calls the “mysteries of life,” meditation training workshops, and the formation of many small groups that meet during the week to explore specifically spiritual perspectives and practices, from learning how to pray or engage in Buddhist practices to sharing personal stories and opinions about how individuals have found meaning in their lives.

The third religious community that provided access to religious liberals was New Heights UCC Church, founded in 1959 and now located in the foothills overlooking the city. The 282-member congregation was not nearly as large as the other two churches in the study, but was nonetheless one of the area’s two biggest United Church of Christ communities. Although another local UCC church was about the same size (with 10 more members), New Heights reported much higher numbers of regular worshipers on Sunday mornings. This greater regular participation level was ultimately why it was chosen as the area’s strongest representative of the UCC denomination. New Heights

was also distinguished by its focused efforts to attract and welcome new visitors into the faith community, an emphasis that was enthusiastically supported by Pastor Genine Singer. Singer had been leading the congregation for about ten years, and she had worked hard during this time to create a warm, friendly environment where diverse participants were encouraged to develop strong social bonds. Her local church's commitment to developing a vital, inclusive community was helped in recent years by the efforts of the national UCC organization, which launched a sophisticated marketing and advertising campaign in 2003. These nationwide promotional activities included radio and television commercials and strong branding techniques that were clearly designed to appeal to religious liberals. In one set of church ads featuring images of minorities and GLBT couples, for example, the tag line stated: "Jesus didn't turn people away, and neither do we." Another commonly featured promotional message was: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." New Heights widely incorporated these messages and approaches on its own website and other materials. This concern for growth in general and outreach to religious liberals in particular made the church a valuable third setting for the present study.

Data Collection

In order to address my research question regarding why religious liberals become enthusiastic and committed to their churches and faith traditions, a qualitative research design was developed that relied on the collection and analysis of two broad types of data. The first and most important was tape-recorded, transcribed member interviews in which churchgoers were asked to discuss in detail their unique religious perspectives, cultural values, and motives for participating in their particular faith communities.

Twelve people from each church were interviewed, including the top religious leader, five lay leaders, and six new members. These 36 individuals thus provided a snapshot of the sort of thinking and priorities of those in the liberal religious market niche. The subjects represented two specific groups—leaders and new members—and were targeted for participation because each was expected to be able to best articulate why their churches and their cultures were personally meaningful. After all, each group of people had made relatively specific choices to more fully involve themselves with the organizations, either by accepting leadership roles (usually after several years of participation) or recently making the decision to formally join the group. In addition to providing a collective, general portrait of their organizations, the two groups of churchgoers were also able to provide diverse perspectives about their individual experiences and spiritual careers in the faith communities. Leaders, both official and lay, had the most strongly formed understandings of their congregational identities and what exactly their institutions intended to offer to participants and visitors. New members, on the other hand, were presumably more aware of their own particular preferences as recently-unaligned liberal religious consumers, and which outstanding features of their new religious communities ultimately proved most attractive to them.

Choosing representatives from each of the two groups involved different processes. Lay leaders were relatively easy to identify, since each congregation had leadership committees that oversaw finances, activities, and policy decisions for their churches. The heads of these committees—whose titles were different within each organization (President, Vestry Warden, Moderator)—were each interviewed. In addition, secondary leaders (President-elect, Rector's Warden, Vice Moderator) were

interviewed, as well as those charged with directing their church's social action functions, worship/prayer functions, and advertising/outreach functions.

When it came to selecting new members to include, much more leeway was available. Each faith community agreed to provide a contact list of churchgoers who joined within the previous six months, and this information was used to identify six new members at each congregation who had the time and willingness to participate in the study. The people contacted by the researcher were strategically selected because of their presumed ability to provide diverse perspectives about the liberal religious experience. Extra steps were taken, for example, to include men and younger people (both of whom were less common in the churches), and those with a gay or lesbian identity. This theoretical sampling method allowed me to explore a variety of different types of liberal consumers, and was adopted because of its recognized value in providing complex, qualitative data out of which grounded social theories can be developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The primary goal of the interviews was to explore what individuals found meaningful in their particular expressions of liberal faith, and the specific rewards they received from belonging to their churches. Since Stark and Finke defined religion as an exchange between individuals and some higher power in control of divine rewards, one approach in the interviews was to encourage subjects to broadly discuss their personal ontological beliefs, spiritual experiences, and what they perceived to be the benefits of religious behavior in general. This provided interviewees an opportunity to explain how they conceived of the sacred, and the extent to which their churches and faith traditions provided them with compelling narratives and symbols for interpreting reality in ways

that balanced both traditionally-religious and secular-humanist priorities. Subjects were also asked to describe how their styles of faith differed from what they perceived to be more “common and traditional” methods of religiosity.

Classical theorist Emile Durkheim noted that not only are religious ideas a necessary component of religious culture, but that strong, emotionally-evocative experiences of social solidarity provide the foundation for building group loyalty and sustaining the value of belief systems over time (Durkheim, 2001[1912]). Particular interview questions therefore explored subjects’ feelings of spiritual sensation and social fulfillment, since both types of emotional experiences are theoretically capable of sustaining religious commitment and identity. Participants were asked about their connections to other church members, including any close, interpersonal ties they maintained, sense of being similar or dissimilar from other congregants, and any momentary or ongoing experiences of unity they felt within their religious communities or in other life settings. In addition, they were asked what spirituality meant to them, and any methods they used in private or at church to help evoke these alternate states.

Not only do enjoyable social and spiritual experiences strengthen religious identities and perspectives, but emotionally-charged religious backgrounds can also have a lingering influence on the sort of ideas and ideals considered personally important (Roof, 1999). Participants were therefore asked about their upbringing and the various stages they went through in relationship to religion over the life course. One such background experience that research has shown to be particularly significant in shaping religious preferences is involvement with countercultural activities (Sherkat, 1998). Baby boomers, for example, who participated in the various civil rights and/or anti-war

activities of the 1960's and 1970's are today more likely to be highly suspicious of organized religious expressions and stricter faith traditions. Interviewees were therefore asked specifically to address this topic (at least, those subjects who were old enough to have been involved in the counterculture).

Finally, a variety of questions asked subjects to think about how their religious cultures have helped them fulfill liberal-modernist priorities, including self and societal improvement. This included a segment of the interview that focused upon the participants' political values and what they considered pressing social issues, and whether they thought their religious views and local congregations supported these worldly concerns. Also, interviewees were asked if they have struggled with a particularly shameful past event or stigmatizing personal characteristic, and if their religious involvement has helped them reduce their anguish over this issue. This questioning approach was intended to reveal if and how liberal religious products help people deal with sensitive, personal challenges.

At the conclusion of each interview, subjects completed a 45-item written questionnaire covering their demographic information, specific levels of religious involvement, and personal opinions on a range of political, social, and religious topics (see Demographics and Personal Opinion Questionnaire in Appendix). Participants' answers to these mostly closed-ended questions provided greater context for interpreting their interview responses. The written data also allowed key variables to be easily compared between subjects, enhancing the study's ability to identify general trends among all 36 liberal religious consumers.

In addition to the rich data that was collected through these interviews, participant

observation methods were utilized in order to understand the distinct liberal religious cultures in each of the three churches. The primary researcher attended at least ten Sunday morning worship services at each congregation, engaging with the churchgoers both before and after the meetings, and attempting to understand and appreciate the various ways that the gatherings were deemed significant by participants and potential converts. Attention was especially focused on the content and style of sermons, music, ritualized elements, and casual social interactions. Along with the written notes taken by the researcher during each of these observations, a variety of other written documents were compiled during the course of the study that provided additional insights about the three religious settings. These included church and denominational newsletters, Sunday service programs, weekly and monthly activity schedules, web pages, letters from church leaders, materials distributed to new members, internal church studies and surveys, pamphlets made available to church visitors, and written transcripts of Sunday morning sermons.

The researcher also participated in other church gatherings specifically mentioned by interviewees as being significant factors in their own religious experiences. Additional observations therefore took place at contemplative prayer meetings, new members' classes, theological discussion groups, and political action events. Each of these activities revealed important details about complex and interesting cultural dynamics within the churches.

Data Analysis

I utilized QDA Miner software and a manual, open-coding technique to evaluate all of the transcribed interviews, setting notes, sermons, and other written data for

thematic patterns. As is appropriate for this type of content analysis (Berg, 2001), I began by seeking to broadly answer the central research question: What are the sources of enthusiasm and commitment among liberal religious consumers? With this question as my frame and focusing on both sentences and paragraphs as my units of analyses, I coded all messages that revealed reasons why people embraced liberal religiosity. Close attention was especially given to how subjects discussed broad ontological perspectives, their sense of life's meaningfulness, the importance of interpersonal connections at church, how ritualized practices were experienced, to what extent they perceived their congregations as reflecting their own personal values, and any other material deemed relevant. This analytical approach emphasized the conscious and articulated reasons for people's choices, and the meanings they attached to those choices, rather than the unconscious factors that may also have driven their decision-making.

The large amount of material identified by this first wave of manual coding was subsequently divided between messages expressing social/emotional/ritualized dynamics and those related to more rational/theological/ideological content. From a Durkheimian perspective, this basic distillation of experiential factors from totemic symbols was an appropriate sociological step in order to fully understand the fundamental sources of social solidarity and member passion.

These two broad areas were then further split and coded into specific sub-categories reflecting thematic patterns found in the data, until all minor themes and messages were identified. Although the coding software helped in identifying certain quantitative patterns in the material, this interpretive approach was clearly driven by my own perspectives, training, and background. I therefore attempted, to the best of my

professional ability and discipline, to control personal biases that might have hindered interpretation of the data's patterns. For example, as a religious liberal myself who has journeyed from Methodism to Evangelical Christianity to Unitarian Universalism over the past 25 years, I am aware of many of the dynamics that shaped my own evolving religious preferences and career towards liberalism. While this diverse background proved helpful in allowing me to relate to many of my subjects—especially those with similar transitional experiences—I had to remain cautious not to minimize the uniqueness of individuals or automatically assume I understood their decisions and thinking. I also needed to remember that just because I had tended to adopt strong religious identities and beliefs over time, not all churchgoers and religious practitioners express such certainties. Instead, many people hold marginal and even constantly-changing religious views and loyalties. It was therefore important for me to remain aware—and respectful—of the many ways that religiosity can be and is expressed.

Based on the various patterns that emerged from the data, I formulated a sociological understanding of the material, based upon my interpretations of the cultural dynamics of the three churches, their members, and the larger society. My interpretations required me to critically and selectively highlight content in order to both apply existing social theories and develop new ones. Such inductive analysis is the foundation upon which new, grounded theories of social phenomena can be built (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and allowed me to make sense of the relatively-understudied liberal religious niche.

In identifying patterns that emerged from the data, I was able to construct a rudimentary profile of a religious liberal, including what might be considered the “typical” preferences and demands of these unique consumers. This included a

consideration of what they tend to find most attractive in their religious institutions.

I also analyzed and interpreted what I found to be the significant distinctions between study participants, and how diverse, personal factors created nuanced expectations and complex needs among liberal individuals. By recognizing these patterns in the data, I came to understand how distinct experiential and ideological factors seemed to predispose people to certain expressions of faith, cultural messages, and denominational styles.

Finally, I analyzed how churchgoers and their congregational cultures interacted and influenced one another. This focus highlighted not only how liberal churches are adapting over time to the unique demands of their members—including shifts in theology and organizational practices—but how individual participants are capable of being reshaped as well by their chosen faith communities. These re-socialization patterns were demonstrated by subjects who reported slowly adapting to their particular congregation's culture in order to express and fulfill their liberal consumer preferences. Even within the most loosely-controlled social environment, therefore, an individual's search for spiritual fulfillment and meaning could lead to self-imposed moral expectations, new practices, and altered ontological perspectives. I sought to understand the extent to which such personal transformations occur, and how individuals might refashion themselves using the available tools of their congregational and denominational settings. Part of my analysis thus focuses on the processes and outcomes of personal development within liberal churches.

Beyond coding around the central research question frame, I also identified content related to interviewees' key sociological variables. This included their

demographics, current lifestyles, upbringing, background experiences, and religious training. This second wave of coding departed from my inductive, grounded theory approach in order to specifically link the data and related cultural messages with existing research, evaluating how the subjects at the churches conformed to the scholarly literature's current, generalized profile of religious liberals. This included, for example, an evaluation of education levels, social class, past experiences that might be labeled "stages of development," and other relevant factors.

Chapters

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters, including this introduction and a conclusion. Five substantive chapters present the study's findings, with the first three providing a detailed profile of each of the churches included in the research. These profiles feature an overview of each community's unique liberal religious culture, including how participants articulated their beliefs, values, and meaningful religious practices. These opening chapters richly present each congregation and describe the specific elements that members found so appealing. Also included are comprehensive descriptions of certain interviewees whose comments best expressed the general sentiments and views of the other people interviewed from their religious community.

The subsequent two analytical chapters build upon a Durkheimian framework that views social solidarity (and, presumably, organizational strength) as arising from both a group's emotional bonds and shared ideological perspectives. The study's fifth chapter focuses specifically on the various ways that liberal religious consumers build emotional ties to their chosen cultural institutions and communities through the ritualized uses of social, cultural, and/or mystical dynamics. The different types of spiritual practices—

both collective and private—used by liberals to create feelings of unity with others is explored, as well as how small groups formed around churchgoers’ shared interests strengthen religious identities and broader, organizational loyalties. The sixth chapter examines how religious liberals think and talk about the nature of existence and what was perceived to be most valuable in human life. Beginning with a discussion of the broader ontological perspectives that liberal religious consumers share in common, I then describe how conventional narratives and symbols are being transformed in order to convey contemplative and postmodern experiences of mysticism. The chapter closes with speculations about the sociological implications of these cultural changes, including possible future trends for religious liberals, those progressive mainline communities looking to serve them, and the overall religious landscape.

A final, concluding chapter is included, and offers possible research implications and practical applications from the study.

Chapter 2:

Liberal Episcopalians and the Progressive Use of Ritual

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

From Jerusalem to the underground catacombs in Rome, the earliest Christians in the decades after Jesus' execution regularly gathered and engaged in a developing routine of sacred activities that expressed their profound sense of unity with their resurrected Lord. By singing, praying, and sharing an "agape feast" together, the nascent believers were able to powerfully experience the immanent reality of their God around them and within them. Over time, these practices evolved into the characteristic liturgies of the Christian Church, variously referred to as the "Mass", "Communion," "Eucharist," and "Lord's Supper." Almost two-thousand years later, these ritualized expressions of faith continue to be practiced in varying degrees by almost all Christians around the globe, testifying to the ongoing ability of these specific cultural forms to propel believers into a meaningful experience of the sacred.

Maintaining such traditions has long been a priority for believers within the Anglican Communion. With over 76 million members in 164 countries, including 2.4 million Episcopalians in the United States, the organizational descendent of the 500-year old Church of England has today become the world's third largest Christian association. Each week, its parishioners gather together like millions of other Christians over the centuries to sing, pray, listen to Bible readings and a sermon, and receive bread and wine as a community at a front altar. In this way, they collectively attest to their Christian self-identity and the value of the faith's time-honored traditions.

In sharing this Anglican commitment to liturgical practices, the congregants at St. Luke's Episcopal Church expressed a broad appreciation for historical culture in general. Indeed, the organizational culture's respect for the past was clear the first time I walked through the large, antique-wood double-doors in 2004. The brown concrete floors

within, painted white and tan adobe-style walls, high open-beamed ceiling, naturally-stained wood pews, and floor-to-ceiling stone wall behind the front platform and altar sharply contrasted with the typical modern elements of the outside world. Even now, entering this sparsely-decorated, unusual setting continues to give me the feeling of stepping into another time and place. While many buildings in towns and cities throughout the American southwest use a similar Spanish-colonial style, the intentionally-historical design of St. Luke's ten-year old building enhances the distinct, special character of the sacred space and ancient Christian liturgies conducted within.

The effect is heightened by the few items boldly decorating the room. These include stained glass windows in the front and back walls with medieval-like religious images, Spanish-colonial statues of the Virgin Mary displayed in a soffit in the stone wall behind the altar, and two five-foot high, wood candlestick holders situated on either side of a naturally-stained wood log altar. Dominating the room is a 9-ft. high naturally stained wooden cross affixed to the front stone wall, adorned by simple, decorative carvings and a crafted silver metal flare attached to the center. Because of the minimalist impression created throughout the setting by the backdrop of white and tan walls and hard, exposed floor, each of these religious icons around the room appears greatly enhanced and eye-catching. Expressing the sentiments of her fellow parishioners at St. Luke's, one woman said that "when you walk into the building it's so simple, and so beautiful. There's just this peace there." While aesthetic tastes are obviously subjective, I suspect that almost anyone entering this place would find the striking environment to be emotionally-evocative.

It was within this historical-looking sanctuary that St. Luke's parishioners

gathered and sat quietly together before worship services begin on Sunday mornings. Occasional whispers and the shuffling of bodies as newcomers arrived and sat down were the only sounds breaking the intentional silence. As they waited for the service to start, some people focused on the imposing cross at the front of the room or the stained glass images of Jesus near the altar. Others glanced up and around, seeming to take in a sense of the entire sacred space at once. Many closed their eyes and spent time in private reflection.

Eventually, the quiet was gently broken by the ringing of the church bell high above in the steeple, at which time everyone stood with their hymnals and began singing an upbeat, celebratory song. During the second of the three morning services, a 20-member choir in casual attire and three musicians (piano, accordion, and hand-held percussion instruments) accompanied the group's singing. Many parishioners would begin to smile as an elaborately-dressed procession of six people appeared at the back of the room and slowly made its way down the center aisle towards the front altar as the enthusiastic music continued. The leader of the procession swung a chain with a silver bowl emitting white, billowing incense, which gradually wafted throughout the room and transformed the air. The next officiator held a staff with a wooden cross on top that rose above the crowd. Three more robed participants followed. Last in the line was the church rector, Father Tim Barnesworth, whose outstretched arms held up a large Bible in front of him. The festive music continued as the impressive group proceeded to the front platform, bowed in unison to the altar and hanging cross, and moved to seats behind the altar. As the song concluded and the service continued, I noticed on the faces of those around me that a positive emotional energy had settled upon the hundreds of people

gathered here.

Experiencing pleasant feelings in reaction to the liturgy was widely reported among parishioners at St. Luke's. One current member explained that "the liturgy is the A-number one component of the life in this church that I'm drawn to." Another man who recently joined the parish explained that to him "the whole structure of the church service is geared towards the spiritual. The vestments. The garments. It's all to give an otherworldly sense—a 'wow' or 'pop' in your life." Though the form and content of religious cultures around the world vary greatly, such excitement in response to sacred rituals has always provided a cornerstone of sustainable faith communities, and is a central reason for the success of St. Luke's growing church.

In addition to enjoying the aesthetically-pleasing elements of the Anglican "high church" spectacle, participants also appreciated the collective, participatory routines of Sunday worship. The standing, kneeling, listening to readings from the Old and New Testaments, unison recitations of the Nicene Creed and Lord's Prayer, interactive elements between the service leader and churchgoers during prayers and confessions, and shared Eucharistic ritual all provided a soothing comfort for those who called St. Luke's home. One new member, for example, said: "I like the Episcopal Church because it's got a lot of liturgy. I like that repetition. And I like the words. I like communion every Sunday. That seems so connected because it's such a physical experience." Practicing collective rituals and feeling connected in this way to something powerfully-reliable—a divine power, universal ideal, and/or organized community—are broadly recognized as defining characteristics of successful religious gatherings (Marshall, 2002; Durkheim, 2001[1912]).

It might seem odd that such a routinized, liturgical setting would be attractive to liberals, though. By definition, a liberal person typically prefers loose social norms and high levels of individual freedom. Indeed, many liberals who visited St. Luke's afterwards reported feeling uncomfortable with the church's formal use of traditional religious practices, collective rituals, and pre-modern language expressing human dependence on the supernatural. Those who found these cultural elements too restrictive typically expressed unease with conformist social settings in general and any institution, group, or "God" seeming to claim authority over them. St. Luke's obvious respect for tradition also reminded some people of Christianity's historical dominance over women, persecution of sexual minorities, suspicion of scientific knowledge, theological dogmatism, and moral exclusivity. Such conservative tendencies are still widely promoted in many of the nation's churches today, and have understandably been linked to the idea of "traditional Christianity" in the minds of many liberal spiritual seekers.

Yet despite the outward display of historical language and practices, St. Luke's was clearly not a conservative community. Not only did the church publicly promote itself as "progressive," but the sheer number of gays and lesbians sitting in the pews on Sunday mornings—up to 20% of the congregation based on my observations and interactions—declared that a unique style of Christianity was being practiced there. Participants overwhelmingly held liberal political and social views, rejecting the restrictive social conservatism that is typically associated with highly-religious Americans. For example, although only one of St. Luke's parishioners interviewed for this study was gay, all of them supported extending equal civil rights to same-sex couples and disagreed with the idea that homosexuality is immoral. They also all opposed

additional government restrictions on abortion. Although many freedom-loving liberals are turned off by St. Luke's highly-liturgical environment, numerous others who cherished individual rights found a way to feel comfortable there, as this chapter will reveal. In doing so, these liberal Episcopalians frequently discovered a level of personal meaning and emotional fulfillment in the church's formal Christian rituals that some confessed even they were surprised by.

This chapter will describe the primary culture at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, focusing on the dominant traits of the religious organization and what I found to be the most prevalent reasons that religious liberals gathered there. I also explain the dynamic changes occurring within the parish that are attracting unlikely new members, increasing devotional activity overall, and strengthening the long-term viability of the inclusive faith community.

I. Core Ethos: Welcoming Liberal Diversity

"I am a Christian, but I'm not a fundamentalist Christian," declared Louise Johnson, a 74 year old parishioner at St. Luke's and lifelong Episcopalian. With that statement, she summarized the characteristic that today defines most mainline Protestant believers and their denominations. Distinguishing themselves from both unquestioning religious conservatives who typically view modern culture with hostility and the secular materialists who reject spirituality altogether, those within most mainline Christian institutions have tended to seek a unique accommodation between the two seemingly incompatible worldviews (McKinney, 1998). They intend to believe "lightly," maintaining a nondogmatic Christian faith that is flexible and therefore able to incorporate new scientific discoveries and adjust to changing social attitudes.

Johnson, for example, firmly believed: “Jesus is the Son of God. He's the mortal manifestation that God sent to us to show us the way He wants us to be on this earth.” But despite this orthodox confession of faith in Christ’s divinity, she was also a former teacher, feminist and self-described political liberal who strongly opposed what she viewed as the authoritarianism and strict conservatism of historical Christian culture. She described fundamentalist believers who defend such fixed Christian traditions as only being able to understand “right or wrong, good or bad.” For them, she said:

It's black and white. It's these rules. You follow these rules, and you fit into that pigeonhole. A literal interpretation of the Bible. I don't believe in that. And, of course, they denigrate women. Women are second-class citizens in fundamentalist religion. It's a male-dominant religion. . . Fundamentalists believe they have the only answer, . . . which is what the Roman Catholic church used to say [too]. I don't know what their hierarchy says now, but most ordinary Roman Catholics don't feel that way today. But they used to.

Like most mainline believers, Johnson demonstrated a liberal orientation that challenged the power of traditional Christian sources of authority to dictate what she should believe or how she should live. She relied on neither an “inerrant,” institutional hierarchy like the Vatican nor biblical literalism to guide her faith. Instead, her individualized approach to Christianity allowed her to selectively-determine which elements of the traditional culture’s doctrines and moral codes she wanted to retain.

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church not only welcomed Christians with established liberal orientations like Johnson, but its leaders actively encouraged all parishioners to similarly adopt questioning approaches to the faith’s longstanding cultural authorities.

For example, Tim Barnesworth preached from the pulpit that:

. . . God did not write the Bible. Human beings, often inspired by God, wrote the Bible. And they brought their assumptions, prejudices, and limitations with them when they wrote. . . . This means that every one of us has to try to tease out the

broad, God-inspired messages that are imbedded among the less lofty and sometimes downright ugly ones. (7/29/07 sermon)

Being free to evaluate scripture in such a manner and personally decide whether to accept or reject a passage has long been a dominant characteristic among most mainline Protestants. Almost half of all self-described Christians nationwide, for example, believe that the Bible is the “word of God,” but interpret the text metaphorically rather than literally (Pew Forum, 2008, 2008a). Reflecting this widespread liberal approach to biblical authority, those at St. Luke’s overwhelmingly viewed the sacred book as a key component of the respected Christian tradition, but did not believe its words provided any absolute, clearly-defined rules for one’s life and personal beliefs.

Perhaps the only unique aspect of Barnesworth’s typically-mainline endorsement of modern biblical criticism was that it was done so forthrightly. He confidently declared the necessity for flexible Biblical interpretation in sermons, as well as in bi-annual classes for prospective new members. Recently, the church even sponsored a three-month long, weekly program called “Saving Jesus” that exposed interested parishioners to critical views about Jesus and the Gospel texts that have been developing over the past 200 years and are now regularly taught to future clergy in mainline seminaries (Rasor, 2005; Carroll and Marler, 1995). These critical approaches examine the differences identified by scholars between the human “Jesus of history” who lived 2,000 years ago and the “Christ of faith” whom Christians began worshipping as divine in the latter-half of the first century (Powell, 1998; Borg, 1995). Some reform-minded mainline ministers have noted that such “honest” discussions with laypersons about this historical distinction are uncommon in their congregations today since mentioning critical understandings of the Bible can unsettle the faith of traditionalist believers and cause unwanted controversy for

ministers (Good, 2003). Even at St. Luke's, there were a few participants in the "Saving Jesus" program who were frightened and threatened by the idea that their cherished Christian narratives—from the Christmas manger story and virgin birth to the bodily resurrection of Jesus—are viewed by most mainstream theologians today as ahistorical myths developed by early believers.

To the majority at St. Luke's who utilized liberal approaches to church doctrine and biblical authority, however, openly addressing such issues within a mainline faith community was generally appreciated. This was most true for those who had already read about and accepted the conclusions of modern biblical scholarship through one or more of the popular books on the subject in recent years, such as those by John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, and the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar.

Even without knowledge of these prominent critical perspectives, though, liberal believers at St. Luke's had been widely using their own private methods for challenging Christian scripture and beliefs—often for years. Some experienced quiet anxiety over their doubts and what they suspected were their heretical views. So being told at church that their questions and reservations about orthodox faith were accepted at St. Luke's and even supported by most mainstream scholars understandably provided them with tremendous relief. The open intellectual atmosphere at St. Luke's, therefore, was a key quality that parishioners found most attractive about the church.

Flourishing Heterodoxy

Despite the relief that such intellectual freedom at St. Luke's engendered for religious liberals, the erosion of orthodoxy and doctrinal certainty left many wondering about the quality of their faith and integrity of their Christian identity. One new member

and a former Catholic, Bradley Reynolds, perfectly exemplified this phenomenon, telling me:

St. Luke's has been deeply meaningful to me because of Tim's sermons, and now because of the "Saving Jesus" program. That has had a profound effect upon me. It's quite disorienting to me. Not that I was into the belief of all this Jesus systematology, and all the dogmas about Jesus. Believing that all the stuff we read in the Bible actually happened—I was sort of distant from it. But now that I'm hearing that a lot of it is really just made up—people thought "hey this is a good idea. I'm going to write this story about Jesus because maybe he was like this"—that's sort of disorienting to me. The trend of my faith may be there are all sorts of Christianities out there. There are multiple Christianities, and they are satisfying to their adherents. . . . There are the stories I like about this guy, such as him finding the adulterous woman who is about to be stoned and saving her. I love that story, because I feel that I'm one of those guys who is about to throw the stone. And I love his parables, especially "The Prodigal Son." So *I'm going to pick and choose* among all these stories and I'm going to say this is my Christianity. This is my creation of Christianity. This is the Christianity I'm going to follow.

Such a stridently individualistic conception of faith—though probably rarely verbalized so honestly by a regular churchgoer—perfectly captured the widespread heterodoxy at St. Luke's and among a significant number of mainline Protestants today. Because there is no culture-stabilizing force like biblical literalism available to dictate conformity of beliefs, those in the pews are free to interpret Christianity's symbols and narratives almost any way they want.

At St. Luke's, for example, some parishioners accepted the 1,700-year old idea of the Trinity while others, including Reynolds, did not. These theological unitarians were often noticeably-silent on Sunday mornings during the parish's recitation of the Nicene Creed, which was totally acceptable to Barnesworth. He understood that a lot of people in his church had a problem saying the Creed, and advised them:

When you look at the Gospels, Jesus did not go around reciting the Nicene Creed at people and telling them they had to believe in that. He said "follow me." I really think it is enough to be a follower of Jesus even if you don't consider him to

be divine. I think you can be a Christian who believes in God and follows Jesus as a human teacher without accepting all the doctrines. Because, in fact, that's what Jesus asked of people. That doesn't mean that the doctrines are all wrong, but it doesn't mean that it's required. So . . . don't say the creed.

Ultimately, this official tolerance for theological diversity—including beliefs long deemed heretical by official church institutions—was another important element that made so many religious liberals comfortable at St. Luke's.

This lack of consensus among members held for every miracle and story in the Bible, from the Old Testament's parting of the Red Sea to the Gospels' account of Jesus walking on water. Longstanding doctrinal certainties of Christianity, such as beliefs about redemption from sin, the patriarchy of God, and eternal, Heavenly salvation were similarly open to personal interpretation and doubt. Some parishioners believed that Jesus actually rose from the dead, but others viewed the resurrection as just a powerful, psychological experience of early Christians. A few believed that Jesus' death fulfilled God's plan for substitutionary atonement and human salvation, while many others believed he was executed for preaching about the politically-charged ideal of the Kingdom of God. When asked the role that Jesus played in her salvation, for example, longtime member and lifelong Episcopalian Renee Pennington expressed the widespread ambivalence of many parishioners towards such issues: "Hmm. I wish I knew what salvation was. I don't know how to answer that." After being prompted that Christians have historically believed Christ died for the sins of humanity and He alone provides believers with the chance to get to Heaven after death, she replied:

I'm reminded of a sermon one Sunday that talked about. . .be very careful about there being only one answer. I believe in Christ as the risen savior and as a guide for me. I don't know if I would say that Christ is the only way to salvation. I'm not certain I would say that.

Like most Americans today (Pew Forum, 2008), Pennington didn't assert that her own religious beliefs are exclusively true, but instead sought to respectfully tolerate the extensive religious diversity of American society (and her Episcopal parish). Serving as the Rector's Warden—the second highest official on the congregation's decision-making Vestry—Pennington demonstrated that even lay leaders at St. Luke's were unwilling to be dogmatic in any way about their beliefs.

The open-mindedness and heterodoxy within the church was further fueled by Barnesworth's own unique understanding of Jesus. Rebutting centuries of Christian doctrine, he didn't see Jesus as an exclusively-unique historical figure. Instead, he viewed Christ as being similar to the Buddha and others who perfectly reflected the Sacred in their lives. In explaining this view of Jesus, Barnesworth said:

I know that he and others reportedly had this way of being where the distinction between human and divine seems to blur entirely. So that he was able to heal and do extraordinary things. I think other people can too, and have. I believe that there are some people who levitate or do perform miracles. And I think that Jesus was one of those people. In the Hindu tradition, they're called avatars, which is a manifestation of God.

By seeing Jesus through the framework of an eastern religious concept like "avatar," St. Luke's rector reflected the extent of theological diversity I encountered within the church and the expansive freedom afforded to laypersons and leaders alike who felt free to develop their own interpretations of Christianity.

For new member Tina Lindsey, this sort of thriving, open-minded environment was exactly what she was looking for in a church community. Transferring from a local Roman Catholic parish six months ago, 65-year-old Tina found that Barnesworth and St. Luke's better suited her self-identity as an "ecumenical" person of faith. She had spent her 20's and 30's as a Zen Buddhist practitioner while teaching skiing in Vail, Colorado.

After meeting and being inspired by several unorthodox Trappist monks also engaged in meditative practices, however, she gradually readopted the Catholic, liturgical culture of her childhood. For almost 30 years thereafter, she actively participated in liberal-minded Catholic churches. But when she retired and moved to a new state, she was unable to find a sufficiently-liberal Catholic parish in her community. Ultimately, she heard from friends about Barnesworth's unique style of Christianity and decided to visit St. Luke's Episcopal Church. Although very happy with her new religious home, she was reluctant to call herself an Episcopalian. She explained:

I'm so devoted to the idea of ecumenicalism that I don't want to take on the idea of another label.. I'd rather just be sort of Catholic-Episcopalian-whatever. I can go anywhere that I want and have my own faith. Some people would say I'm being a "syncretist." And that's a bad word in certain religious circles because it means you just cherry-pick your thinking without committing to any one body of belief. I think it's just being broad-minded. So I don't know where this is going to lead.

By permitting and encouraging such "broadmindedness," St. Luke's had become a magnet for unorthodox, "syncretic" Christians like Lindsey.

Shifting Morality

Mainline Protestantism's broad challenges to fixed Biblical authority has not only contributed to widespread heterodoxy in its pews, but has gradually allowed believers to revise longstanding Christian standards of morality in order to accommodate evolving modern values and ethical priorities. On topics from premarital sex, contraception, divorce, and abortion to gay rights and same-sex relationships, almost all mainline denominations have moved over the past fifty years in varying degrees to become more accommodating towards once-condemned social phenomena (Roof and McKinney, 1990).

In the Episcopal Church, two of the most publicized, recent examples of this

process of moral adaptation has been the acceptance of women and gay persons into the organization's highest leadership positions. Gene Robinson was elected in 2003 by the New Hampshire diocese as the first Episcopal bishop living in an open, same-sex relationship and Katharine Jefferts Schori was elected in 2006 as the first woman to lead the national church as Presiding-Bishop, simultaneously becoming the first female Primate in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Although both moves resulted in fierce, ongoing dissent from socially-conservative Anglicans in America and abroad, the overwhelming majority of Episcopal bishops and local parishes have consistently affirmed these policy changes (Zoll, 2008; Banerjee, 2007).

In providing mainline Protestants and liberal theologians with the tools to deconstruct the Bible's narratives and theological claims, modern biblical criticism has also laid the groundwork for the sort of moral shifts in church culture that led to the elections of Robinson and Schori. Rather than being viewed as a timeless, coherent system of moral directives from God, most academic biblical scholars today critically analyze the Old and New Testaments' diverse collection of Jewish priestly laws, tribal morality codes, and Pauline teachings as culturally-limited products of particular historical societies (Coogan, 2001; Olbricht, 1999). For this reason, mainline Protestant leaders like Barnesworth and the majority of Episcopal bishops feel justified in dismissing Biblical directives that have long prevented women from speaking or holding authority over men in church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12) and condemned gay men and lesbians (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-10). In discussing this approach to morality with his congregation, Barnesworth has said:

We know that there is a difference between, on the one hand, the eternal truths of God and the overarching message of the gospel, and on the other hand, those parts

of scripture and the moral teachings of the church that have been culturally influenced by their time and place in history, such as the Bible's few short passages on homosexuality. We know therefore that our morality is not frozen in ancient biblical times: it evolves as humanity evolves. (8/10/03 sermon)

Taking such a clear stand in opposition to fixed, traditional morality was not only welcomed, but demanded by religious liberals at St. Luke's who said they would be unlikely to support any faith community that did not share their personal commitment to contemporary society's inclusive values.

While many mainline and Episcopal churches today tolerate social diversity and are lax in enforcing traditional moral injunctions, St. Luke's community went further by publicly declaring a commitment to accepting all people into fellowship unconditionally.

Barnesworth said:

All are welcome in the community of faith; come as you are. Invite everyone in from the streets, without regard to their standing in life or their past behavior. We're all one in God, all equal. No one is in a position to keep out or condemn another. (10/9/05 sermon)

This radical intention to welcome everyone distinguished the parish from other Christian churches that retain various exclusionary membership criteria, and proved tremendously attractive to disaffected, liberal spiritual seekers who either felt unwelcome within or were rejected by other faith communities.

The accepting environment at St. Luke's was especially appreciated by political liberals whose positions on controversial social issues often put them at odds with conservative Christians and traditional Christian teachings. Renee Pennington, for example, expressed her frustration with fellow believers who questioned her faith just because she was a liberal Democrat who supported abortion rights. She asserted:

It doesn't make me less moral than you if you happen to be pro-life and I am pro-choice. It's probably my biggest problem with the Moral Right. . .there's a sense

given that somehow I worship a lesser God because I happen to support certain social issues.

Although Pennington's political views are perhaps unpopular among and even condemned by certain outspoken Christian groups, her ideology faced no such disapproval within St. Luke's intentionally-inclusive community. In fact, by drawing in so many political liberals like her who had felt uncomfortable elsewhere, the parish was actually dominated by those who shared Pennington's liberal opinions and partisan affiliation.

The clearest and most publicized example of St. Luke's drive towards inclusivity was its formal, ongoing acceptance of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons in the life of the church. For over a decade, the parish had been enthusiastically reaching out to include this historically-maligned social group. At a special worship service conducted at St. Luke's on Oct. 4, 1997, Barnesworth first announced his faith community's official support for GLBT people. In the sermon he gave at the time, entitled "Extending an Olive Branch," he declared: "Let me say to you brothers and sisters in Christ who are lesbian and gay: welcome home. Welcome home, fellow children of God, into the family of faith. You belong here as much as anyone else." He went on to describe how so many gay people had rightly given up on Christianity and even belief in God because of the suffering inflicted on them by Christian believers and institutions. Barnesworth apologized on behalf of all Christians, saying:

...in these and countless other ways when we as the church have hurt you—when we have forced you out, when we have made you feel guilty—we have been wrong. While there may have been cultural and psychological reasons for our actions, there are no excuses. We have been wrong. We are sorry we have done this to you, and we apologize. It is not you who need to reconcile yourselves to the church; it is the church who must reconcile herself to you.

In the years since this statement was made, the church continued to expand its outreach to GLBT people. These efforts included soliciting news reporters to write stories about St. Luke's diverse community, submitting newspaper editorials written by Barnesworth that argued for gay rights' laws, co-founding a statewide, ecumenical religious organization that lobbies on behalf of gay rights, and even marching as a church in the city's annual Gay Pride parade.

St. Luke's well-known commitment to social inclusiveness was what first drew Alex Tilley's attention. He had recently moved to the American southwest from his native Chicago after suffering a heart attack that forced him into early retirement. At 58 years old, he was eager to build friendships in his new hometown and find some relaxing activities that would be good for his health (and heart). But Tilley only casually entertained the possibility that a church community could be accepting enough for him to accomplish these goals within a religious setting. He hadn't regularly attended any church since he accepted his homosexuality as a young man and abandoned his family's disapproving Catholic religion. Also, his partner of 35 years was an atheist who had no interest whatsoever in church. Nonetheless, Tilley was intrigued one weekend after reading an editorial by Barnesworth about gay rights in the local newspaper, and decided to visit St. Luke's on his own. He liked that initial experience so much that he began to regularly attend. Comparing the church to his Catholic upbringing, he said:

The nice thing here and this Anglican experience is that it's not based on guilt. My whole life with religion previously was 100% guilt. When you went to church, it was guilt. When you didn't go to church, it was double guilt. Triple guilt. But here, it's okay to go or not go when you want to. Receive the sacraments when you want to. There's just a better feeling. It's more welcoming. And you feel better about it because *you're doing it because you want to*, not because you have this guilt thrown on you. Like you're going to go to hell if you don't.

After several months, Tilley signed up for the new members' classes at St. Luke's, met several new friends, and eventually joined the church. He has now been regularly participating in the parish for over a year.

Another parishioner who joined the church because of its welcoming atmosphere was Rich Parsons. Raised as a Roman Catholic, he became passionately involved with the charismatic Catholic movement as a young adult and subsequently devoted much of his life to an intensive type of orthodox Christianity. For over 20 years, he and his wife were members of small house churches where charismatic believers lived closely with one another and sought to foster an intimate spiritual community like those of first-century Christians. While the focused religious lifestyle was often emotionally-satisfying to Parsons, over time he became increasingly resentful about his lack of privacy and the level of control being incessantly imposed on him by fellow believers. The scrutiny from the Christian community was especially difficult when he and his wife began having marital problems, leading both of them to reduce their involvement in that religious subculture. The marriage eventually failed, and Parsons was heartbroken. He experienced a great deal of shame over the divorce, viewing it as a personal and spiritual failure. It was during this painful period that he decided to return to a church that offered the familiar liturgical routines of his childhood. Reflecting back, he said:

When I first started to come here, it was in the aftermath of my divorce, and I just needed a place to hide for a while. St. Luke's provided that kind of respite for me. Just being here—the liturgy and all—would kind of salve me.

Although Parsons continued to hold orthodox theological beliefs, his words conveyed the tremendous comfort and healing he had experienced in St. Luke's nonjudgmental, accepting environment. He has now been a member of the church for over seven years.

Serving Liberal Churchgoers

The vast majority of people attending St. Luke's were probably similar to other liberal churchgoers in the United States who have been drawn for decades to more overtly open-minded Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. These participants displayed a strong desire for personal autonomy in interpreting traditional religious ideas and/or selectively-applying longstanding moral standards, and this trait defined them as a unique segment of the religious marketplace. Nondogmatic faith communities are therefore naturally-positioned to attract them. By providing a setting that de-emphasized Biblical authority, tolerated heterodoxy among parishioners, adjusted moral standards to contemporary societal values, and intentionally created a safe, welcoming atmosphere for all visitors, St. Luke's satisfied liberal consumers who wanted a culturally-lenient style of religion that enthusiastically-embraced ideological and moral diversity.

What distinguished St. Luke's from other mainline churches that similarly provide tolerant, low-demand environments was Tim Barnesworth's unwavering, *public advocacy* for the broadminded views and contemporary, inclusive values cherished by religious liberals. He was a uniquely-charismatic champion of liberal religiosity, consistently articulating his parish's "progressive" brand in the local community. Occasionally, the church had been penalized for Barnesworth's high-profile liberalism, as when the local, conservative diocesan bishop eliminated funding for St. Luke's new sanctuary after the church's 1997 declaration of support for gays and lesbians. But despite this criticism, Barnesworth had proven to be a tremendous asset to the parish, drawing into St. Luke's a growing number and variety of liberal spiritual seekers who

appreciated the acceptance and advocacy within his faith community for their variously non-orthodox approaches to faith.

Some of those attracted to St. Luke's were lifelong Episcopalians like Renee Pennington and Louise Johnson who brought with them strong pre-existing commitments to both the Episcopal Church and liberal Christianity. When Pennington first arrived in the area from New Orleans ten years ago, for example, she visited several Episcopal parishes in search of a new church home similar to her liberal faith community in Louisiana. St. Luke's clearly stood out to her as the most distinctly-liberal Episcopal parish in the area. "There really wasn't much of a comparison," she said. For political liberals like her and Johnson, the church validated their desire to claim a Christian identity while maintaining social opinions that were at odds with traditional interpretations of Christian culture (such as women's equality and support for abortion rights). Because no other local parishes apparently offered the sort of radically-inclusive environment available at St. Luke's, Barnesworth's church probably monopolized the region's liberal Episcopal marketplace. Whereas liberal members of the denomination might otherwise have been distributed across a variety of parishes in the area, St. Luke's focused outreach to this group presumably led many liberal Episcopalians like Pennington and Johnson to concentrate within a single faith community.

Others being drawn to St. Luke's were dedicated churchgoers from other Christian traditions, like Lindsey and Parsons. While former Catholic Lindsey was attracted to the broad open-mindedness and intellectual-stimulation at Barnesworth's church, Parsons found St. Luke's welcoming, nonjudgmental atmosphere to be preferable after his divorce to the demanding Christian communities in which he had more recently

been participating. Both believers were longtime members of other churches, but ultimately chose to join St. Luke's because of the community's unique ability to meet their liberal religious demands. Just as conservatives departing from mainline Protestant and Catholic communities have helped fuel the growth of thriving evangelical and fundamentalist churches (Perrin, Kennedy, and Miller, 1997), liberals departing from other Christian groups have similarly added strength and vitality to St. Luke's liberal organization. Perhaps the ability to convert religious liberals to St. Luke's and other radically-inclusive parishes around the country partly explains the unexpected membership increases in the nationwide Episcopal Church during the 1990's (Hadaway, 2004).

In addition to attracting longtime churchgoers, St. Luke's has also grown by appealing to unaffiliated liberals like Tilley. Having spent three decades separated from organized religion, the only criteria he knew he wanted from a possible church home after retiring was that the community would have to accept his homosexuality and long-term, same-sex relationship. He was, therefore, immediately drawn to Barnesworth's outspoken, public support for gay rights and the parish's broad commitment to affirming (not just tolerating) social diversity. Defying exclusionary moral traditions and welcoming sexual minority seekers such as Tilley allowed St. Luke's to attract a segment of motivated religious consumers who are typically overlooked or rejected by mainstream Christian organizations.

By so clearly declaring the broad-minded, inclusive style of Christianity being practiced at St. Luke's, Barnesworth successfully drew together a wide range of religious liberals from the surrounding community. They were often "intentional churchgoers,"

having a firm commitment to the Episcopal denomination, a long history of church involvement, a strong desire to join a faith community, or some combination of these traits. I found that these highly-motivated religious liberals were often thrilled to find a church like St. Luke's that so openly accepted their variously-nontraditional approaches to Christian faith. By successfully drawing in these distinct, active parishioners in the religious marketplace, the church was able to maintain a vitality and growth pattern that is unusual among most mainline groups nationwide.

The Challenges of a Liberal Community

Institutional strength is not typically a characteristic of liberal organizations, and even St. Luke's faced problems because of the highly heterogeneous environment Barnesworth fostered. Liberal spiritual seekers are understandably excited after first joining a highly-inclusive church like St. Luke's. Researchers have found, though, that most liberal social settings with diffuse, unfocused cultural characteristics have been unable to maintain the devotion of participants (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, 1995; Hadaway, 1993). Whereas stricter churches serve as the sole providers of distinctive theological beliefs, moral codes, and exclusive subcultures that conservative believers cannot easily find in the wider society, liberal faith communities have few cultural elements that their parishioners feel compelled to obtain or maintain.

In observing several social events at St. Luke's, for example, I found that participants almost never talked casually about Christian topics or issues. They rarely mentioned Jesus or even God during coffee hour between Sunday services, or at other church-related social activities. In this way, their interactions seemed similar to those occurring in any other secular, public gathering. While many parishioners did attend

Bible studies, religious book discussions, or special activities like the “Saving Jesus” program during the week, the majority of members seemed disinterested in such distinctly theology-focused activities. Instead, most churchgoers at St. Luke’s just attended Sunday worship and were otherwise intensely-private about their personal beliefs. The laity’s widespread commitment to privacy in matters of faith seemed to conveniently prevent them from engaging in the pointed theological discussions and related questions about morality that might have unsettled their notion of being a “unified” liberal community.

Although most did not frequently talk openly about their various beliefs and values, parishioners at St. Luke’s did share a unique cultural trait with one another compared to those in most other liberal churches: like other Anglicans worldwide, they celebrated the liturgy. It was through the ancient Christian rituals of their weekly “high church” worship that liberals at St. Luke’s expressed their religiosity, carving a distinctive cultural line between themselves and the outside secular world. Such collective commitment to orthopraxis—a common, “right” practice—may partly explain why liberal, high church institutions have not faced the same sort of membership declines as other mainline denominations (Sherkat, 2001). Perhaps the success of liturgical liberal communities like St. Luke’s is primarily due to maintaining a distinctive, outer religious identity (rather than shared inner belief system), thus allowing the groups to remain culturally-unique and compelling to their members.

That was certainly true for motivated churchgoers like Pennington, Parsons, Johnson, Lindsey, and Tilley—all of whom knew about the Christian liturgy because of their Episcopal or Catholic upbringings. As Barnesworth described it, the liturgical

rituals “sort of get in your blood,” and this was reflected among the many longtime Episcopalians and former Catholics who loyally attended St. Luke’s. For them, there was something intimately familiar and comforting about the religious routines, most of which can be performed by seasoned practitioners with little focused thought. Participating in the liturgy was the most definable expression of their religious devotion. As has been shown, therefore, being able to enjoy these heartfelt rituals safely within a community that accepted their variously-nontraditional beliefs and modernist values was why parishioners at St. Luke’s were so highly-committed to their liberal institution.

II. Progressive Mysticism: Being “Grounded” by Sacred Experiences

When I asked interviewees what they found so enjoyable about practicing the liturgy, almost all mentioned their experience of being “grounded” by the rituals. This simple expression captured their common, powerful sensation of connecting to “Something Sacred” that was both expansive and unmovable. Encountering this “Ground” provided them with a profound sense of personal value—an emotional knowing that they were intimately rooted in what was deemed most stable and important in reality.

Pennington described this ineffable experience as both rejuvenating and addictive. Whenever she and her husband end up missing church services for a few weeks, what inevitably drew them back was their desire for the liturgy. She explained:

We miss the grounding that it gives us—to spend some quiet, reflective time together in the larger community of both friends and people who have some of the same beliefs. It's renewing. There's something for me about kneeling down and confessing sins that allows me to go forward and recognize that we're all human, we all carry this baggage with us, and it's a part of who we are. And we can kind of start over and start over and start over, and we will. So it's very renewing to be able to come to church and be able to spend some quiet, reflective time in a beautiful liturgy that is grounding for me.

The feelings of forgiveness and acceptance that Pennington experienced during her parish's collective confession of sins each week confirmed her sense of being grounded. Such absolution rituals not only offered a reminder of her connection to all human beings and their shared moral struggle, but more importantly, that the compassion of her God and spiritual community were limitless. By celebrating the "beautiful liturgy" with others in search of moral affirmation, she experienced a comforting reassurance of her own ultimate value.

Parsons also felt grounded by the rituals. Despite spending so many years of his life in charismatic communities that largely ignored institutional Christian traditions, he came to love practicing the liturgy again at St. Luke's. In explaining the change, he said:

I have re-embraced the long historicity of the church's life through two millennium. That is, two millennia of experiences like mine and institutions that have thrived and failed and everything else. . . I recognize the value of communion of all these saints. Doesn't have to be just the people who can sit in my living room. I like the fact that there's a thread running through here over a long period of time, and I'm just a piece of it. You're part of the history of God in the earth. That feels good to me.

The liturgical routines thus provided him with a powerful sense of not only connecting with the believers around him at St. Luke's, but with the countless millions of Christians over the centuries who used similar rituals to worship Jesus as their Lord.

Motivated churchgoers like Pennington and Parsons with firmly-established notions of God and positive past experiences of the liturgy regularly encounter the desirable sense of being grounded during St. Luke's rituals. Their mostly-orthodox Christian beliefs provided a psychological context for interpreting the familiar religious environment at St. Luke's and immediately preparing them to engage with sacred emotions while there.

Although these highly-socialized religious liberals provided the church with its greatest strength and numbers, Barnesworth was committed to expanding beyond this natural membership base. He knew from personal experience that even highly-motivated Christians can sometimes lose their enthusiasm for religion over time. This is especially true for educated liberals like him whose extensive secular knowledge and skeptical mindset can often lead to lingering doubts about the value of traditional religious devotion and the reality of the supernatural.

Barnesworth's Transformation

In 1991, a simmering mental conflict within Barnesworth between belief and skepticism overwhelmed him and he succumbed to the worst crisis of faith in his life. The liturgical routines that he had been conducting at St. Luke's for the prior eight years suddenly lost all meaning as he questioned God's existence and the value of Christian community. Reflecting back on that time, he wrote:

I felt hopelessly trapped and empty. I was supposed to have something meaningful to say, and I had nothing. And yet like a coin-operated robot, I had to keep going anyway. It was horrible. I heard the words of sermons and liturgical prayers come out of my mouth as if they were nonsense syllables spoken by a "Star Trek" alien. Even worse, the whole religious enterprise seemed like a sham, a clever illusion created by fearful and grasping minds. We were all very busy greasing the cogs of a vast machine the purpose of which we had long ago forgotten. I couldn't even pray for help, for my prayers had lost meaning. I contemplated what else I could do to support my family and home. Nothing came to mind, and I knew that this was no time to make a big change. (1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality])

Like many liberally-trained professionals, Barnesworth struggled severely to reconcile his religious faith with the modernist ideals and critical approaches to knowledge that he had been taught to use and value. Rather than leave the ministry in despair, Barnesworth

went on a one-year “therapeutic” sabbatical to see if he could restore the passion not only for his religious career, but for his sense of spiritual meaning in life.

Barnesworth returned to California where he had previously lived and first served as an Episcopal clergyman, entering an intensive meditation retreat at the Zen Center of San Diego. The Center is an independent organization that sponsors a variety of daily classes and special programs for those looking to develop their meditation skills, with the stated intention of supporting the “practice of awakening” in these students (Zen Center, 2008). Barnesworth was familiar with Buddhist practices, having casually studied Zen as a college student and young adult. Facing his crisis in 1991, he was thus open to the possibility that this familiar eastern spiritual approach might provide him with the support and guidance that his Christian traditions had lost their ability to do.

Barnesworth continued his work at St. Luke’s, but he regularly returned to San Diego for ongoing Zen training over the next seven years. During this time, he was able to develop a deep, abiding faith in the reality of God that stemmed from his own profound experiences of the Sacred. By disciplining himself to sit still in silence for long periods of time while focusing intently on his own thoughts and environment, Barnesworth gradually gained an experiential sense that all of reality is interconnected and a unified whole. Mystics in both eastern and western religious traditions have long reported a similar monistic awareness stemming from their meditative disciplines (Armstrong, 1993). Neurologists today have shown that those engaged in any focused contemplation or repetitive, devotional activity are frequently able to spark an observable brain reaction that results in an altered perception of reality (Newberg, D’Aquili, and Rause, 2001). This temporary, psychological transformation often convinces them of the

sacred union of all existence. Like others who suddenly discover dramatic new ontological insights (Miller and C’deBaca, 2001), these spiritual practitioners who encounter a peaceful Ultimate Reality where everyone and everything in the world is harmoniously intertwined often find their joyful meditative experiences to be life changing.

Such was the case for Barnesworth. While many mystics encountering the monistic reality sense only an impersonal Sacred stillness underlying existence, Barnesworth instead became intimately aware of a loving, compassionate Consciousness that permeates the universe. Struggling to describe his experience of this ineffable Essence, he told me:

It is ultimately good and loving. It's very personal. It gives us insight. I don't conceive of God as a person. I conceive of God as the ultimate life force. We have the capacity as human beings to either be open or closed to it. There are lots of different ways to open to it, religious and non-religious. And lots of different ways to be closed to it that are also religious and nonreligious.

Barnesworth was deeply inspired by what he perceived to be direct encounters with God—not the separate, supernatural Personage of Judeo-Christian traditions, but a good, mysterious Presence within him and all things that bound existence together. He depicted the God he came to know as “this Energy that is in everything and in everyone, and is very alive and active and is self-aware and is aware of the life that it's imbedded in.” Intimately engaging and getting to know this Sacred energy provided Barnesworth with the greatest peace of his life. Rather than relying on ancient religious theology or the testimony of others to find out about the nature of God, he was now able to know and experience the divine for himself.

Barnesworth became convinced that this compelling, harmonizing Force he felt

within him was the same energy throughout history moving people closer together, prompting ever-evolving expressions of kindness and compassion in social relations. In a sermon, he said:

Experiencing the Spirit this way. . .it changes how we relate to the world around us. Rather than imagining ourselves to be separate from other people, our nation as separate from other nations, and human life as separate from all other life forms, we can see humanity and all creation as one unified organism, animated by the Spirit. (5/11/08)

He concluded that as a universal force towards goodness, “God” does not uniquely belong to Jews, Christians, Muslims or any cultural community. Instead, the sacred imperative within everything has touched a range of prophets, priests, and laypersons alike over the course of human history, providing the common inspiration behind all of the world’s various religious and secular traditions that call individuals to self-sacrificial love for one another. Barnesworth wrote:

This nature of God is universal. No one religion owns it, and it is available in myriad forms. But underneath its forms, its character is consistent. God’s nature is love, freedom, renewal, and truth. God is always like this, no matter in what form God is revealed. God is not just what we subjectively make God up to be. The nature of God has *an objective quality*, character, or personality about it. We can say that this is what God is like. (1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality]).

The common moral theme of the world’s diverse religious experiences and cultural interpretations of the divine, Barnesworth asserted, calls people to act gently towards others, thus reflecting the intrinsically-divine value of every human life.

With this fresh, personalized assurance of God’s presence throughout reality and his own ultimate worth, Barnesworth was able to enthusiastically re-engage his liturgical duties and Christian life. Ironically, becoming convinced that the Sacred Reality extended far beyond the realm of any one religion or human experience gave him the

freedom to consciously and enthusiastically choose Christianity as his method for encountering God more fully. He could have probably chosen any number of religious paths that offered practices for knowing the divine. But as an established Christian leader, Barnesworth was drawn back to his own faith tradition, determined to find those cultural elements that could prove most useful to spiritual seekers like him who desired to be “grounded” in the universal, life-changing experience of a monistic sacred reality.

Emerging from his life-enhancing spiritual journey, Barnesworth looked upon Christianity afresh. Within the Biblical stories of the Jewish people and early Christians that he knew so well, he began to recognize devoted, energized people like him who had similarly been touched by personal experiences of a loving, infinite God. The narratives no longer merely described to him a distant divinity of the past, but instead revealed the same gentle, quiet Presence that Barnesworth had come to know so well in his own life. In writing about their “God experiences,” these ancient people may have been limited by the cultural terms and biases of their particular societies. But Barnesworth was convinced that the Sacred Reality they imperfectly conveyed was the same One he had found through meditation and that believers in countless other religious traditions throughout history have also been touched by. He concluded that he didn’t have to leave Christianity to engage God. The Christian tradition offered him countless stories, symbols, and practices developed over thousands of years that had all proven variously helpful for talking about and interacting with the mysterious, universal God. In describing the purpose of any religion, Barnesworth stated:

Religion, if it is to be useful, must point the way to the objective truths it has discovered over time that lead to life. It must speak of human/divine experience in a way that awakens one to *the true reality of God-in-life*. It must provide practices and disciplines that really work, that really bring freedom and peace of

mind. It must model compassion and justice so that people may move from a belief in the idea of a loving God to an experience of the objective truth of God's ever-present love. (1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality]).

With his newfound spiritual confidence, Barnesworth began to view Christian culture as a tool kit containing several proven, beneficial techniques for interacting with and being inspired by the mysterious, sacred Essence within everything. Nothing about Christianity would be seen as mandatory or exclusively “true” ways to approach God. Instead, Barnesworth viewed church culture as merely providing optional resources—or cultural “forms”—that seekers may or may not find useful in their own spiritual journeys.

The Progressive Use of Ritual

One of the religious tools that has undoubtedly “worked” for millions of spiritual seekers over the past two millennia is the Christian liturgy. The ritualized patterns of collective action and personal reflection often move participants into a semi-meditative state that makes them more receptive to and “grounded” in sacred experiences. While longtime churchgoers like Renee Pennington, Louise Johnson, and Rich Parsons experienced the liturgy at St. Luke's through the framework of relatively orthodox theology, Barnesworth found that he too could meet his monistic conception of God through Christian rituals like prayer, confession, singing, and communion. The figure of Jesus, around whom the liturgy is designed, provided him with a compelling portrait of an “avatar”—an exemplary human who was transformed by a deep awareness of the Sacred and subsequently manifested God through his life. The key to opening the liturgy's dramatic, emotionally-charged routines to more expansive ontological interpretations was for Barnesworth to minimize the significance of the specific words repeated each week and instead emphasize the meditative, experiential elements of the

ritual itself. In this way, he was able to use the cultural structure as a method for sensing and being guided by the peaceful, loving Presence within him. He eventually began sharing this flexible, mystical approach to the liturgy with other spiritual seekers, including all people intending to join his church.

Twice a year at St. Luke's, between 20 and 40 prospective new members participate in a weekly, three-month course that introduces them to the community. In addition to discussing the history of Anglicanism, the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*, overviews of the Old and New Testaments, the nature of Jesus, and the various social ministries and financial obligations at St. Luke's, an entire session is spent addressing the purpose of the Sunday morning worship service. A pamphlet written by Barnesworth in 1999 entitled "The Holy Eucharist" is distributed to all the attendees that explains each element of worship. All of these Christian rituals, Barnesworth wrote in the pamphlet, is how people of faith "play" together, allowing them to "act out things that go deeper than words and explanations." By approaching the liturgy "playfully" and not necessarily focusing on the theological details spoken during the traditional service, participants can engage the much broader, ineffable themes of the Sacred. Barnesworth more fully described this view of the church service elsewhere, writing:

The parish community gathers together, usually weekly, and we play. We use symbolic words, actions, costumes, special music, habitual greetings, a predictable order, and repeated phrases. Our liturgical play is a way of surrendering to a structure that can carry our deep, subconscious forces into relationship with our Creator, who can then work with them. Darkness and light, guilt, eternity, grief, and joy are all carried along and transformed by the play which we make. We don't even understand what we are doing, but we know that in this play something is stirring that needs to be stirred. (1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality])

With this view in mind, Barnesworth taught parishioners and prospective new members

that they did not have to understand or even consciously agree with the spoken content of the liturgy. Instead, Christian worship was to be interpreted as conveying broad themes about human life that were intended to be *experienced*. The specific words used in the services, therefore, could be de-emphasized in order to prevent them from becoming barriers for people looking to encounter the divine.

In the new members' pamphlet, for example, Barnesworth wrote that "the Nicene Creed, like all statements of theology, are really more songs of praise than objective descriptions of spiritual reality. The Creed is a poem to God." Likewise, when listening to the scriptural readings, participants are advised that "it is best not to be doing much analysis during this time." Barnesworth concluded the pamphlet by acknowledging that throughout most Sunday services "my conscious mind only hears one or two things as the rest of it washes through me." New members are thus taught that the liturgy at St. Luke's is not designed to help them think about and affirm exclusive Christian doctrines, but to instead encounter their own personal experience of the Sacred that affirms the ineffable reality of a universally-accessible God within and around them.

In these ways, Barnesworth and his leadership team at St. Luke's promoted Christianity and liturgical rituals as a useful religious "form" that could carry people into meaningful perceptions of the Sacred. Regardless of what people believed or didn't believe, Christian traditions like the liturgy were viewed as helpful tools for interacting with a mysterious, universally-accessible Ultimate Reality. The structure of the Christian liturgy, like valuable "forms" in other religious traditions, merely provided the cultural template upon which spiritual seekers of all stripes might intuit their own sources of enlightenment.

The church sought to make the emotionally-powerful rituals conducted there available to anyone regardless of beliefs or doubts. Even the Communion ceremony, which the Episcopal Church officially-restricts to “baptized Christians,” was available to all liturgical participants at St. Luke’s who felt comfortable receiving the bread and wine. By welcoming all people into his community and minimizing language, doctrinal, and cultural barriers that might alienate them, Barnesworth brought people into the church and Christian “form” who may never have done so otherwise.

Promoting a cultural system of faith in this way, as intuitively but not exclusively compelling, is perhaps the most important characteristic of so-called “progressive” styles of Christianity. Just like in the reviving mainline congregations observed by researcher Hal Taussig (2006), St. Luke’s displayed the unexpected combination of liberal, loose theological commitments and a passionate, sincere dedication to traditional Christian practices. Much of this enthusiasm came from the parish’s concentrated core of liberal, motivated churchgoers who self-identified as Christian and long appreciated liturgical practices. But the church has also grown and overcome the typically-corrosive force of its diverse community by embracing a variety of intentional spiritual seekers who, like Barnesworth, use Christianity as a helpful “form” for encountering broader notions of the Sacred. While the majority of longtime liberal churchgoers at St. Luke’s continued to see and feel grounded by a “Christian God” during worship, a growing number of others courted by Barnesworth found within the liturgy a universal Sacred Reality that could be sensed as well through other religious traditions and spiritual experiences in life. The church’s ability to attract and coalesce these two types of religious liberals was why this progressive community was able to sustain an unusually high level of excitement around

Christian culture and the faith's ritualized traditions.

In fostering an intentional spiritual community where the unique energies of both liberal Christians and broad-minded spiritual seekers were strategically included, St. Luke's avoided the typical organizational decline that plagues so many mainline churches. Each group of parishioners, in learning to support and trust one another in a welcoming, ritualized atmosphere, supplied unique resources that strengthened the overall church. Spiritual seekers benefited from the structured, semi-meditative routines maintained by liberal, experienced churchgoers who loved the liturgy. Within these traditional Christian practices, those pursuing a mystical connection to the compassionate, monistic Sacred Reality—like Barnesworth—found a loving, intimate God emerge to Whom they could comfortably surrender their lives. More traditionally-minded, liberal Christians, on the other hand, were energized by the disciplined devotion that these radically-unorthodox seekers enthusiastically displayed towards the church's rituals. Not only was there added passion for the Sunday worship, but the seemingly-genuine spiritual experiences of syncretic and seeker-oriented "Christians" at St. Luke's demonstrated to many longtime churchgoers that God was both real and broadly-accessible even to those lacking traditional Christian faith.

I found that most participants at St. Luke's shared a high level of confidence both in the authenticity of an ineffable Ultimate Reality and the utilitarian value of Christian traditions for encountering this Sacred Mystery. By teaching people how to "play" with the Christian liturgy, Barnesworth revitalized the meaningfulness of rituals and the Christian life for a significant number of broad-minded believers. Both veteran liberal Christians and a range of spiritual explorers at the church said that by adopting this

experiential, uniquely-mystical approach to Christianity, they discovered fresh, personally-compelling reasons to practice and remain committed to their organized faith.

Broadening Ritualistic “Forms” at St. Luke’s

Participating in the liturgy was how most religious liberals at St. Luke’s derived emotional fulfillment and a sense of collective identity. In recent years, however, the church has also worked to develop new, alternative practices and rituals for those looking to enhance their spiritual experiences beyond Sunday morning worship. These additional programs, though maintaining various Christian themes and traditions, nonetheless strongly de-emphasized words conveying historical Christian doctrines. As Barnesworth often discussed publicly, religious language can be helpful for some but alienating to others. The emerging ritualistic “forms” added at St. Luke’s ultimately attracted a variety of spiritual seekers who were often uncomfortable with traditional Christianity and the liturgical language used on Sundays.

The most important of these new church rituals was contemplative—or centering—prayer. This monastic exercise of sitting for long periods of time in silence and focusing one’s mind entirely on God is not typically associated with mainstream Christian culture (excluding Quakers), but is nonetheless deeply rooted in Christianity’s mystical and ascetical traditions dating back to the earliest centuries of the faith (Maloney, 2008; Zaleski and Zaleski, 2005; Armstrong, 2001). The spiritual discipline is marked by intensive, quiet concentration that is designed to narrow one’s thoughts until only an awe-inspiring and all-encompassing awareness of the Sacred remains in consciousness. Encountering this ineffable, imminent sense of God as everything has led contemplative Christians throughout history to describe the world and all of reality as

containing a sacred monistic quality. Their mystical perceptions led them to conclude that there is no place where God is not present. Contemplative prayer, therefore, produces many of the same experiential sensations and ideological conclusions as many forms of eastern meditation, including the Zen practices that Barnesworth found so inspiring and transformational during his time of spiritual crisis. He clearly understood the similarities between the two spiritual approaches, writing that “for those who have come to know God as the source of all being through meditative practice, a contemplative approach to prayer will help the often limited religious concept of God to actually come alive”(1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality]).

In 2001, Barnesworth established a permanent contemplative prayer program at St. Luke’s. Since then, small groups of parishioners have gathered each week to clear their minds of all thoughts but God. Some people gather on Monday nights, while others attend the contemplative service on Tuesday mornings. Also, special meditative retreats are held on several weekends throughout the year for larger groups.

At one of the Monday night gatherings, I sat with ten other people who were scattered around the church’s sanctuary. Three men and seven women sat quietly with their eyes closed. The only movement within the sparse, dimly-lit, cavernous space was the flicker of candles upon the wooden altar and the gentle breathing patterns of participants. All seemed tremendously peaceful. Five minutes passed. Then ten. There was the faint sound of traffic outside the building walls, and the distant bark of a dog. But the intentional silence and stillness of the practitioners created a sacred atmosphere that seemed impervious to the outside world. After a remarkable 20 minutes of near-total silence and stillness, a bell was struck and participants gradually opened their eyes. The

lay leader at the front of the room rose from her seated position on a floor pillow, and everyone else did likewise. They all bowed in unison, and then proceeded to move slowly but deliberately to the back of the room where they cued, bowed simultaneously again, and then gradually walked forward. All were shoeless, and some were barefoot. Their steps were cautious, and as they focused on the ground before them, each spiritual seeker appeared to maintain a semi-meditative state. Slowly, the procession circled the room, followed by two more rotations at a brisker pace. Afterwards, the line broke and everyone returned to their seats. The leader rang a bell again, participants closed their eyes, and another 20 minute period of silent reflection ensued.

During the many contemplative meetings like this one I attended at the church, I was consistently struck not only by the impressive monastic discipline that laypersons displayed for extended periods of time, but by the palpable sense of sacred energy that their gatherings evoked for me and other visitors with whom I spoke afterwards. The simple rituals, intensive mental focus of participants, and minimal spoken words (only at the beginning and end of the service) created a seemingly-generic template for encountering a nameless, mystical Reality. For this reason, the program drew together an even more diverse collection of religious liberals than those who gathered on Sunday mornings to “play” with and selectively-listen to the church’s liturgy.

Contemplative prayer neither requires nor imposes any specific religious doctrines on participants, and can therefore be appreciated by a broad range of spiritual seekers. Liberal churchgoers Pennington and Johnson, for example, had both participated in the meditative program and thoroughly enjoyed it. Within the sacred silence, they could engage in meaningful encounters with their own conceptions of Jesus and God.

Other contemplative practitioners at St. Luke's, however, did not closely identify with Christianity and rarely drew upon established theological ideas to frame their experiences. Some even confessed to me that they were unsure about God's existence. Just like Barnesworth during his spiritual crisis, these skeptical seekers found more meaning in the silence of meditation than in the dogma-laden rituals of the Christian liturgy. Through the quiet, collective routines of contemplative prayer, they experienced sacred sensations and a peacefulness about their existence that was not unlike the "grounding" described by liturgical Christians. They may not have used terms like God or Jesus to describe the source of these feelings, but they nonetheless often grew to recognize an ineffable Sacred quality to their existence and all of life because of their intentional, ritualized practice of silence. For this reason, contemplative prayer served as a valuable outreach tool for St. Luke's, drawing in people who would not otherwise find a reason to regularly visit a Christian church.

Hoping to further expand the parish's ecumenically-broad spiritual offerings, Barnesworth oversaw the development of an even bolder, nontraditional program in 2008 called the "Kirtan Mass." Promoted as a "new form of worship" and conducted initially as an "experiment," the first two of these creative services attracted approximately 100 people each. The atmosphere at both gatherings was relaxed, but clearly-intended to evoke sacred feelings among participants. Before entering the church sanctuary, almost everyone removed their shoes and received a paper that contained the words to various unfamiliar chants. Most people then made their way to the pews. However, the service leaders and several parishioners sat on pillows on the ground around the front of the room, similar to those involved in contemplative prayer. As everyone sat in silence

before the service, the flickering candles and low-lighting dimly-revealed the many closed eyes and expectant expressions of those in attendance.

Most of the program that followed consisted of devotional chants read from the paper handout and alternately spoken by Barnesworth and the participants. Accompanied by a flute, hand percussion instruments, and harmonium, the simple chants were repeated by attendees for up to ten minutes at a time and had a similarly semi-meditative effect as Hindu “Kirtan” mantras have upon many yoga groups. While some of the repetitive verses used at St. Luke’s “Mass” included recognizable Christian concepts (like Jesus or the Virgin Mary), most were less specific. One song was in Latin, for example, and another used Hindu ideas that had participants cry out to “all sentient beings throughout space and time.” Between the musical chants, a lay leader read various meditative quotes, including Gospel passages about Jesus and Islamic poetry by Sufi mystics. Towards the end of the program, all celebrants were invited to informally gather together around the front altar for Communion. Barnesworth conducted an abbreviated liturgical ritual with traditional words and actions, but then passed the cup of wine to one worshiper and the basket of bread to another. Each layperson drank and ate before handing the sacred elements on to the next participant. In this way, every person present—regardless of belief—was included and intimately connected to this most ancient and meaningful of high church rituals. Several weeks after the second Kirtan Mass of the summer, the church announced that the services had been so popular and well-received that St. Luke’s would begin regularly conducting them once each month beginning in the fall.

Appealing to “Borderline Christians”

By offering an assortment of spiritually-evocative rituals and nontraditional religious “forms” for seeker-oriented liberals, St. Luke’s created new opportunities to enhance and expand its radically-welcoming environment. Barnesworth’s desire to make Christian-themed practices more accessible and meaningful to a range of people—from liberal churchgoers to serious skeptics—was why the parish proved so effective at meeting the needs of those within the liberal religious niche. In describing this targeted outreach to these individuals, he wrote:

On one side of Christianity’s border are many who are hovering just outside and looking in. On the other side are those who are just barely within and looking out. These people on both sides of the border are those who are attracted to the richness of Christian tradition: its myth, ritual, community, and the person and message of Jesus. But they are also cautious about an otherworldly pietism or a dogmatic narrow-mindedness that in either case seems to exclude their own authentic spiritual experience that they know to be very real. What they often desire is a Christian faith that is experiential. . .that recognizes its truths can be found in other forms; a church that uses its theology and rites in a way that points to what is universal in the human experience of the sacred. (1996, [Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality])

Such a description of those “borderline Christians” hovering on the edge between traditional religion and the secular world beyond conveyed the defining tensions of liberal religious consumers. Understanding and focusing in on this marginal population is how innovative and mystically-oriented churches like St. Luke’s have been able to bridge the gap between faith and modernity for a growing number of people, making church participation meaningful again for a variety of political liberals, skeptics, spiritual seekers, and others who had come to doubt the value of organized religion.

Paige Jennings was one of those who returned to church specifically because of the unique, broadly-spiritual environment created by Barnesworth. She had been raised

in the Lutheran Church, but never found the religious doctrines compelling. By age 30, she and her husband had concluded that religion was only “for people who were sort of weak-minded and needed someone to tell them what to believe or find courage.” Not only did she reject traditional Christian theology, but as a self-described liberal Democrat, she opposed most of the conservative moral standards often associated with church life in America. An extremely unlikely candidate for religious conversion, she said: “I never thought I would ever be a Christian again in my whole life.” When her mother began attending St. Luke’s, however, Jennings would sometimes reluctantly agree to join her for services. Although Jennings didn’t like the Christian language of the liturgy, she nonetheless enjoyed a real sense of peace from the service’s rituals and music. She also appreciated the parish’s liberal position on social issues, evidenced by the large number of gays and lesbians in the pews.

In time, Jennings became curious enough about St. Luke’s that she decided to explore the church a little further. She started to attend the contemplative prayer gatherings during the week, and pleasantly found that these “introduced the church to me in sort of a new way.” Describing those times of collective meditation in the sanctuary, she said:

I [would] take that time to just quiet my mind and stop thinking about all the daily activities. There's just sort of a peace there that comes. That makes me feel like you're connected to something bigger than just your individuality.

Discovering this sacred, “connected” feeling at church under any circumstances surprised her, and she decided to make an appointment to talk to Barnesworth about it.

Subsequently, over the course of several pastoral counseling sessions, she became deeply interested in the mystical, experiential Christianity he described to her. “He just sort of

laid [liturgical worship] out like a play that you can partake in different ways, and have different views,” she said. They discussed many different topics, including the concept of sin, which she found “was such a big one for me—why was everyone telling me I was such a sinner?” Barnesworth suggested to her that since everyone was already a part of God and nobody could separate themselves from that sacred, monistic Reality, sin was not an inborn state of separation from the Divine as espoused by the historical Christian doctrine of Original Sin. Instead, sin is when individuals forget or ignore their own ultimate worth and mystical connection to God and all of existence. Jennings was impressed, telling me: “He really described it in a way like being separate from that natural flow of life and being connected to it. And there are certain things that you do that can sort of pull you away from that. It’s just disconnecting yourself.” Ultimately, she was so attracted to these alternative explanations of Christian concepts and Barnesworth’s charismatic faith in God that two years ago she decided to join St. Luke’s.

Jennings remained a “borderline Christian” who didn’t regularly attend the liturgy on Sundays because of the traditional language. She also received no support for her newfound religious focus from her husband, who continued to be disinterested in matters of faith. But Jennings clearly valued her new Christian identity and alternate approaches to spirituality she continued to regularly practice at St. Luke’s. Through her ongoing involvement in the church’s contemplative prayer services and recent activities like the “Kirtan Mass,” she remained a committed—though peripheral—member of her diverse religious community.

For Barnesworth, making religious culture accessible to someone like Jennings and helping her find a meaningful, sacred connection to life was what Christianity is all

about. In the exemplary, compassionate figure of Jesus and the ritualistic, spiritual tools of the church, he found a compelling Christian faith that called him to help others become “grounded” in the monistic, Sacred Reality of God. His mission was to help people discover meaning in this present world, not a Heavenly one. Following Jesus’ example, he hoped that others “may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). For this reason, he fostered an intentionally-broad, welcoming community at St. Luke’s where all people are invited to be inspired by the various “forms” of the Christian tradition. In one sermon, he explained:

From time to time, some of you make appointments with one of the clergy here or attend our new member classes, so that when you muster up the courage, you can tentatively venture forth and say “I’m not sure I’m a real Christian. I’m not sure *what* I believe about Jesus.” It turns out in our conversation that someone made you feel as if there was only one way of being in relationship with him. What you will hear me say in response is that when you read the gospels, you don’t find Jesus demanding this. What he says is “Follow me.” Follow me. He offers an invitation to come and see for yourself, to approach him in whatever way you can . . . *It doesn’t matter how you get to him.* The important thing is to be in relationship. . . (11/25/07 sermon)

In seeing a mystical vision of God in the life and teachings of Jesus, Barnesworth developed a charismatic, inclusive, and experiential approach to Christianity that has proven its appeal to a wide and growing number of diverse consumers in the liberal religious marketplace.

III. Member Bios: Snapshots of the Newly-Devoted

Within St. Luke’s diverse, spiritually-focused environment, both marginal seekers like Jennings and longtime, liberal churchgoers have found religious products that meet their unique demands. Most important to the growth and long-term viability of this faith community, however, was the church’s ability to transform seekers into enthusiastic parishioners. By attracting those who are least connected to organized religion and

seeing them transition into highly-motivated devotees, St. Luke's effectively demonstrated its ability to serve members of the liberal religious niche and sustain itself as an organization.

Two parishioners who exemplified why the church was so successful and compelling to disaffected spiritual seekers were Wendy Allen and Larry Best. Both had spent long periods of time outside organized religion and were generally dismissive of traditional faith. However, after encountering St. Luke's uniquely-progressive style of Christianity, they learned to value church and ultimately became devoted members of the parish.

Wendy's Story

During the darkest period of her life, Wendy Allen would lay in bed at night and be comforted by the music of familiar church hymns. Hearing the lyrics to songs like "Amazing Grace" allowed the 45-year old mother of two to sooth the emotional wounds of her recent divorce. Not only did she feel alone and exhausted from the dissolution of her family, but she was wracked with guilt over the romantic affair she had carried on before her marriage ended. As she struggled with doubts and personal demons through countless long, lonely evenings, the old songs she had learned as a child growing up in the Methodist Church returned to her.

Allen hadn't been involved in any organized religion for over 20 years. She had abandoned Methodism shortly after getting married. In addition to finding the conservative, patriarchal culture of most churches increasingly at odds with her own social values as a liberal Democrat, her husband never had any interest in organized religion whatsoever. Also, most of the professionals at the hospital where Allen worked

as a physician seemed to dismiss the relevance of church involvement and traditionalist, supernatural ideas about God.

But listening to the old Christian hymns again after her divorce became sacred experiences for Allen that she still didn't completely understand. "Even though they're pretty traditional," she recalled, "it was the only thing sometimes that would fill my heart. I can't explain that. I don't need to know it. It was just so powerful." Although she didn't relate to many of the "traditional" theological ideas in the songs and had only a vague concept of God, the music provided her with a peace and growing sacred awareness. "As part of that divorce," she said, "one of the things that happened to me is that I sort of got reconnected with the spiritual part of my life. . . . This divorce is probably the best thing that happened to me, in some ways."

As Allen continued to privately develop her own meaningful practices and sense of the sacred, a friend mentioned that she might appreciate the nondogmatic, spiritually-focused style of Christianity being practiced at St. Luke's. Eventually, she decided to visit the progressive faith community.

Attending St. Luke's for the first time, Allen found herself quickly and deeply attracted to many aspects of the parish. She had never participated in an Anglican high church service before, but the liturgical practices seemed familiar, reminding her of the Methodist rituals she had learned earlier in life. She also enjoyed the uplifting music, and the social diversity of parishioners. "To walk in and see all kinds of people there was really wonderful," she remembered, noting specifically the presence of gays and lesbians in the pews around her. Hearing Barnesworth speak was especially moving for Allen,

since his depiction of an infinitely-compassionate, mysterious God seemed to so perfectly reflect her own developing convictions about the Sacred.

She began to regularly attend Sunday services, and later joined the classes for prospective new members. During the course's 12 weeks, she met many parishioners and found them all to be warm and friendly. More importantly, though, she was inspired by their seemingly common desire to more fully encounter and *experience* a loving Sacred Reality in their lives. Allen observed:

Most of the people that I've met are so committed to deepening their spirituality. Not just going to church on Sundays. I haven't taken as much advantage of the sort of things like the Contemplative Center. But I think everybody there has a real desire to deepening their spirituality.

Towards the end of the new members' class, Allen decided to become an Episcopalian and join the church.

In the year since that significant decision, St. Luke's has only become more important to her. As she gained confidence in her new liberal religious identity, she gradually started mentioning her faith to friends, family, and coworkers. Allen explained:

I'm just now becoming comfortable talking about being actively involved in a church. Mostly because I didn't know how to deal with it. And because I feel so certain of it now. So clear about how important it is in my life. I think it's shocking to many people that I believe the things that I believe and still go to church. Like that gay marriage is fine. Or that I'm a science person. Because I sometimes will tell people something about me at church on the weekend, and they are like "oh, you go to church?" So I don't know if they're shocked because I don't live my life like that or because I'm just so liberal.

One of the reasons for Allen's hesitancy in talking about St. Luke's was that she did not receive much support for her newfound religiosity from those around her. She recently remarried, but her husband was unable to relate to concepts like God and rarely attended

church services with her. Allen also faced tensions with her more orthodox-minded mother who suspected that her daughter's new parish wasn't "sufficiently Christian." The two decided not to talk about religion at all—especially since, as Allen explained, her mother "knows I don't believe in a male God up there somewhere."

But Allen does now firmly believe in a God, although talking about what that means and the significance of her sacred experiences at St. Luke's posed an ongoing challenge for her. Like many other religious liberals at the church, she had grown used to the traditional language of the liturgy. Over time, she became increasingly comfortable with the word "God," for example, and followed Barnesworth's approach to minimizing or ignoring certain orthodox Christian phrases she still found objectionable.

Saying the Nicene Creed, though, remained "hard sometimes" for her. Repeating the 4th century dogmas of Christian orthodoxy, she explained, presents such an unfortunately narrow, exclusionary vision of God and Jesus. In dealing with this ongoing problem, she said:

If I look at it as more whole language rather than specific and literal, I'm okay with it. I'm sad sometimes that we don't include all the prophets. But then I guess you wouldn't have the different religions. But maybe that would be okay too. Aren't they all right about religion in some ways? Buddha. Mohammed. It's hard. [With the Nicene Creed], if I step back and think about it historically, I'm okay with it. But there is part of it that is just hard sometimes.

Allen's struggle to make sense of traditional Christian narratives and accommodate them to her modernist mindset was similar to many religious liberals at St. Luke's who were learning to "play" with the liturgy.

Although she didn't always agree with all of the tools that Christian culture has developed to describe God and the purpose of Jesus' life, her faith ultimately did not rely on dogmas of any sort. Instead, Allen's peaceful certainty about a compassionate Sacred

Reality stemmed from her own intuitive, spiritual experiences. She had encountered God for herself, first on her own at home and now through the ritualistic, moving atmosphere of her new, expressive Christian community. In describing the church's value, she used the term "grounded" just like the parish's longtime churchgoers who held more typically-"Christian" theological beliefs. Allen said that the faith she developed at St. Luke's allowed her to feel "like no matter what happens I have the resources, tools, powers, strength to deal with it and grow from it – inside an institution and connection with people. . . . Whatever this Great Mystery is gives me the power to step back and say 'there's a bigger story here'." Like Tim Barnesworth, Allen's devotion to her chosen religious "form" rested on a personal awareness of a positive Sacred Mystery that was ultimately beyond words.

By far the most important result of Allen's growing intuition of God and attachment to the progressive community at St. Luke's was the sense of relief from the guilt she faced over her marital affair. "In terms of forgiving myself," she recognized, "it has been huge." Joining the parish allowed her to feel accepted and acceptable again. In describing the church's role in this regard, she said:

Feeling the liturgy is so positive. Tim is so insightful, and he seems to always say the things that are the common concerns of the masses—things about ourselves that we don't tell anybody else. About our badness and our brokenness. . . . So somehow it grounds me and makes me rethink about a lot of things. Like this week, he talked about forgiveness. And how we all want to be forgiven, and need to forgive in turn. But even bigger than that is that we probably don't forgive ourselves. I'm really bad about being so self-critical, and not willing to do anything if I can't be perfect at it. So it grounds me. That sometimes even though my behavior might not be perfect, it doesn't mean that I'm not a good person.

Allen's restored confidence and belief in her own self-worth was undoubtedly a key reason for her passionate and sustained devotion to her liberal religious community.

Larry's Story

Like Wendy Allen, Larry Best was well aware of his own moral weaknesses and the destructive power of uncontrolled passions. Eighteen years ago, he first sought help for a substance abuse problem that was jeopardizing his family and legal career. He began to regularly attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and learned to recognize his addictive, destructive patterns of behavior. Although he did eventually succeed in ending his dependence on alcohol, Best continued to be affected by disruptive elements of his personality and went through two divorces. Now married for a third time, he still described himself as an addict in a permanent state of recovery.

Despite the ongoing challenges in his life, Best looked back upon his experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous as life changing. Certainly, the most direct benefit was that he was able to gain control over his alcohol addiction. But perhaps just as importantly, Best described his AA involvement as an integral part of a “spiritual journey” that sparked his renewed interest in matters of faith. The personal vulnerability, intimacy, and social bonding that occurs within recovery programs often result in increasing spiritual awareness among participants (Rudy and Greil, 1988). Like millions of others who have successfully participated in 12-Step programs since they were introduced almost 70 years ago, Best left AA much more receptive to personal, sacred experiences, recognizing a trusted, beneficent “Higher Power” in his life.

He hadn't been involved in a religious community since his first marriage, when his wife insisted they regularly attend the local Catholic parish. Although they had both been raised Catholic, Best had never found much relevance for church or abstract notions like God. As a child, he described how his family was “schlepped off to Mass on

Sundays.” He was an altar boy and completed Catechism, but these early experiences never held any positive meaning for him. “There was never a connection,” he said. “It was just rote. I always likened it to getting my car washed. No connection.” Instead of being enjoyable, he actually associated “a lot of guilt and fear” with his liturgical upbringing. He stopped attending Mass at age 15, and didn’t return to church until after completing law school and getting married in his mid-20’s. Shortly before he and his first wife divorced, he stopped attending the Catholic Newman Center where they had been married and were members, again determining that organized religion had nothing to offer him.

Although he subsequently avoided church for almost a decade, his experiences in AA had sparked a growing spiritual interest in him. He began to regularly read books on religious cultures and spirituality, including those by mythology expert Joseph Campbell, philosopher Alan Watts, psychologist Carl Jung, and ecumenical Catholic monk Thomas Merton. In these works, he discovered concepts that helped him expand and better define his understanding of a Higher Power. He said:

I don't hold to the theory of someplace in the sky with thrones and marble and all that stuff. A lot of it for me, if I were to define God, is much more in the way of an eastern thinking. . . There is a collective spirit. There is a collective conscience—the Jungian term. There is a oneness of being that our souls all represent. And that to me is what God is. And it's that collective force which you're either in tune with or not at any given day—to a higher degree or not. Some days I'm totally out of it. Other days—it does require attention to that part of me. But it is something that is within every being on the planet. That is where I see—where I find God.

With this evolving, ontological perspective of humanity’s sacred interconnectedness, Best was able to interpret the significance of those “spiritual” feelings he encountered in AA groups as well as during other peak, positive emotional moments of his life.

An ineffable Sacred Essence, he came to believe, was in him and all around him.

Best recalled that such feelings had often been a part of his life:

I have always felt a real connection around Christmastime. The period between Thanksgiving and New Years has always been a very hopeful, exciting time. And I can't tell you why. But I like the smells and the sounds. And the Gregorian chant is still something that connects to me on a strange level. I mean that's a Higher Being in there, somewhere. Who knows? Music is probably where I connect most.

Over time, sensing the sacred became a more frequent and recognizable experience in his everyday life. He even began a practice of quiet contemplation almost every day in order to focus his thoughts, sometimes resulting in a heightened spiritual awareness. In

describing these sacred feelings, he said:

Spirituality is my connection—my connection with every other living being. One with the other. It is the relationship on the soul-to-soul level. And it's true. Some days it is palpable. The recognition that we're all a part of the same creation. And really sensing that. Just knowing it most days. And on a really, really lucky day, feeling it. It is an emotional thing to me.

With such certainty in his undefined faith, Best seemed to perfectly reflect the growing American phenomenon of being “spiritual but not religious.”

Several years into his second marriage, however, he and his wife—a former Methodist—began to think about the possibility of finding a church together. Best said that both of them had separately begun “feeling some sort of call, some sort of need—vaguely defined.” Neither of them were exactly sure that a community even existed which could satisfy their specific liberal religious needs. In discussing where to attend as a couple, Best quickly ruled out any sort of traditional Christian church, especially a Catholic parish because he “had some serious issues with the Pope.” As a staunch, liberal Democrat, he refused to “subject [him]self to that particular branch of politics.”

So with his wife, they began visiting various local liberal congregations, including the Unitarian Universalist Church and Church of Religious Science. None of these communities, however, provided the perfect combination of liberal and spiritual dynamics they were looking for. Each church seemed to have its own drawbacks, with some lacking enough ritual, or friendliness, or a theological approach they could accept.

After several months of searching, Best was reading the local newspaper one day and saw an article about St. Luke's Episcopal Church. He recalled:

The thing that jumped off the page to me was that a large percentage of the congregation was gay and lesbian. And I thought, now there's a group that I wouldn't associate with being particularly comfortable in a mainstream house of worship. Particularly in a large number.

This unexpected discovery of a liturgical, obviously-liberal community of faith seemed like exactly the sort of church he and his wife had been looking for. He mentioned the parish to her, and they decided to attend one Sunday.

While the ritualistic atmosphere was immediately familiar, what especially impressed both of them during their first visit to St. Luke's was hearing Tim Barnesworth speak. Best remembered:

I was absolutely mesmerized. This was the first time I had ever heard a sermon that made a connection to me in lots of ways. I wasn't being talked at. I wasn't being droned at. I wasn't being spoken to in "Bible-ese" that was circular and illogical. Here was a guy who was speaking about things and relating the Scriptural message-of-the-day—very eloquently—to something going on in my life, whatever it may have been at the time. I was just struck by what a great speaker he was. How natural it was. How heartfelt it was. And it was stimulating.

That initial sermon was powerful enough that Best and his wife decided to return the following Sunday. As they continued attending in the weeks that followed, they increasingly began to associate positive, sacred feelings with the entire community. "I

can't put a finger on it,” Best said, “but there was also just a genuine sense of warmth. There was some sort of spirit, if you will, of ‘yeah, this is a good place’.”

Even after his second marriage collapsed, Best continued attending St. Luke’s and became a member three years ago. The progressive liturgical environment provided him with a sense of peace and acceptance through his domestic difficulties—a “grounding” during his time of transition. Although the rituals were similar to the Catholicism he rejected as a youth and continued to criticize, he had concluded: “You really do need to ultimately find your way back to something you’re familiar with. St. Luke’s tone and the spirit of the place are much more forgiving and unthreatening, and all those things. That keeps me going there, as opposed to Our Lady of Sorrows.”

The elements of the high church rituals on Sunday mornings became deeply moving to him, although he did initially have problems with the traditional words of the liturgy. After several discussions with Tim Barnesworth, however, he learned to view the ancient form of the Christian service as a play. He found that “the reason that the piece works is because you adhere to the structure—the fundamentals. That's what makes it work—that sound structure. And then you can be creative within that structure.” With this freedom to creatively interpret Sunday worship, Best could now say: “I'm much more comfortable with the Mass ritual than I was as a kid because I understand it better.”

By learning how to utilize St. Luke’s liturgical services in more personally-meaningful ways, he also gained a better appreciation for Christianity in general as a method for encountering the sacred. “It is an avenue—a conduit,” he said. “Just as other places are for other people. This is one of Tim's things—Christianity is a conduit. It is

not *the* conduit, it is *a* conduit. And it really is. There's just a connection there that allows everything in my life to be much more grounded.”

As an elected judge at one of the area’s local courthouses, Best was a well-known public figure and had become a prestigious, regular participant within the church. He was therefore eventually asked to join the parish’s Vestry, and was recently elected to serve as Vestry Warden, the highest lay leader at the church.

Now 49 years old, Best is a devoted member of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, saying “What I get from it is a sense of peace.” Just like the many diverse liberals and spiritual seekers around him in the pews, he has found the welcoming, spiritually-dynamic atmosphere of this progressive parish to meet a deep, almost inexplicable need in him. In describing why he values the church and his personal, spiritual faith, he said:

There's a constant reminder to me that I'm part of a greater family. There's a connection. And there's a lot of comfort in that. And it translates for me into much more calm in my life. There's a much greater sense that I have now than I've ever had in my life. . .I've had both personally and professionally—a very tumultuous past six months and I really think that one of the reasons that I have been able get through it with very little abnormal upset is the fact that I have that calm. That grounding. That sense that everything's going to be okay. . .I don't think of myself as a particularly religious individual. But there's obviously some need that is met there.

Best’s sacred experiences of being “grounded” at St. Luke’s confirmed his own ineffable notions of a positive Ultimate Reality, and the meaningfulness of his life. This personal, experiential confirmation of his ineffable faith provided the strongest source of his ongoing religious devotion.

Through Barnesworth’s creative leadership and the radically-inclusive atmosphere he fostered within his parish, once-alienated and skeptical seekers like Best became surprisingly-enthusiastic about organized religion. This positive development not only bodes well for the future of St. Luke’s, but for other progressive faith

communities that similarly target and creatively meet the needs of liberal religious consumers.

Chapter 3:

Unitarian Universalists and Progressive Interfaith Syncretism

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

Just as progressive Christian communities like St. Luke's Episcopal Church intentionally accommodate and attract a variety of liberal congregants today, the mainline Protestant congregations of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and Universalist General Convention (UGC) operated in a similar way during the late 1700's and throughout the 19th century. In that early American period, both Unitarian Christians and Universalist Christians within those organizations objected to what they viewed as the strict doctrines and exclusionary requirements of more traditional, popular Christian groups—including orthodox theologies that emphasized humanity's sinful separation from God (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, 2008; Wright, 1997). The Universalists appealed to the lower classes with a message of God's boundless love and universal salvation through Christ for all people regardless of belief or lifestyle. They intuited God to be a good, kind Father who would never condemn any of His children to eternal damnation. The critically-minded Unitarians, on the other hand, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity in favor of an absolute monotheism and a low Christology. By revering Jesus as an inspirational, exemplary human being rather than God incarnate, Unitarians attracted the support of a wide variety of unorthodox intellectuals, Deists, and socially-influential religious skeptics during that key period of American history—including many of the nation's Founding Fathers and even five US Presidents (Wills, 2007). Both denominations became important religious options for the growing number of liberals in America who struggled to accommodate more traditional religious sensibilities with the emerging, modernist dynamics of their newly-democratic nation.

Rather than being strictly unified around formal creeds or shared beliefs, these radically-inclusive, original liberal Protestants in America increasingly focused instead

on modeling Jesus' moral teachings about compassion and how human beings should ideally live with one another. Unitarians and Universalists called American believers to devote themselves to Jesus' social message by collectively building a more just, egalitarian society through political and charitable activities. For these Christian activists, faith was not primarily about hoping for supernatural interventions or a future heavenly reward, but was instead linked to an optimistic vision of realizing Jesus' socially-interdependent "Kingdom of God" on Earth (Williams, 2001). In this way, Unitarians and Universalists foreshadowed the later "Social Gospel" movements in other mainline Protestant denominations, as well as the growing emphasis upon shared behavior (orthopraxis) rather than orthodoxy as the standard of identity among liberal faith communities. The refocused religious attention from an invisible, spiritual realm to the imminent realities of everyday life also accommodated the modernizing western and secular trends that were undermining traditional religious worldviews, such as new scientific discoveries, critical biblical scholarship, evolutionary theory, advancements in the social sciences, and greater materialistic security and life opportunities for the masses.

Over time, Unitarians and Universalists eliminated written creeds altogether and became even more inclusive of those who wanted to participate in the denominations' society-building efforts regardless of theological belief. By the turn of the 20th century, even openly agnostic and atheistic congregants were welcomed into their fellowships (Wilson, 1995).

Now in the 21st century, the 47-year-old, single organizational descendent of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations—the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA)—has become one of the most theologically-diverse faith

communities in the nation. Each week, a wide range of agnostic humanists, “earth-centered” naturalists, paganists, Buddhists, unorthodox Christians and other spiritual seekers assemble in over 1,000 UU congregations across the country to think, hope and work together for a more egalitarian social reality. Despite the tremendous heterogeneity of those now participating in Unitarian Universalist communities, these radically-inclusive liberal congregants continue to indirectly celebrate the compassionate Christian values and humanistic-centered vision developed by the mainline Protestant forbearers of their liberal faith.

In order to accommodate more skeptical, disbelieving congregants over the past century, however, many Unitarian and Universalist congregations gradually reduced or eliminated traditional religious narratives and rituals from their worship services. Critics have noted that this cultural erosion over time stripped the overall UUA of a distinctive organizational identity, leaving the denomination with few emotionally-compelling products to offer spiritual seekers in the religious marketplace. Indeed, many UU meetings during the 20th century were dominated by agnostic or atheistic humanists who conducted their self-described weekly “fellowships” more like dry academic lectures than spiritually-evocative religious gatherings (Lee, 1995). Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke observed that such highly-secularized, “ultra liberal” congregations are usually unable to foster sustainable religious devotion among participants (Stark and Finke, 2000). One Unitarian Universalist I spoke with summarized the apparently widely-acknowledged liberal pattern of migration out of religious institutions by saying: “I heard that you go from Lutheran to Methodist to Unitarian to the golf course.” Indeed, the UUA experienced a multi-decade decline in membership that lasted until the 1980’s

(Cowtan, 2002). Even today, the smaller UU fellowships that compose a third of the denomination's congregations continue to lose members each year.

In addition to the challenges of creating a compelling religious identity for the denomination, the UUA suffers from an organizational weakness that is common among almost all liberal faith communities with loose membership standards. As Iannoccone argued (1994), welcoming all people into fellowship unconditionally has resulted in Unitarian Universalist communities being plagued by high levels of so-called “freeriders” who enjoy the benefits of congregational life without contributing back to the church for these services. This phenomenon probably explains why 630,000 Americans across the country now describe themselves as Unitarian Universalists, but only about one third are official members of a local UU congregation (Cooley, 2007). Because formal affiliation is neither required nor aggressively promoted among those attending UU churches, people might attend a congregation for years without ever taking the formal step of joining. Such freeriders are theoretically able to enjoy the resources of the congregation while avoiding personal responsibility for supporting the community's financial health and overall well-being.

Over the past 20 years, though, the liberal denomination has worked to build a more compelling, spiritually-focused religious culture within its churches (Cowtan, 2002; Lee, 1995; Lee, 1992). Although the word “God” has generally been absent from typical UU sermons for decades—perceived as too divisive and controversial for skeptical congregants—a growing number of local ministers and national UUA leaders have been working to reclaim distinctly-religious words and practices so as to clearly reaffirm their denomination's identity as an institution of faith (Gibbons, 2006; Sinkford, 2003). These

efforts have focused on providing liberal spiritual seekers with diverse cultural tools for fostering and expressing various experiences of awe and reverence for life. The largest UU churches have generally adopted these renewed religious approaches, and are now driving much of the membership growth for the entire denomination (Cooley, 2006; Cowtan, 2002).

Community UU Church is one of these large, thriving faith communities where old and new styles of Unitarian Universalist culture have combined to create a popular religious option for a wide range of marginal and marginalized liberal consumers in the religious marketplace. Overseeing this diverse congregational environment and playing a pivotal role in its development was Rev. Rachel Corrigan. Since becoming Community's senior minister in 1988, she has worked continuously to reshape her Unitarian Universalist community into a more dynamic, theologically-diverse setting where both skeptical humanist sentiments and experiential spirituality are able to coexist and thrive. Over the past two decades, Corrigan's commitment to what she has called "UU spirituality" has broadened the congregation's appeal to a wide variety of skeptical spiritual seekers. Longtime UU member Susan Nelson, the President of the congregation's lay-led Board of Directors, acknowledged the success of Corrigan's approach and actively supported her goal of building a distinctly "religious" community at Community Church where both agnostic humanists and unorthodox believers can develop meaningful styles of spiritual expression. "We have to constantly remember we are a church," Nelson told me. "We are not a political organization. We are not a club. We are a church. And so we must create safe space for people to be able to explore spiritual things."

The congregation's intentional commitment to fostering a sacred "safe space" for diverse religious liberals was evident the first time I visited Community Church in 2001. Walking into the 1960's-era, rectangular sanctuary, I was immediately struck by the ecumenical tone and nature-centered themes within the sacred space. The front and back walls were composed entirely of ceiling-to-floor windows, providing plentiful natural light and attractive views of landscaped gardens just outside. On the white, side walls, 30 framed photos of natural scenes were hung, along with cloth banners at the four corners of the room with various depictions of vegetation, the earth, and the universe. Most prominent in the worship area was an 8 ft. high, wood-paneled mural that curved around the 30 ft. wide, slightly-raised platform at the front of the room. This impressive, walled backdrop to Sunday services was adorned with numerous symbols of faith from the world's eastern and western religious traditions, including an Eastern Orthodox cross, Islamic crescent, Jewish Star of David, Taoist Yin and Yang, a Buddhist lotus flower, tablets of the Ten Commandments, and several other less familiar spiritual signs. At the center of the wall display and much larger than the other symbols was the local congregation's own logo: two intertwined circles with the fiery chalice of Unitarianism in one and the slightly off-center Christian cross of Universalism in the other.

Sitting on padded, adjoined chairs in this eclectic sanctuary each week as they waited for the service to begin, almost three hundred congregants listened to musical performances conducted by paid or volunteer artists from the local community. These entertainers have included pianists, singers, guitar players, and even full choirs, all of whom tended to perform more popular, secular works rather than those of a specifically "religious" nature. The music was soothing and nonsectarian, creating a peaceful

atmosphere for the theologically-heterogeneous congregation.

Each of the two Sunday services then started simply, with a lay leader stepping behind a podium on the front raised platform, briefly greeting fellow congregants, and lighting a one-foot-high metal chalice situated on a small table nearby. Since the 1970's, the lit chalice (a wide-lipped stemmed cup) has served as the primary symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Association. For some members nationwide, the chalice mainly represents the comforting power of community, while others view it as a spiritual sign of life, individual freedom, or even various abstract notions of the Divine (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2008). Ultimately, the fiery image often stirs sacred emotions in congregants as they collectively reflect on what is most valuable about their lives together. In UU churches across the country, therefore, lighting a chalice has become a common, moving, and identifying practice both on Sunday mornings and at many of the various church activities conducted during the week.

It was only after the chalice was lit each week at Community Church that the services seemed to truly begin, with all congregants standing, opening blue hymnals, and singing a song accompanied by piano. Following the hymn, congregants continued to stand as they recited an Affirmation statement in unison. The Affirmation was selected by the church and changed each week. Typically, though, one of six familiar statements was read. Each of these similarly idealized intellectual freedom, self-discovery, and the emotional value of community. For example, one of the most common Affirmations repeated by participants was:

Mindful of truth ever exceeding our knowledge,
And love ever exceeding our practice,
Reverently we covenant together,
beginning with ourselves as we are

To share the strength of integrity and the light of the spirit
In our unending quest for meaning and love.

Another Affirmation that was frequently utilized in services was:

Though our knowledge is incomplete, our truth partial, and our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting to break through individual hearts and
minds to enlighten our ways
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

When the last word of the morning's Affirmation was spoken each week, the pianist at
the front of the room played eight notes leading directly into the congregants' singing of
what they called the "Doxology." Together, participants sang the Spanish and then

English words:

De todos bajo el gran sol
Surjan esperanza, fe, amor
Verdad y belleza cantando
De cada tierra cada voz.
From all that dwell below the skies
Let songs of hope and faith arise
Let peace, goodwill on earth be sung
Through every land, by every tongue.

Just as traditional Christians often collectively recite the Nicene Creed and sing a
doxology of praise to God in their services, the congregants at Community Church
similarly invoked these practices to express their highest, shared ideas and ideals. Their
unison words poetically conveyed the Unitarian Universalists' humanistic-centered faith
in the ultimate value of individual empowerment, communal interdependency, and the
present, physical reality.

Congregants sat down following the Doxology's familiar musical ritual. The
remainder of each service then followed a fairly-common format for mainline Protestant
congregations, with announcements about upcoming church activities, contemplative

readings from religious sources spoken by a layperson, a time of silent meditation, several hymns sung by the congregation, one or more musical presentations by the church choir or visiting artists, a collection of donations, and a sermon. Although the content of the services only occasionally included specifically Christian narratives (such as a Bible reading or sermon topic) and did not include any ritual similar to Communion/Eucharist, their basic structure was nearly indistinguishable from many other mainline Protestant gatherings.

Near the end of the Sunday program, Rev. Corrigan would invite congregants to stand and greet one another, which they did by shaking hands and offering those around them a brief salutation. The congregation then either sang a closing hymn together or, more often, joined hands before singing a familiar melody that did not require a hymnal. A frequent closing song that congregants seemed to know by heart was called “Circle Round for Freedom,” which often inspired congregants to smile or close their eyes as if in prayer. While holding the hands of those next to them, they sang:

Circle round for freedom
Circle round for peace
For all of us imprisoned
Circle for release.
Circle for the planet
Circle for each soul
For the children of our children
Keep the circle whole.

Moving to the back of the room during the song, Rev. Corrigan then offered a final inspiration to those gathered. She slightly raised her arms and admonished everyone to “Go in peace.”

For activist-oriented religious liberals like those who historically participated in Unitarian, Universalist, and mainline Protestant congregations that preached the Social

Gospel, “peace” was probably interpreted as a tangible goal that could be achieved through individual and collective effort. These world-focused believers had faith that good, religious people working together could bring about a more harmonious, just, and compassionate reality in this life. They affirmed a sense of ontological meaning to existence that revolved largely around their own humanistic efforts to improve society. By practicing charity, promoting moral values of compassion, and engaging in liberal political movements, optimistic religious liberals embraced a modernist vision of transforming their communities and bringing about a lasting, widespread peace for themselves and all people.

Community Church today still formally idealized these traditional liberal activities and expressions of devotion (through sermons and songs), and an overwhelming majority of its congregants were self-described political liberals who consistently voted Democratic. Also, among the religious liberals at the three churches I interviewed for this research, only the Unitarian Universalists at Community were uniformly willing to pay higher taxes to expand government welfare programs and were all critical of the size of the U.S. military and national defense budget. Their overall commitment to liberal social justice causes was clear.

However, few UU participants confidently embraced their denomination’s traditional idealism about transforming society through these political and charitable efforts alone. Instead, those I spoke with were often pessimistic about the ultimate effectiveness of their humanistic activities and personal ability to alter the current conditions in the nation and world. Many expressed despair over the rise of fundamentalist religious movements both in the US and around the globe. Similar to

other Unitarian Universalists nationwide (Walton, 2005), most congregants at Community were also profoundly frustrated by the dominant conservative political trends in America during the past decade, and especially the re-election of George W. Bush as President in 2004. One Community lay-leader even told me that she was seriously thinking about leaving the country and becoming an ex-patriot because of Republican control of the federal government. Others talked about their deep concerns about the environment—especially global warming—and what they considered the declining power of community institutions to inspire individuals towards selfless action on behalf of others. Rev. Corrigan herself confessed that “I think it's possible we're coming to a point of no return with our lifestyle and our planet. I'm not sure. Maybe we need a catastrophe to get us thinking in a new direction. I have no doubt in my mind that we can't continue doing what we're doing for very much longer.” While all of these liberal believers still abstractly hoped for a better, kinder world, they tended to express an overwhelming disappointment and negativity about society's future.

For most of these exhausted humanistic activists and anxious liberal religious consumers, therefore, notions of “peace” were not to be easily found in traditional, liberal religious goals of transforming society. Instead, the style of Unitarian Universalism promoted by Corrigan at Community Church tended to refocus spiritual seekers away from what they perceived to be a threatening external environment and towards a “higher” spiritual reality within themselves and their congregation where a soothing peace could be found. In this way, the congregation displayed what classical sociologist Max Weber referred to as a “world-fleeing” orientation that has characterized most expressions of traditional religiosity (Weber, 1993 [1908]). Community's congregants

were often tired of losing the social and political battles of the world, as well their own personal struggles against orthodox religious cultures, conservative family members, and even various personal disappointments such as failed marriages. Through the structured religious environment of their socially-liberal community, though, they often discovered during Sunday services and other church-related activities a profound, temporary comfort that heightened and confirmed their religious identity and devotion.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the dominant views and religious styles of the liberal consumers participating at Community Church, as well as the specific organizational challenges this diverse, radically-inclusive community faced. I then outline Corrigan's own mystical approach to faith and drive to expand congregants' spiritual interests, arguing that these dynamics have strengthened the organization. Her efforts have made the church more attractive to a broader range of spiritual seekers and provided new sources of emotional solidarity for the faith community.

I. Core Ethos: A Countercultural Sanctuary

"I haven't encountered any other congregation where you feel welcomed and comfortable if you don't believe in God," said one new member who recently joined Community UU Church. Like other agnostic and atheistic seekers over the past 50 years, she discovered that Unitarian Universalism was among the only denominations in the nation where nonbelievers are openly and unconditionally accepted into fellowship. Welcoming such skeptics who either doubt or reject traditional theological narratives remains one of the most defining characteristics of the UUA today, and this was a key reason that many liberal seekers sought out and joined Community Church. The radical-inclusivity of UU communities provided these highly-unorthodox, liberal religious

consumers the rare opportunity to participate fully and honestly in a structured church environment.

Community's minister, Rachel Corrigan, regularly spoke publicly about the barrier-free nature of her congregation and the unrestricted freedom granted her congregants in determining their own ontological beliefs. In one sermon, for example, she reassured her listeners:

We can. . .define God in our own ways and find people here who will delight in our creativity, not scold us for our heresy. We are glad that we can share our intuitions that this life which we are given is what is important, that no one will scold us for not believing in a life hereafter—even if that's what they themselves believe. It's such a relief for so many of us not to have to recite a creed with our fingers crossed. This is a place where we come as we are, religiously speaking, believing what we believe, and it is OK. To join a community and keep one's freedom—this is such a liberation for so many people that one very common response of our new people, and many of our not so new people, is tears. Finally, somewhere they can be themselves. (sermon, 10/14/07)

Feeling so broadly accepted in a religious environment was what many of the people I spoke with at Community said was most meaningful to them about the congregation.

Because of their variously nontraditional beliefs, values, and lifestyles, the liberal seekers there treasured the institution's celebration of nonconformity and individual freedom. "It has a sense of tolerance for diversity," said one new member regarding the church. "It's not about us or them. It's all of us. That's the biggest thing that I see in a church like this. And probably in the denomination. . . . All the ideas about the way we treat each other. We do those things with care and loving rather than with fear and loathing."

Encountering Unitarian Universalism's distinct, broadly-inclusive approach to issues of faith and religious fellowship often turned out to be a surprising, emotional experience for those who joined Community Church, as Corrigan noted. This was especially true for those who felt they had been harassed and/or oppressed by more

traditionally-conservative religious groups at some point in the past. One longtime UU member named Marsha Avery, for example, described how frustrated she had become after moving from England to Atlanta, Georgia in the late 1960's and being accosted by conservative Christians in the South. The pressures to conform to the dominant Baptist culture in that area of the country began shortly after she arrived, with a fundamentalist Christian coworker confronting Avery over her apparent lack of religious devotion. She reported being told by the forceful lay-evangelist: "It doesn't matter what you do. How good you are. How many good deeds you do and how many kind things you do for people. If you're not saved, you'll go to hell." Although Avery had never given much thought to her religious beliefs—always assuming herself to be a good person and passively accepting her membership in the Church of England—the relentless proselytization from dogmatic Christians such as this coworker in America's South ultimately turned her off to religion entirely. While her "proper" English upbringing tended to prevent her from aggressively confronting those who condemned her, privately she had concluded that "this whole business of heaven and hell and being saved is bullshit."

After spending over 30 years alienated from organized religion, though, Avery's husband convinced her in 1987 to join him in visiting a Unitarian Universalist church near their home at the time in Austin, TX. That experience, she found, turned out to be life-changing. "I would sit in church and listen to the sermons, the hymns, and the readings," she recalled as tears began to well in her eyes. "I couldn't even sing because I was always so choked up. It took me months, probably. Even talking about it now. . . .It was the most amazing thing to find the Unitarian church." Although Avery had become

an avowed atheist, she nonetheless discovered that the Unitarian Universalist church fulfilled an unmet and unexpected emotional need in her for a like-minded, supportive community. She was shocked by that discovery, quietly realizing in the pews of that first UU congregation she attended that: “Oh my god, this is what I have been my whole life.” Her strong identification as a Unitarian Universalist was why she immediately joined Community Church after moving to the local area over 15 years ago.

Other congregants expressed a similar sense of “homecoming” after discovering Unitarian Universalism—either at Community or in a previous UU congregation. Many had grown up in mainline, Catholic or other Christian churches, but had ultimately been alienated by what they perceived to be the restrictive, conformist pressures of those more traditional faith communities. Such alienating former experiences are common among those who join Unitarian Universalist congregations nationwide (Niekro & Casebolt, 2001). One woman at Community who spent over three decades participating in her family’s Evangelical Lutheran denomination, for example, was once told by her longtime minister that because of her unorthodox beliefs she was the “most un-Lutheran Lutheran” he had ever met. She found this comment to be deeply-hurtful, since she had always considered herself to be a good, loyal churchgoer. Another UU congregant remembered being shamed by fellow congregants for always asking critical questions about Christian doctrines in her Methodist bible class. Similarly, a former Presbyterian who confessed to his pastor that he no longer believed in the Nicene Creed was informed: “Well, then I guess you’re not a Presbyterian any more.” Such comments and reactions were widely reported among those at Community who had left more traditional Christian churches feeling hurt and alienated. They frequently described the tensions and occasional

confrontations they experienced in those groups after challenging the validity of orthodox Christian beliefs and/or their denomination's membership expectations.

While many current UU congregants willingly left their former congregations, others were forced out of their church homes over issues of sexuality—especially related to homosexuality. These religious gays and lesbians who were excluded from more conservative, traditional faith communities were often drawn to the welcoming, liberal environment of UU congregations. In 1971, the UUA became the first major religious organization in the country to call for the equal treatment of gay and lesbian persons in both churches and society (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2007), and this ongoing leadership role has made the denomination an attractive destination for marginalized GLBT seekers. Some of these congregants at Community Church described to me their painful experiences of being shamed, judged, and even formally excluded from other Christian groups. Some had been shunned by religiously-conservative family members. Parents of gay and lesbian children who joined Community also reported being judged in previous churches over their son's or daughter's sexuality, leading them to feel abandoned by their longtime denominations. One new member at Community who was among these "exiles" from exclusionary Christian groups described the UU church as "a refuge." She said: "I think many people like myself tell the story of fleeing from some background. And they come to this place with fresh air. That's really the wonderful thing about that place. Fresh air for people who have just been smushed and crunched by dogma and judgment."

Rev. Corrigan recognized that her congregation generally appealed to such critically-minded and liberal apostates from other religious traditions. In one sermon, she

described how “Unitarian Universalist religious communities predominantly serve people who have looked over the conventional, orthodox religions that society has to offer. . .and found them wanting” (sermon, 4/13/08). These liberal seekers who become Unitarian Universalists, she said, overwhelming value “thinking for oneself and basing one’s faith on one’s own experiences, thoughts, and feelings, rather than accepting, wholesale, what ‘most people’ believe.” Accepting, respecting, and even encouraging such strident individualism, she concluded, “is practically the baseline of our life together” at Community Church.

Not only did religious outcasts and nontraditional believers join Community Church in large numbers, but so did those whose greatest ontological ideals were linked to expressions of liberal socio-political activism. These self-identified “humanists”—who make up almost 46% of the nationwide UUA (Schulz, 2003; Cowtan, 2002)—placed their faith overwhelmingly in human efforts (individual and collective) to improve life on earth rather than looking to a supernatural, interventionist divinity for help. While a few of these highly-secularized liberal seekers I spoke with at Community were atheistic, most did believe vaguely in an impersonal sacred force in the universe that simply had little relevance for their lives. For example, one told me:

I don't really believe in God. I wouldn't call myself an atheist, though, because I don't know for sure. Sometimes I feel very spiritual like during a sunset or hiking. When you think there just has to be something magical out there. So I feel that there should be or feel the presence sometimes. But I don't intellectually believe it. All the evidence is against it. . . .We're on our own.

Another congregant said:

God is this independent force. God is not a person. I don't have a personal relationship with God. I have personal relationships with people. But there is this—and maybe a scientist would say it's an electronic force or there's rays—but there is this energy in the universe that causes things to have positive interaction.

Ultimately, such highly-secular humanists at Community showed only marginal interest in theological questions about ontological reality, preferring instead to focus upon the “practical” applications of their religion’s compassionate moral values in the present world. They tended to idealize the concept of a socially-just, interdependent community, using this symbolic vision of idyllic civilization as a source of spiritual inspiration and devotion.

It was Unitarian Universalism’s ability to convey liberal socio-political principles that first attracted Community’s lay-President, Susan Nelson, to the denomination over 20 years ago. She developed a humanistic orientation early in her life during the countercultural upheaval of the late 1960’s. During that time, she was a young Presbyterian college student who became increasingly involved in anti-establishment protest movements—even organizing fellow young activists to join in the massive demonstrations in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. As a young adult in her 20’s, she was active in several communist organizations, working to reform the “imperialist capitalist nation” that she viewed as harmfully exploiting the powerless members of society. Even after attending law school and “settling down” to become a financial planning attorney, mother of two daughters, and relatively-conventional member of her community, she continued to fondly recall her past activism and to maintain her humanistic commitment to liberal socio-political values—as is common among former countercultural activists who retain their radical ideological commitments throughout life (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). Her lingering faith in social movements and hope for societal change was why she eventually became a Unitarian Universalist, explaining to me that the denomination’s emphasis on accepting,

supporting, and caring for all people reflected her own deeply-held, ontological priorities. “When I go from one Unitarian church to another—and I’ve been in many [around the country]—I come in with complete confidence that I will meet good people,” she said. Joining with other Unitarian Universalists who share her liberal social orientation provided Nelson with what she called “spiritual relief”—an inner peace developed from her understanding that she is not alone in hoping for a better, kinder world for all people. This moving sense of confident, ideological unity with others was why she had come to describe herself as an “evangelical Unitarian.” She felt secure enough in her religious identity that she frequently talked to others about her radically-inclusive congregation, inviting interested friends, coworkers, and even legal clients to visit Community Church. In this way, she seemed to sustain the organizing efforts and focus she had begun years earlier within leftist political movements.

Shannon Young was another humanistic lay-leader within the congregation whose lifelong commitment to social liberalism propelled her interest in Unitarian Universalism and Community Church. After divorcing and facing the prospect of raising her young daughter alone, Young looked in the yellow pages of the phone book in search of a community where she might find social and emotional support. Although she had been raised as an Episcopalian, she had come to doubt traditional Christian dogmas about the supernatural and passionately rejected the sort of conservative morality she perceived to be associated with dominant religious institutions. Therefore, when she came across a phonebook ad for Community Church with a headline reading “A Liberal Religious Community, Open to Everyone,” she was curious and thought “that sounds just like what I’m looking for.” As a university professor and former students’ rights activist during

the late 1960's, she was attracted to the idea of a church that promoted open-minded values and tolerance for diversity. Young decided to visit the church "with the idea of just sort of trying it out." The first time she attended, Rev. Corrigan was conducting a special GLBT service in conjunction with the city's annual gay pride celebration. Young remembered:

Rachel was preaching on gay rights and there were lots of gays and lesbians in the congregation. And I thought that was awesome. I realized later that there were many people that had come just for that service. But, anyway, it certainly brought out to me the real progressive side of the religion. And, of course, Rachel preached a wonderful sermon. And so, I was sort of hooked.

Similar to Larry Best at St. Luke's Episcopal Church (see Ch. 2), Young viewed the presence of gays and lesbians at Community as a positive indication of the congregation's overall liberal culture. This affinity for the implied values there led her to begin attending regularly, eventually join, and later become a lay leader of the congregation. Young's devotion was due almost entirely to her sense of belonging to a like-minded, socially-liberal community. "I don't consider myself strongly religious or strongly spiritual," she admitted. Instead, like many other political-action-oriented humanists at Community, Young enjoyed the congregational support she received for her expressive, liberal ideals and commitment to social justice. "I really think that for me what it means is being tied in with a progressive community and sharing progressive political values," she said.

An Orthopraxis of Socio-Political Liberalism

Officially, Unitarian Universalists and their congregations are organized around a collective commitment to idealized moral activities in this life rather than to specific theological doctrines related to the supernatural. "Unitarian Universalism is not a body

of belief,” said Rev. Corrigan. “It’s a connection to an institution, and a certain kind of gathering values that draw us together.” Among mainline American denominations, the UUA is relatively-unique in having no formal creeds or dogmas regarding God, salvation, the afterlife, or any other supernatural topic that has historically been the focus of mainline, Protestant denominations. Instead, Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration from a shared vision of idyllic human community, expressed in seven official “Principles” that convey the broad guidelines of how congregants should live and interact with others (Buehrens & Church, 1998 [1989]). The principles to which Unitarian Universalists commit themselves are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The seven precepts contain an inherent call to action for Unitarian Universalists—creating a framework for orthopraxis that encourages individuals to express and advance each of these moral imperatives in their personal lives, congregations, and larger society. It is for this reason that members of the denomination have been so involved in local and national political activities—demonstrating a surprisingly high level of social influence despite their limited numbers. Among UU clergy, for example, 83% describe their political views as “liberal” or “extremely liberal,” and the majority promote these views by addressing political issues in sermons, taking public stands on public issues, urging their congregations to register and vote, lobbying public officials, and personally making

political campaign contributions (Green, 2003).

Those attending UU congregations nationwide tend to share the politically-liberal views of their ministers (Unitarian Universalist Association, 2006), and this held true for Community Church as well. “There's a certain left-leaning political agenda around here that's not uniform, but it's common,” said Rev. Corrigan. “I think most people here can be swayed by ideas about justice and equity.”

After services on Sunday morning, for example, congregants often gathered in the church's Social Hall across from the sanctuary where they were invited to sign political petitions related to liberal causes, write letters to elected officials, and/or volunteer for upcoming social service activities and local political demonstrations. These various activities allowed those at Community to express their support for the seven UUA Principles. Church members might be encouraged one Sunday to pick up trash in the local mountains or work on behalf of various larger national and international environmental causes—reflecting their commitment to upholding the 7th UU Principle concerning a “respect for the interdependent web of life.” A few times they were asked to support GLBT civil rights bills in the state legislature and U.S. Congress—thus upholding the 1st UU principle regarding the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Congregants frequently acted in support of proposed local and federal efforts to expand social services for the poor and disadvantaged in society—a reflection of the 2nd UU Principle that upholds “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” In ways such as these, Unitarian Universalists were regularly encouraged to express their religiosity through specific socio-political actions—individual and collective practices intended to promote a liberal social vision in the world and thus bring humanity a bit

closer to the sacred, ideal community they all envisioned.

Those at Community often described their commitment to social justice causes as being directly related to their religious identity and faith. “I do believe there's a meaning to this life,” said one congregant. “We are responsible to each other and for each other, in some way. To help each other. We do need to contribute in some way to our society and community.” Another told me:

We should try to take care of each other. Not everyone can get a PhD or an MD and can pass all those tests. But that doesn't mean that the garbage man doesn't deserve any less healthcare or any less food in his cupboard or less education for his children. Equality is a very big issue from a spiritual sense. I don't like being so divided—whether it's by class or race or sex or sexual orientation or age—in the country. I don't like the world being so divided. I don't like the us and them mentality. I think from a spiritual and political perspective, it's very important to reconcile that.

Supporting humanistic, social justice issues in this way was how the liberal congregants at Community typically expressed their religiosity. One longtime member explained: “The way we speak out our religious belief is by what we do in our lives.” Another congregant described how her UU faith compelled her to defend public social services that help others: “When I see programs being cut, or people being denied basic healthcare or legal care, my Unitarianism tells me that's not right and we need to work to get that back.” Like many Unitarian Universalists, she believed that an activist government could effectively advance the humanitarian principles of her UU faith. One woman who recently joined the congregation said that religion was “the basis” from which her political priorities grew. “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” she said. “I think that's where most of my political views come from.” For politically-motivated religious liberals such as these, Community Church provided a valuable, organized forum for them to collectively express their most cherished ontological values and self-empowering,

humanistic faith.

Despite their generally widespread pessimism about the direction of society, most UU interviewees felt compelled to continue working in support of their various liberal causes on behalf of others. “Many of the people I talk to feel that we may be on the verge of making our own extinction on this planet,” one congregant said. “But that doesn't matter. We still have to work the best we can. . . . That no matter what, we have to be the best people. The best citizens. The best soul we can be.” Another woman described how she found great satisfaction in being connected to Community Church and the liberal activists there. “There's a real sense that by being part of this community, we can effect a very real, loving change in the world around us,” she explained. “All of the things that the church does collectively has a lot to do with trying to be that still small voice in a world of madness. That's one of the things that I really appreciate. That there's a church community that is willing to put itself out there.” In these ways, congregants turned to one another not only as a way to temporarily escape the “world of madness” in the larger society around them, but to find inspiration for returning to the world and continuing their personal struggles on behalf of various (seemingly hopeless) humanitarian causes.

As a religious subculture so highly-focused on the ultimate value of communal moral action, Unitarian Universalism has developed a distinctive sort of orthopraxis for participants. Although the socio-political practices and broad support for liberal causes that characterized almost all Community congregants were neither as formalized nor uniform as the Christian liturgical routines engaged in every Sunday morning by Christians such as those at St. Luke's parish, the humanistic endeavors of Unitarian

Universalists nonetheless provided the religious liberals there with a distinctive identity. Their action-oriented faith contributed to a unique, compelling cultural environment within the congregation that helped members define themselves apart from what they perceived to be the more conservative, self-indulgent values of mainstream American society.

Strengthening a Subcultural Identity

For humanistic congregants, the distinction between their liberal faith community and the wider environment became disturbingly clear following the 2004 re-election of President George W. Bush. Most UU congregants strongly opposed the Bush administration's public policies and many had donated a great deal of volunteer time and money to support the failed candidacy of Democratic Sen. John Kerry. On the Sunday following the November election, Community's sanctuary was packed with people who were noticeably filled with grief and despair. Some sat quietly, as if in a numb state of shock. Their decision to attend church in such large numbers that morning reminded me of how many Americans nationwide had sought out faith communities following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Joining together with others who understood and shared your grief apparently provided valuable comfort to those threatened by the apparent dangers of the world. The 2004 electoral defeat, some Community congregants later told me, was interpreted as a powerful indicator of how marginalized their deeply-held humanistic values had become in the nation. One of the church's lay leaders said that for weeks afterwards at Community he "would go to meeting after meeting and a number of people would be wringing their hands about the whole thing." Another congregant just shook his head slowly and told me: "I can't even imagine that our country was so sold on

George Bush. I can't understand it.” Similarly in dismay, Shannon Young lamented the apparent naïveté of Baby Boomer activists such as herself who had dreamt of creating a better, fairer, and more interdependent world. “We didn’t come of age and create a better society,” she said. “I don't think that the overall society changed as much as I thought it would be.”

Feeling so pessimistic and estranged from the major religious and political institutions of the nation, UU congregants treasured Community Church as a sort of countercultural sanctuary where they could temporarily escape from what they perceived to be society’s threatening realities. Whether retreating from judgmental religious dogmatism, conservative moral prejudices and bigotries, and/or an alienating political environment, the liberal spiritual seekers at Community viewed their congregation as a sacred asylum that stood uniquely apart from the profane, outer world. In celebrating their radically-inclusive ideals together and seeing these values expressed in an organized, local setting, congregants frequently experienced a sense of deep comfort they often described using spiritual language. One agnostic churchgoer, for example, had come to describe herself as a “born-again Unitarian” because of her passionate devotion to her UU identity. In explaining why she was so committed to attending UU church services, she said:

It's a need that I have. It's a spiritual need. It's a need to go somewhere, especially on Sunday morning, and not worry about what Bush is doing in the White House. You just kind of forget everything that's going on and you're able to center in. When you've got a good speaker and something to think about. It's a place to go on Sunday morning and get spiritually fed.

Existing in tension with so much of mainstream society’s religious and political cultures allowed Community’s liberal community to take on distinctly spiritual dimensions for its

discouraged humanistic congregants.

“It's really nice to sit there just for ten minutes and hold hands and breathe in peace and breathe out love—and feel like there's other people who care about doing that,” said 39-year old Laurel Alexander regarding why she recently joined Community—becoming a member of a religious congregation for the first time in her life. For her, gathering with other liberal social idealists each Sunday proved to be a valuable experience that affirmed her priorities as a self-described political liberal and lifelong Democrat. Attending Community's services filled her with a sense of inner peace and faith in life. Alexander explained:

I think that's what I needed the most. To feel like the whole world isn't about all the guys who want to screw you and make money—all about business or Halliburton or torturing. I wanted to feel like there was another truth—another side to life. That there was a group of people who cared. People in my community who cared about the world being better. It's not just survival of the fittest or the ones with the most money or the most power. That, and just having a quiet moment in my life. Church is extremely good for that.

Although she didn't believe in the existence of a supernatural deity, Alexander came to view her liberal values of compassion, tolerance, and social interdependency as having profound spiritual significance, and was thrilled to have her ideals supported by those at Community Church. She said:

I never thought of myself as religious because of the whole God aspect. But I've always wanted to do good deeds and be a good person. When I think about being religious, I think if I believe in a God—which I'm still not sure about—it would have to do a lot with love. So when I think about being religious, I think “how can I do a really loving thing? Or, how can I do something in a loving way? Or how can I contribute something loving or kind to others?”

Joining and regularly participating at Community Church provided Alexander with a structured opportunity to live out her values and be comforted by others who shared her humanistic, ontological priorities. Feeling affirmed by like-minded congregants on

Sunday mornings while collectively transcending the profane, larger reality beyond their local group was one of the most important sources of devotion for liberal seekers like Alexander. Their ritualized encounters each week created a seemingly-sacred environment that validated their shared socially-liberal ideals and the political activism that served as a de facto orthopraxis within the denomination.

Meeting the Social Needs of Liberal Religious Consumers

Because Community primarily attracted humanist-oriented seekers who were skeptical towards mainstream supernatural beliefs and traditional styles of religiosity, many of the activities conducted during the week at the UU congregation were devoid of any overtly spiritual or “religious” elements. Similar to some other mainline churches that have minimized distinctly religious culture in order to accommodate more modernist and skeptical liberal participants, Community functioned in some ways like a public “community center” where secular social interactions regularly took place. For example, the church sponsored a range of non-religious activities during the week such as cards-and game-playing, dancing and painting classes, several book clubs, a stitching group, occasional movie nights, and even a weekly potluck dinner that was open to anyone. Community also supported social gatherings for niche demographic populations, including young adults, men, women, senior citizens, parents, and GLBT persons. In all of these programs, the emphasis was on providing social and recreational opportunities for participants, rather than fostering any distinctly “religious” identities.

Rev. Corrigan and the church’s lay leaders strongly supported these congregational efforts to promote closer interpersonal relationships and tighter social support networks among congregants. “I don’t understand how people make it through

some of the parts of their lives without a church,” said Corrigan. Participating in a supportive community like Community, she explained, helped people “through tough patches in their lives.” Noting the valuable social functions the church has performed in the lives of the religious liberals there, she explained: “They have people around them, and potlucks to come to, and have care committees to bring things and to help them set their affairs in order. All those kinds of things. I wonder how people do it who don't have a church.” Practicing such social interdependencies within this local community might be interpreted as an expression of congregants’ devotion to the humanistic, UU principles they hoped to apply in the larger society. More importantly, though, the social bonds between congregants allowed them to rely on one another for emotional comfort and practical support during times of personal distress.

One of the ways that Community promoted the development of these interdependent relationships was by encouraging the formation of small group networks called “Extended Families.” Each extended family was composed of seven to thirty church members who wanted to regularly get together with others in the congregation for dinners and other informal social activities. Shannon Young and her daughter were among those participating in the program. When they first started attending Community over ten years ago, they soon joined one of the church’s extended families and began meeting other congregants in a more intimate social setting. Young explained why she was so appreciative of that small group experience:

I'm not really all that close to my biological family. We didn't really share values. They're all Bush supporters and conservatives. . . I like the extended family here. I think that the friendships [my daughter] has with the teenagers in our extended family—she’s much more like “cousins” with them than she is with her real cousins.

Developing such ongoing relationships with other liberal-minded people at the UU congregation was deeply-satisfying to Young, allowing her to feel affirmed, supported, and “safe” within the church’s close social network. This feeling of community, she said, was a critically-important reason for her own devotion to the church:

I can't think of any other part of my life where I've had that feeling of community. By that I mean, supportive people. All ages. Some knowing me very well. Some knowing me not at all. But this sense of not having to prove yourself. Feeling supported—that people sort of give you the benefit of the doubt. And it's a very nice feeling. . . I don't know if I would have stuck with it or gotten so involved if I hadn't had that feeling of community there.

For Young, being accepted and supported by other open-minded liberals through Community’s nonreligious, social gatherings was extremely valuable.

The opportunity to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships with other embattled social and political liberals was frequently mentioned by congregants as an important reason why they participated in the UU congregation. Barney Thompson, for example, joined the church four years ago soon after retiring and moving to the area. Although he and his wife loved their new home and chosen city, they had a tough time meeting new friends in the area. It was for this reason that Thompson sought out the local UU community. He said:

Over the years, one of the things I have observed—because I've moved a lot—is that people who move and tend to get involved in churches, tend to develop a social life. I've always observed that new people come into an area and they tend to hook up with the church. And that tends to give them an immediate social life. I moved here and we have no social contacts. . . I finally decided I really should try to find a group of people that I would have a common philosophical base with. I attended the Unitarian church for about a year. Frankly, I like the sermons and the minister. . . I did decide that if I was going to make social contacts, this would be a group of people that I would share values with.

As an atheist, Thompson said he would never have felt comfortable or welcomed at more traditional Christian communities. The UU congregation, though, provided him the

opportunity to develop the friendships and supportive social ties that he desired and viewed as commonly-available to more mainstream churchgoers.

Another member who joined the church because of the congregation's liberal social environment was 33-year-old Heather Atkins. Although she was raised by her parents as a Unitarian Universalist and had attended Community with them for several years, she only recently decided to become an official member. She usually enjoyed the sermons given by Rev. Corrigan and broadly shared the congregation's liberal socio-political values, but had been reluctant to formally join because of the perceived time and financial obligations that she associated with membership. Like other liberal seekers, Atkins was highly-averse to committing herself to any formal religious organization—even one she supported ideologically and regularly attended with her family. As she grew older and more established in her married life and career as a medical doctor, though, she became increasingly attracted to the church's inclusive, open-minded community. Ultimately, she decided to officially join the organization. "After I got out of [medical] residency," she said, "I started realizing that I enjoyed the actual people who went to the church and their values—their values being more accepting, and searching for truth. Expanding your knowledge, rather than staying up on the latest styles or making sure you're always going to the hip places. Some of my associates in medical school were a little bit superficial and phony. So it made me feel positive about the real accepting environment at this church." While the UUA—like other liberal denominations—has a tough time maintaining long-term commitments from those raised in the organization (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995; Roof & Johnson, 1993), Atkins was among a minority of those who maintained the liberal faith identity of their childhood. She

ultimately made an independent decision as an adult to associate with the UU church, having realized over time how much she shared in common with other UU congregants, including her parents. As an agnostic humanist, Atkins appeared to “come home” to a social community that her religious background had long prepared her to accept.

In addition to the social and recreational opportunities offered to adult congregants, Community fostered a sense of interpersonal community by supporting parents in the education of their children. One of the officially-stated missions of the congregation was to offer religious education (RE) programs for all ages, and this community-building function was widely appreciated by the humanistic parents who joined the UU church. “I’m convinced that both of my girls are the good people that they are because of their Unitarian upbringing,” said Susan Nelson about the role she credits to UU churches in inculcating a compassionate, liberal morality in her daughters. Laurel Alexander was also attracted to this service of Community Church, enrolling her two daughters in the congregation’s Sunday morning RE classes. In reflecting on the ideal, interdependent society she envisioned and that served as the basis for her faith, she told me: “It’s not going to happen in my lifetime. But I try to teach my kids, and maybe they’ll teach their kids, and they’ll teach their kids. Then hopefully it will eventually get there.” Although Alexander perceived her social values and ontological priorities as only dimly visible in the world today, Community’s investment in childhood education supported parents like her who held to an idealistic faith in the future.

Shannon Young also was comforted by the UU church’s RE programs, appreciating the perceived “protection” they provided her daughter against the traditionally-religious and conservative views of other children she had begun

encountering in school. “I joined the church here when my daughter was about five years old,” Young said. “[My daughter] had started to be confronted with a lot of fundamentalist Christianity in kindergarten and stuff. She would come home and say ‘is it true that God can strike you dead at any moment if you're bad?’ I said, ‘no, that's not true.’ I thought maybe it would be good for her to have some sort of antidote to that.” The countercultural liberal community at Community, Young believed, would offer needed help in passing on liberal values and a critically-minded, humanistic outlook to her progeny.

The Challenges of a Liberal Community

Despite the community ties and general sense of camaraderie among the variously-embattled liberal congregants at Community Church, I found a subtle conflict between them over how to interpret the ultimate meaning of Unitarian Universalism as a liberal faith. While almost all shared a commitment to promoting and practicing their denomination’s humanistic principles as a collective orthopraxis, congregants disagreed as to whether these liberal religious values were best expressed through the broad inclusivity of the local church or through the leftist socio-political activities generally supported by members. Activist-oriented congregants tended to associate Unitarian Universalism primarily with the liberal partisanship that dominated the congregation. Others, however, were uneasy with any divisive political or religious rhetoric at church that might alienate visitors or diminish Community’s commitment to welcoming all spiritual seekers into fellowship.

Heather Atkins, for example, told me that she was occasionally uncomfortable “when Rachel assumes that everybody in the audience is [politically] liberal” and that

“we’re all on the same page.” Her discomfort was shared by another congregant who stated: “I never assume that somebody is politically liberal just because you're a religious liberal.” This apparent tension between political and religious liberalism was a challenge for some of those attending Community Church. Atkins said that the few times a year when Corrigan preached on specifically-liberal political issues or was critical of conservative Republican public policies, she was worried, thinking to herself: “What if there are some people visiting who don't feel that way? I wholeheartedly agree with what she's saying, but I think we need to attract people who are in the middle. . . I would like to feel that we did have something to offer conservatives.” Atkins’ concerns about the partisanship and anti-conservative prejudices of those at Community highlighted the subtle, exclusionary dynamics of the humanist-dominated congregation, challenging its stated liberal intention of welcoming all spiritual seekers. “I think [the church] should be a little more respectful,” Atkins concluded. “Sometimes I think there's that 'us' and 'them.' [mentality].”

Other churchgoers, however, were much less sympathetic towards these concerns, and actually dismissed those in the congregation who didn’t support political liberalism. “People who are conservative make me uncomfortable,” Shannon Young confessed outright. She knew that some congregants within the congregation actually were registered Republicans and/or held conservative political views, but reasoned: “There aren't very many of them so you tend to overlook them.” Likewise, church President Susan Nelson acknowledged:

If, with all of this spiritual openness and inclusiveness, somehow or other the Unitarian Church took a turn to the political right—I think that I would have a very difficult time with that. So I think that it's naïve to say “oh well, we're all just really good people and that's what makes us so cool.” I think that if we

weren't all so politically liberal, that it would be less comfortable, even though we might still be spiritually open.

Nelson even pondered aloud a question that inevitably confronts those in the UUA today:

“Can you be a Unitarian and not a liberal? I think that's an issue.”

Although Corrigan was generally left-of-center in her political ideology and occasionally spoke out publicly in support of particular social justice issues in the local community and nation, she was viewed by most congregants as an opponent of blatant partisanship in the congregation. “Rachel's often being pushed to have the church take a stand on something or another,” said Nelson. “And she works very hard against that. Much to some people's dissatisfaction. But, you know, she says, this must be a safe place. It must be a safe place spiritually.” Corrigan herself recognized that those at Community “probably think I'm too moderate.” After the American invasion of Iraq, for example, she opposed those in the congregation who wanted the church to take an official, public stand against the war. Barney Thompson, a leader on the church's Social Action Committee, encountered many congregants who were very disappointed and frustrated by Corrigan's reluctance to speak out on what they considered to be such an important socio-political issue. “They wish they had a minister who would be stronger and provide more leadership to their belief system,” he said. Thompson, however, rejected such critiques from fellow church members, saying that he valued Unitarian Universalism and the liberal religious environment within UU congregations primarily because congregants were not obliged to conform to others or submit to the will of a single source of authority. He said:

If we go back to one of the things that attracted me to the [UU] church, it's that the church is a democracy. So as a result, you don't want the leadership to be directing you and how you should vote. If you want that, you can go to the

Catholic church or the Baptist church or some other church that will give you that formal structure. So I get a little frustrated with my colleagues on the committee because they want [Corrigan] to take that leadership. But I think that's the strength of our church. It's the fact that we don't expect the minister to do the leading. We're the ones who should take the leadership.

Rather than explicitly directing members on how to act, Thompson would prefer that the church simply provide the space and resources for individuals to organize their own activities, including those related to liberal socio-political causes. "I think the church should serve as a liberal think tank for the community," he explained, suggesting that Community ought to restrict itself just to teaching and broadly affirming the seven UU principles. Individual members and church groups, he believed, would then be inspired to engage in their own diverse expressions of those liberal values without any hierarchical directives limiting their creativity. In supporting this apparent accommodation between religious and political liberalism, Thompson found even more reason to support the UU congregation and the officially-nonpartisan atmosphere fostered there by Corrigan.

Not only did Corrigan oppose those local congregants who sought to officially-define Community Church according to politically-liberal ideologies and position statements, but she also worked against those religious liberals who interpreted Unitarian Universalism's creedless style of religiosity as an invitation to moral licentiousness. Speaking of the larger denomination, she told me: "Sometimes there's this. . .hyper-progressive individualism that says everyone really ought to be able to do just what they want. And my values are much more communal than that." As an example, she mentioned an ongoing dialogue taking place within the national UUA regarding the morality of marriages composed of more than two people, which advocates call

“polyamory.” She told me:

The proponents really are an aggressive bunch. A whole lot of people are saying “why not?” But I say, “wait a minute.” First of all, I don't think that's quite the way the human being has evolved. I think we ought to stop and think about this. Look around at the people who are promoting this agenda, and they don't look to me like happy, healthy people. Furthermore, I think promoting that “freedom” for those people to do as they wish would do huge damage.

Corrigan was likewise opposed to the legalization of marijuana, which many freedom-loving Unitarian Universalists around the country apparently supported. On issues such as these which tested the bounds of liberal tolerance for individual liberty within the UU denomination, she often found herself championing the seemingly-“conservative” social position. “A fair amount of times I feel like I'm on the outs with the overall progressive mindset,” she observed. “It's too individualistic.”

Although I never observed any controversial debates at Community over questions of individual freedom, congregants did sometimes reveal the sort of extreme individualism that Corrigan suggested was often a part of the denominational culture. When Marsha Avery described her reasons for participating in the UU church, for example, she revealed a self-centered focus that appeared to dismiss the needs of others in her congregation. “I love lay leading,” she told me in a distinctive-English accent, before then describing her longtime involvement in a variety of Community’s lay leadership roles. “All my life—ever since I moved to the States—people have always said ‘I just love to hear you talk.’ And, they still say it. So I enjoy it very much. I suppose it's a form of service. But also if I like doing something, I like to do it right. And I would prefer to be in charge.” Her desire to be “in charge” was of primary importance to Avery. As a member of the congregation’s influential Worship Committee—responsible for planning Sunday services each week—Avery cherished her connection to what she

called one of the “power centers of the church.” However, when some congregants recently suggested that she step down and allow others to share in the opportunity to plan services, she refused. In explaining her apparent disregard for others in her church, Avery basically said that her own needs took priority. She loved her current leadership role too much to share it, saying of this volunteer position: “I am sufficiently egotistical that I get a kick out of it.” Despite her prominent and longtime leadership in the church, she seemed to be disinterested in the concerns and expectations of other congregants, telling me:

There are people like me who are tremendously involved. . . Then there are people who come [to Community] and I'm sure they get something out of it. I hope they do. But we haven't worked out a way to involve them more. In a church this size, everybody can't be active.

While such self-centered views are undoubtedly a corrosive part of almost every religious community, a liberal church like Community didn't seem to have the cultural tools available in stricter faith traditions for reigning in such blatant individualism.

The widespread individualistic orientation among those attending the UU church was most noticeable in the generally-agnostic sentiments of participants. Laurel Alexander reflected this common ontological worldview within the congregation, describing herself as an “extremely independent” person who had no need for prayer or reliance on God. “If I think I need the strength to do something, I will find it here,” she said while pointing to herself, “and not up there.” Similarly, Shannon Young quickly discovered after joining the church that such ontological self-sufficiency was typical among the liberal religious consumers who attended Community, with most being “pretty agnostic” just like her. When she asked others at the church what they believed, they often responded by reaffirming their commitment to the seven principles of the UUA

rather than to any theological concepts or spiritual ideas. “That's not really religion,” Young used to silently think to herself. “That's some secular humanism.”

Indeed, the broadly-inclusive atmosphere at Community Church seemed to attract the most highly-skeptical and nonconformist consumers in the liberal religious marketplace. Among the congregants I interviewed, the most common reason they valued the congregation was because of the various social benefits, leadership opportunities, and political organizing activities they enjoyed there and/or because of the sheltering comfort the UU church provided against the perceived socio-political threats of the larger society. Because Unitarian Universalists build their collective religious identity around an orthopraxis of humanistic activities rather than defining beliefs, the decidedly agnostic congregants and secular humanists at Community Church were often able to avoid theological dialogue altogether. Their congregational loyalty, therefore, relied primarily on the strength of their interpersonal relationships and perceived social solidarity with like-minded political liberals in the church. The broadly-secular reasons motivating many congregants to join and remain active in the church created inherent difficulties for the congregation in sustaining an identifiably “religious” culture.

II. Progressive Mysticism: Promoting Interfaith Spiritual Exploration

Rev. Corrigan seemed to understand the tenuous communal links that held much of her congregation of independent-minded, skeptical congregants together. She once described her fellow Unitarian Universalists as “an interesting bunch. . .best known for being rational, feet firmly planted on the ground, work-for-a-better world, don't believe anything you can't see types” (sermon, 12/4/05). Having been brought up attending a UU congregation run by skeptical humanists and largely devoid of distinctly-religious

elements, Corrigan was quite familiar with both the sort of people traditionally-attracted to Unitarian Universalism and the fragile, dispassionate environments that usually result from highly-secularized, liberal cultures (Stark & Finke, 2000).

As a young adult, though, she began to question the dogmatic-like confidence of the UU nonbelievers around her, and ultimately rejected their atheistic orthodoxy in favor of a more open-minded, liberal approach to matters of faith. She began to take spirituality seriously, motivated by her own ineffable, moving encounters of the sacred in life. Struck by these personal moments of wonder and reverential awe at what she called the “mysteries” of existence, Corrigan intuited a sense that reality consisted of more than what could be proven empirically. In a sermon at Community, she shared:

My faith has been developed on threads of experience almost too tenuous to remember, much less name. And yet I am still a believer. Though I was an atheist as an adolescent and an agnostic for many years, I have come to think of myself as a “winter believer” . . . Unlike confirmed atheists or philosophical agnostics, wintery types are committed religious people who remain tentative about any absolutes, but who behave “as if” there is a “yes” on the horizon. (sermon, 8/31/08)

Such a cautious statement of faith in the ultimate value of the spiritual search may seem unimpressive compared to the confident affirmations of belief from more traditionally-devout, dogmatic religious consumers. Among traditional Unitarian Universalists, though, Corrigan’s suggestion that the universe has any intrinsic, sacred value at all beyond the empirical realm was bold. By consistently pointing her congregants at Community towards something sacred and ultimately-meaningful “on the horizon” of human understanding, Corrigan has been able to expand the congregation’s appeal to more diverse segments of the liberal religious marketplace.

“Spirituality,” she explained to me, “is simply our living a deep part of our lives,

aware of and honoring all the things that words cannot explain.” For her, any moment in life when people encountered an ineffable, moving experience that was distinct from profane, everyday existence could be defined as “spiritual.” These often unexpected and/or inexplicable experiences of wonder, awe, and reverence were all associated with what she called “Mystery.” “In between the world of fact and the world of the absurd is . . . the world of Mystery,” she regularly taught from Community’s pulpit.. “This is the area of human endeavor that cannot be proven or disproven by science, that is part of the lived experience of some people but not of all people, and the world of all that we can never know. It’s the world of meaning, of hope, of speculation, and it’s the biggest realm of all.”

On Sunday mornings, Corrigan frequently encouraged congregants to look within themselves and recognize various mysterious experiences of the sacred they had personally encountered—perhaps without recognizing them. She encouraged her listeners to think beyond both traditionally-religious and skeptical perspectives that place limits on spirituality, saying:

For some people this deep place includes God, grace, our beloved departed, “energy,” and other things that science cannot explain and that words cannot define. For others, whose beliefs stick closer to the material reality of our lives, spirituality is the honoring of deep values—values like truth telling, service, honoring nature, and living loving lives. . . The humanist who sees the spark of good in every human being, even after hearing the evening news, is being spiritual. So is the meditator who has learned to drop into a mental space where he feels in touch with the divine forces of the universe. So are all of us who resonate with the forces of healing and renewal which we call by many names. (sermon, 4/13/08)

Corrigan generally shared Tim Barnesworth’s broad recognition that spiritual seekers could encounter meaningful experiences of the sacred in many different settings—both religious and nonreligious. “I make a distinction between religious and spiritual,” she

told me. “Religious being connected to religious institutions, which of course is something I do value. But spirituality is something more internal to an individual person.” In hearing Corrigan’s radically-ecumenical message that spirituality was ultimately available to everyone and accessible in a variety of ways, even skeptics at Community Church told me that they had come to recognize mystical sensations in life and felt included in the congregation’s collective spiritual search for sacred intuitions of ultimate meaning throughout the world.

In repeating this message regarding the importance of sacred awareness among Unitarian Universalists, Corrigan found inspiration through a variety of her own spiritual practices. During various sermons and personal interviews, she mentioned the importance of meditation, walking contemplatively in natural settings, and the unexpected joys and insights about life developed through interpersonal relationships. Corrigan even attended a few of the Contemplative Prayer services at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, feeling comfortable enough with her broad-minded approach to spirituality to participate in other religious settings in the local community. She also went away several times a year to “spiritual retreats” where she worked with other seekers to specifically develop a more focused awareness of the sacred aspects of existence. She described those gatherings as a “time just to sit, or to sit at the feet of somebody who's been at it longer than I have. To be with others who are working some of these things out.” Every six weeks, she also met with someone she described as a “spiritual counselor” in order to talk about her sacred intuitions and explore meaningful styles of language for describing those experiences.

Like Barnesworth at St. Luke’s, Corrigan’s introspective spiritual focus and

ability to recognize the sacred in multiple settings led her to believe that all of reality is mystically intertwined in a singular unity. “I think we are all connected,” she told me. “Not only to each other, but to the whole cosmos. We can enhance those connections or we can keep breaking them. And we can be aware of them or not. I choose to keep enhancing them and staying aware of them.” Her monistic worldview and personal spiritual awareness not only provided Corrigan with a sense of comfort and confidence in life’s ultimate value, but profoundly shaped her approach to ministry at Community Church. In a variety of ways, she gently encouraged her congregants to explore and adopt their own meaningful, “spiritual” styles of religious devotion as Unitarian Universalists.

Reclaiming Spirituality and a Transcendental Heritage

“Some people hear the word ‘spiritual’ and cringe,” Corrigan acknowledged during a sermon to her congregation. Subtly addressing the many humanists seated in the pews, she said:

To them this word means pie-in-the-sky, silly, anti-scientific, impractical, or even manipulative. The word was ruined for them at some time in their lives, probably by someone who tried to force their own great vision of God or truth on them in an unkind way. If you are one of those people, I congratulate you for being here this morning, and I challenge you to the hard work of thinking about the word “spirituality” in a new way. (sermon, 4/13/08)

Encouraging her listeners to “think about spirituality” and remain open to the sacred and mysterious experiences in the world was a recurring theme in Corrigan’s Sunday sermons. During a four year period, almost two thirds of all her messages to Community’s congregants dealt with topics related to spirituality, overviews of specific religious traditions around the world, and how universal religious tools (meditation, prayer, etc.) could be useful for seekers today.

In addition to using sermons to direct congregants towards spiritual interests, Corrigan worked with the church's Worship Committee to incorporate ritualized practices into Sunday mornings so as to evoke personal, sacred sensations within congregants. These included traditional mainline Protestant techniques such as singing hymns (including the fixed Doxology), reciting a collective affirmation, spending time in quiet meditation/prayer, greeting fellow congregants (similar to the liturgical "Peace"), and occasionally holding hands or engaging in other closing rituals. The congregation also installed a two-foot-wide, metal "prayer wheel" with many small candles variously arranged around the spokes near the front of the church sanctuary each Sunday. Congregants facing personal difficulties and worries were invited to come forward, light a flame on the wheel, and surrender their cares to what Corrigan called "the forces of help and healing in the universe that we call by many names." Occasionally, she expanded the time during services when congregants sat in silent meditation, providing them with several minutes to enter a contemplative state of mind.

Collectively, these liturgical elements in Community's services provided a developing cultural framework for spiritual seekers to experience a sense of mystery and mysticism in their gatherings, which most participants told me they had learned to value. Susan Nelson, for example, said that she was "confident that Rachel knows what she's doing. She's now completely convinced—which she was not in her early ministry—that evoking the spiritual in these worship services is what it's all about. It's not about a good message or everyone having a good time. Or feeling good. It's more involved than that. And I think she structures the worship services to do that."

Other humanist congregants were also pleasantly surprised by the distinctly-

spiritual atmosphere fostered by Corrigan at Community Church. Former Episcopalian Shannon Young told me:

The Episcopal Church in which I was raised, of course, had a lot more ritual. So I think that there's something in my mind very valuable about that. And there's something valuable about going every week and having some of the same features of the service be present. You know, it's sort of grounding. It's like you coming back to some of the same words and some of the same rituals every week is good.

Just as the liberal congregants at St. Luke's commonly attributed their devotion to the sense of "grounding" they perceived during the fixed Anglican liturgy, Young felt a sense of the sacred through her participation in the semi-structured routines performed each week during Unitarian Universalist services. Further explaining why she appreciated Community's worship program, Young said:

There's a sort of peacefulness and aesthetic experience in church that I really like a lot. I think it's very calming and relaxing. And I think it sort of calms me down and focuses me on what's going on in my own life. And makes me more reflective and more aware of my emotions too.

Similarly, Laurel Alexander said that Community's services had "a little more singing and meditating" than at other UU churches she had visited in the past, which she found to be "actually quite nice." The congregation's predictable Sunday format reminded her "to slow down. . . It has nothing to do with God, per se. It's just connecting with humans and life and good things. That's probably the closest that the church can get there for me on a spiritual level. It's a good feeling." Although Alexander did not connect her sacred emotions to any concept of the divine, the fact that she was willing to utilize the term "spiritual" to describe those feelings evoked by her church experience was itself a seemingly major transition for the otherwise skeptical congregant.

Freda Starr, a 74-year-old agnostic and longtime Unitarian Universalist who recently joined the congregation, also enjoyed the more traditionally-mainline Protestant

format at Community, saying:

You can just expect what's going to happen and when. It lends itself to what I would call liturgy. Community Church stays more spiritual for me than previous Unitarian churches. At those other churches, they would let people get up to share joys and concerns and make announcements. But they can't do that at Community Church because it's too big. I thought I wasn't going to like that. But what I found is it keeps the service on a more spiritual level for me. To not have people getting up with happy joys and sad sorrows. At Community Church, the spirituality just sort of stays up there. So I've come around.

Raised as a Lutheran, Starr told me that many of the spiritually-evocative elements in Community's Sunday services seemed both familiar and surprisingly comforting to her.

In directing her congregants to think about, experience, and reclaim a personalized sense of the sacred in their lives, Corrigan suggested that they consider embracing an identity as "mystics." Describing the value of this distinctly-individualistic style of faith, she explained in a sermon:

A mystic is a person who, first and foremost, relies on their own inner experience to decide what is true and meaningful in their lives. For that reason, mystics are looked at with some suspicion in traditions that value priests, scripture, and tradition. Mystics often find themselves accused of heresy...that is to say, choosing their beliefs on their own inner authority rather than relying on external authorities. . . . It seems to me that mystical experience is right down the UU alley. You give religious and spiritual authority to individuals and ask each person to look at their own mind and heart and experience of life to choose how to express their own beliefs. You believe that the divine speaks uniquely into the hearts of individuals, and that those experiences...experiences of mystery and wonder...form one of the bases of your faith. (sermon, 12/4/05)

For Corrigan, mysticism was apparently the sensible, spiritual alternative to secular humanism for Unitarian Universalists, providing the denomination's strident individualists with a way to move beyond a mere rejection of mainstream religious culture to a point of being able to affirm their own personal experiences of a sacred Ultimate Reality. "Mystical experience," she taught, "is what, in the end, grounds all that we do in the spiritual part of our lives. And even you down-to-earth UU's have them."

In encouraging a private mysticism among congregants at Community Church, Corrigan drew upon American Transcendentalism as a cultural resource. Popularized by well-known 19th-century proponents such as Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalism played an important role in the development of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations long before 20th-century skeptical humanism came to dominate the organizations (Higgins, 2003).

Transcendentalism's uniquely-individualistic approach to spirituality was based on the idea that:

Human beings contained within themselves a mysterious internal principle that guided them toward religious truth—an intuitive capacity more profound and reliable than scriptures, ecclesiastical institutions, or tradition. This spiritual sixth sense pointed toward “transcendental” truths such as the universal brotherhood of all people, the ability of the human individual to commune directly with the divine, and the presence of the sacred in the manifestations of the natural world. (Wilson, 2008)

Reflecting the deeply mystical and monistic perspectives that were frequently evoked by transcendentalists while communing with nature or engaging in personal introspection, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1982 [1837]) poetically described his sense that during these spiritual times:

A certain wandering light comes to me which I instantly perceive to be the Cause of Causes. It transcends all proving. It is itself the ground of being; and I see that it is not one and I another, but this is the life of my life. That is one fact, then; that in certain moments I have known that I existed directly from God, and am, as it were, God's organ. And in my ultimate consciousness Am God.

Such moving experiences of being united with the Sacred served as a source of inspiration for Rachel Corrigan in her work at Community Church. Of all the various religious traditions she had studied through her ongoing professional development and personal spiritual exploration, she said that the American transcendentalists “probably

come closest to the people that I whole-heartedly buy into.”

Small Groups and the Sacred

In addition to nurturing a progressive, intuitive spirituality among Community’s liberal churchgoers through her sermons and the ritualized elements of Sunday morning services, Corrigan encouraged the development of congregational programs specifically designed to further spiritual reflection and dialogue among congregants. She recognized, though, that revealing one’s personal intuitions about life’s meaning to others could be a threatening, uncomfortable experience. “I think the spirituality piece is hard to talk about with others,” she acknowledged. Continuing, Corrigan told me:

Part of that is the nature of spirituality which is always something that isn't easy to put into words, even if you're just writing in your own journal it's not easy. We all come from such different places that sometimes you're not sure you're going to get a sympathetic or even an understanding audience. So it feels kind of risky. Sometimes you even get a negative reaction, even here where we think we're all very tolerant. There's some stuff we're not so tolerant of, or not everybody is. And it's not a part of your life you want to get bashed about, so you just don't talk about it.

One of the most identifiable ways that Corrigan and other lay leaders worked to create “safe spaces” for congregants to share the intimate details of their spiritual questions and personal discoveries was by promoting a program called “Covenant Groups.” Each year, over 150 church members signed up for the six month program, agreeing to meet together in small groups of up to eight people every two weeks in order to talk about specific topics related to spirituality and emotional growth.

Because many congregants I spoke with at Community had been or currently were involved in a covenant group, I decided to join the program in order to better understand the importance of these activities. Every two weeks, my group of four men and three women gathered in a room at the church (some other covenant groups met at

members' homes). Our meetings began with a facilitator lighting a chalice and the seven of us then taking turns reading printed, opening contemplative statements designed to center us on the spiritual importance of the evening's particular topic. The broad themes we discussed during our twelve sessions together encouraged us to reflect on the relationship between our life experiences and current ontological perspectives. Topics ranged from seemingly lighthearted issues such as "family stories," "holiday," and "vacation" to more personal, complex subjects such as "evil," "silence," "community," and "regret." At each meeting, we took turns sharing our thoughts in response to several printed questions we had received two weeks prior at our last session. As each of us listened to the others, we followed guidelines explained during our initial orientation session that there was to be no "counseling" or conversation in response to what people shared. Covenant groups were intended for participants to talk about their own backgrounds and personal interpretations of life's meaning without interruption from others. When one person spoke, everyone else remained respectfully silent and attentive to their words, "listening deeply" to the diverse beliefs and experiences of fellow congregants. It became clearer as the weeks progressed and my group spent more time together in the intimate encounters that we grew to trust and value one another more intensely. By the end of the six-month period, the Covenant Group format had not only guided us to think about and express what was ultimately valuable about our individual lives, but had led to the development of an emotionally-intense social atmosphere that in itself felt like a sacred experience.

Like other congregants I spoke with at Community who went through the Covenant program, Heather Atkins found the intimate encounters of her small group to

be both personally meaningful and important in the development of her Unitarian Universalist identity. She said:

It was nice to go to that every other week. To talk about things that were really important and really mattered about your spiritual development and values. . . . To figure out what's really important to you makes you feel better about yourself. It made me happier. Those questions that they ask are really hard. You had to really think about them. I didn't come up with any great revelations, but just the process of knowing it takes so much work to think about things like that and get the answers. It was helpful just going through the process, and made me feel more solid.

Such a response was exactly what Corrigan had hoped for from those participating in the covenant groups at Community. Saying that she felt “more solid” suggested that Atkins had found a source of important “grounding” in her life that was evoked through the semi-ritualized and sacred atmosphere created by her church’s small group. Corrigan seemed to understand that these intimate gatherings had the potential to strengthen the sense of commitment and meaningfulness that congregants attributed to their religious activities—gradually transforming their liberal community’s potentially-divisive heterogeneity into a common experience of sacred, mystical unity. She explained:

With some discipline, we can make this a place where deep sharing is possible. Our covenant groups do this most formally; they remind people to speak their own truths, not to try to “fix” or “change” or “set straight” others who share, and they leave some silence so that people can respond after considering what they want to say. With some discipline, we can get out of the habit of debate-team style conversation, where we try to prove our point definitively and solidly; these are points that can never be definitive and solid. With some discipline we can avoid—at all costs—the style of talk-show politics, which slimes persons instead of trying to understand them. With some discipline, we can make spaces for differences and approach diversity with curiosity. There are no scripts here, no predetermined endpoints, only an open invitation to explore the beliefs that matter to you, in your own time and way. (sermon, 10/14/07).

The covenant groups were thus designed to provide the generally-skeptical religious liberals who attended Community Church with a means for creating a disciplined,

ritualized focus not only upon the value of their own ontological “truths,” but upon the equally-valuable “truths” of those around them. These activities thus furthered Corrigan’s overall efforts at Community to build a more distinctly-religious identity and shared spiritual experience for church participants.

Broadening Multicultural Interests and Options

By officially-cultivating a *spiritually-oriented* congregational environment where Unitarian Universalists were unconditionally invited to engage in their own exploration of life’s sacred and experiential mysteries, Corrigan was able to gradually introduce skeptical liberal consumers to new and optional expressions of formal religious culture they might find useful for fostering enjoyable spiritual sensations. She and other lay leaders drew from a variety of religious traditions and spiritual practices in order to create a multicultural, interfaith atmosphere during the church’s weekly worship. Referring in a sermon to the diverse religious elements woven into that particular Sunday morning’s program, Corrigan said:

A worship service at this church will sometimes use theistic language, like prayer, words from other faith traditions, as in the first hymn we sang, which comes from Hebrew scripture, or the second, which comes from the African American faith tradition. We use a variety of meditation and prayer forms—today’s was more or less Buddhist, and often close with words popularized by neo-paganism. We regularly celebrate both Christian and Jewish holidays here, giving them our own UU twist. And we lift up the deep aspects of the secular culture we live in, its science, its poetry, its ethical thinkers, even its politics. If there’s something you don’t like, just leave it on your plate and stare out the window for a bit. It’s a smorgasbord. (sermon, 5/22/05)

Although Community’s services were structured in a similar way to other mainline Protestant gatherings, the actual content of the UU gatherings incorporated many styles of religious practice and expression other than Christianity.

Community’s distinctly-ecumenical services seemed to strengthen the devotion of

participants in two important ways. First, for the humanists and unorthodox congregants who felt rejected and/or in ongoing tension with conservative, Christian cultural forces in the larger society, the alternative religious approaches introduced during the UU gatherings provided them with an opportunity to adopt new expressions of religiosity that were relatively free from painful emotional baggage. Participating in Community's non-Christian religious elements on Sunday mornings allowed them to begin exploring a fresh cultural framework for fostering and expressing their personal experiences of spirituality. Susan Nelson, for example, had come to love the church's radical ecumenicalism, saying "we pick from this tradition. We pick from that tradition. We pick from this tradition. And we don't get hung up on 'okay, today I'm going to speak the correct spiritual words. And if you don't like them, get out'." She appreciated that unlike dogmatic religious institutions with a limited set of cultural tools, Community introduced her to many sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance, and allowed her to freely accept or reject any of these diverse techniques for encountering the sacred. Ironically, while Nelson strongly resisted practices and ideas imposed by exclusivist, orthodox religious cultures (especially Christianity), she enthusiastically participated in many of these same expressions of formal religiosity during Community's worship services because they were voluntary and blended with those of other faith traditions.

Secondly, and perhaps most significantly related to the ongoing growth and strength of the organization, the distinctly-multicultural, spiritually-oriented environment promoted by Corrigan attracted a number of mystical seekers to the congregation who had often been dissatisfied in other religious groups that were characterized by a single theological/philosophical perspective. Such narrowly-focused faith communities—

whether mainline Protestant churches centered around Christianity or UU “fellowships” emphasizing secular humanism—had usually been explored and rejected by these broad-minded, liberal consumers. In explaining why she chose Community Church over a more conventional but liberal Christian community, for example, one of these spiritual seekers told me:

I think the difference between [other liberal, mainline denominations] and this church is that we embrace all faiths. As liberal as those congregations may be, they're still very much centered in the Christian faith and the resurrected Christ. I like that the edges are blurred here. We can talk about something Buddhist and something Christian here in the same sentence. They're not mutually exclusive or antagonistic. I don't think that exists anywhere else.

Being viewed by such ecumenical religious consumers as the sole local provider of a rare, desirable cultural product allowed Community to tap into an underserved segment of the local religious marketplace and expand its appeal beyond the denomination's natural base of skeptics and humanists.

Just as the enthusiastic mystical seekers that Tim Barnesworth attracted to St. Luke's Church broadly served as a source of inspiration for the liberal Episcopalians there, the ecumenical spiritual seekers Corrigan drew in to Community generally proved to be a reinvigorating force for the humanists within her congregation. Not only did these ecumenicalists increase the size of the church overall—in terms of members, Sunday service attendance, and financial resources—but their broad spiritual interests also led to the development of multiple new educational and contemplative programs at the church.

Alongside the various secularized, weekday social gatherings long-sponsored by Community, the congregation also hosted a growing number of ongoing, small group activities around distinctly-religious themes and practices. These included, for example, Tibetan Buddhist meditations, Zen Buddhist meditations, general discussions of spiritual

practices such as prayer, book discussions on spiritual and religious topics, and ritualistic services for pagans and wiccans. Corrigan sometimes encouraged the development of these small groups directly, as when she facilitated a few meditative “retreats” on Saturday mornings at the church that taught UU participants a mixture of introspective techniques for heightening spiritual awareness. Such diverse congregational programs added to the distinctly-interfaith religious culture promoted during Sunday morning services, and provided congregants with additional opportunities to engage in more structured expressions of formal religiosity. One congregant, for example, conceded that: “I’m not very self-disciplined. I don’t meditate everyday. I love to meditate. But I can’t sit down and meditate all by myself. I have to meditate with a group of people.” Community’s contemplative and religious-themed activities offered such congregants the opportunity to be supported by others in developing a more sustainable and meaningful spiritual focus in their lives.

Certain About Uncertainty

Encouraging congregants to pursue diverse spiritual paths simultaneously within the same church would seem to pose an inherent risk to organizational identity and strength. In other mainline denominations and congregations, heterodoxy has often proven to be corrosive by undermining cultural foundations and the overall sense of unity among church participants (McKinney, 1998). However, at Community UU Church, heterodoxy itself became a sort of orthodoxy that defined church culture. Corrigan taught: “This is a church built on the idea that it’s not only OK, it’s downright interesting to be around people who define words differently, who experience life differently, who believe differently. We try to calm our natural human inclination to be afraid of what is

different and hope that our conversations here open doorways of perception and pathways of wisdom and hope” (sermon, 8/24/08). Ultimately, being exposed in a fixed setting to such cultural variety was promoted as a beneficial way to actively engage one’s own personal spiritual seeking. “We are not stuck with the beliefs that we have absorbed and inherited,” Corrigan preached. “We can think about them, we can expose ourselves to other beliefs and wonder about adopting them, we can adopt practices, like meditation or walking in nature, which might bring us to new experiences” (sermon, 6/6/04).

Congregants were encouraged to collectively affirm not only each individual’s right to experience their own sense of sacred meaning, but to consider that within such mysterious diversity might be found a unifying sacred element tying humanity to all of existence. According to Corrigan, “We understand that the many names for God, the many schemes of the afterlife, and the many ways of humanity’s worship to be partial truths and meandering paths towards what is deepest and highest and most meaningful to our lives” (sermon, 11/10/02). Being able to demonstrate both open-mindedness to diversity and mystical, unifying insight simultaneously was a key to what she called “spiritual maturity.” Corrigan taught:

In this church, we value the theological diversity that is a part of our life together, and that means that our definition of spiritual maturity has to include the ability to be strong in one’s own beliefs without denigrating others. . .Maturity, in our context, is the ability to live with, value, even enjoy the diversity we have here, while holding comfortably on to your own vision of truth. Eventually, this edges into the ability to imagine that the universe of truth is large enough to hold even contrasting and competing visions, as well as paradox and ambiguity. (sermon, 4/13/08)

The radical inclusivity that historically defined Unitarian and Universalist congregations—rooted in Christian notions of compassion—was no longer viewed by Corrigan and many of the interfaith congregants at Community as merely an appropriate

expression of religiosity, but more fundamentally, as the very source of their spiritual inspiration and devotion. To have faith that reality's diverse components are all somehow intertwined and only together provide a glimpse of some Ultimate "universe of truth" reflected Corrigan's personal sense that all of reality is somehow mystically-interconnected.

The Push To Accept Greater Diversity

Despite this idealized goal, learning to appreciate and respect one another's diversity proved to be a challenging, ongoing process for some of those at Community. A few congregants, for example, were critical or condescending towards those in the congregation who participated in the Pagan/Wiccan group. One person even told me that she was mildly "offended" by their activities, saying: "They're not the kind of pagans I'm interested in. . . they're European pagans. Their pagan traditions are coming out of the Druids and out of Europeans and stuff." Living in a rural, western state, this critical congregant would have preferred a pagan group that took account of the area's many indigenous styles of native American spirituality and nature worship, and was insulted that such local cultures were apparently being ignored. Even Corrigan herself conceded to me that she sometimes had a tough time understanding the neo-pagans in her congregation:

They're trying to invent a new religion. That's always awkward. So they do these rituals, and it takes a long, long time to figure out how to do that, and to do it so that it has the sort of grace and power of the old rituals. I honor them for doing that because the old rituals aren't working for them anymore. . . They did a winter solstice thing here about three years ago, and we did it together. They gave me a part in it, which I was glad to do. But I just cringed through most of the service because it was like a teenage or elementary school Christmas pageant. They were just play acting. To me, it didn't have any power at all. It was pretty silly. Father Winter, and all that.

Although Corrigan occasionally had a difficult time personally appreciating the varied religious activities of her congregants, she nonetheless made an effort to include all cultural approaches in the life of the church. Pagan songs and rituals, for example, were gradually incorporated into Sunday morning services, allowing all Unitarian Universalists to become more familiar with and appreciative of these developing, alternative spiritual expressions.

The faith tradition that usually faced the greatest difficulty being accepted and utilized by most people at Community, though, was Christianity. Because of the painful encounters many Unitarian Universalists remembered having had with over-zealous Christians and/or exclusionary, former churches, any overt expression of Christian belief or symbols often resulted in a negative response from some members of the congregation. A few church members, for example, complained about the display of the Universalist cross on the front mural in the sanctuary and as part of Community's printed stationary logo. For them, the cross triggered oppressive memories which seemed to invade and disrupt the peaceful sanctuary they had found at the UU church. Acknowledging and challenging such anti-Christian sentiments among many congregants at Community, Corrigan observed:

We keep open minds and hearts to the wisdom of all the world's traditions. That's an important part of who we are. We are at our open-minded, openhearted best when we are studying Hinduism and Buddhism and paganism and Shintoism and even Judaism. And we are so often at our close-minded, angry worst when we are thinking about Christianity. (sermon, 3/9/08)

Continuing, she explained:

It happens because most of us were raised in the Christian faith and we left it, sometimes feeling a little duped. It happens because some of our Christian neighbors let their enthusiasm for their faith shade over into a denigration of our faith. It happens because our children's friends tell them that they will go to hell

when they die. Sometimes even their grandparents tell them that. Just as it is hard to appreciate gourmet food if it is being stuffed down your throat, so it is hard to appreciate another religious philosophy when it feels so often like it is being forced on you.

Over the course of several years, though, Corrigan increasingly encouraged congregants at Community to tolerate and consider exploring Christianity, saying “keep your heart open to the spiritual wisdom of this very, very old tradition.” Community’s radical interfaith culture, she taught, inherently implied that spiritual truth and value could be found in all religious traditions—even Christian ones.

For Freda Starr, hearing this conciliatory message only reconfirmed her devotion to Unitarian Universalism. She had already learned to cherish the idea that wisdom existed in all religions, and this had allowed her to even look favorably upon the conservative, Evangelical-style of religiosity that her grown daughter had embraced. “It was just a revelation for me to look at all these different religions that all my life I had been told were bad, and to discover instead the good in them,” she said. “At this point, I’m there with fundamental Christianity. I see the good in it. I see what it does for people like my daughter and 14-year old granddaughter. I don’t have to worry about their theology. I’m just grateful that both my girls have something.” Corrigan’s oft-repeated message that spiritual meaning could be found within multiple faith traditions powerfully resonated with open-minded, liberal congregants like Starr.

Another person who appreciated Community’s message of multiculturalism and interfaith tolerance was Frank Wolverton. After spending most of his life attending liberal Methodist churches, he recently left that denomination because of what he found to be an alienating style of conservative orthodoxy spreading throughout the organization. Although he continued to identify himself as a liberal Christian who believed in a

personal God, he was attracted to Community Church because of the familiar Protestant structure of its services and liberal, nondogmatic approach to spirituality. Not only did he appreciate the congregation's commitment to liberal social justice issues, but he was pleasantly surprised by Corrigan's willingness to occasionally include Christian themes and topics during Sunday morning worship. He explained:

I think I've always identified as a Christian. . . It's what felt comfortable. I felt that the Christian religion gave me a great deal of comfort. A liberal Christian religion. I think without it, I wouldn't be fed. What Rachel does in talking about it openly—it's a Unitarian church, my God!—to me, that makes all the difference. Without that, I don't think I could stay there.

In creating a space where liberal Christians like Wolverton could feel comfortable and have their spiritual needs met, the UU congregation demonstrated both its willingness and unique ability to serve an increasingly-wide range of consumers in the liberal religious marketplace.

III. Member Bios: Snapshots of the Newly-Devoted

Olivia Baldwin and Barbara Thorne exemplified the sort of liberal seekers being attracted to Community Church and contributing to the congregation's steadily-rising membership levels. Like many Unitarian Universalist converts, both congregants had been alienated from traditional Christian churches because of disagreements over theological dogmatism and conservative morality. They were therefore delighted to discover Community Church's humanistic, countercultural sanctuary where social diversity and heterodoxy were not only tolerated but encouraged. In addition to appreciating the comforting sense of social connection they experienced with other marginalized and marginal religious liberals within the UU setting, they were profoundly attracted to the multicultural, spiritually-focused style of religiosity promoted there by

Rev. Corrigan. Baldwin and Thorne were drawn to both social and ideological dimensions of the UU congregation, and thus found multiple sources of inspiration for their religious devotion.

Olivia's Story

For over a decade, Olivia Baldwin had stayed away from organized religion. “When you get burned,” she said, “you just want to go off and hide for a while.” She was still filled with anguish over her departure from the United Methodist Church. It was a choice, however, that she felt she had to make for both herself and her family.

Although she had been a lifelong Methodist and even the wife of a minister, she had noticed an increasingly bold movement towards fundamentalism within her denomination for several decades that she found threatening. Conservative evangelicals—organized as the “Good News” movement in the Methodist Church—promoted a much more exclusionary, dogmatic style of Methodism than Baldwin embraced and had known throughout her life. “It was the more fundamentalist wing that was 'back to basics,' and back to more traditional ideas and literal representations of Biblical themes,” she said. At the last congregation where her husband was in ministry, Baldwin remembered congregants being passionately at odds with one another over strict and liberal approaches to Christianity. She said:

We were in a church in El Paso. . . half the congregation were the Methodists that I grew up with and half the congregation was this other new brand that wanted to just move away from the Methodist church altogether. A minister and minister's family in that situation can't win. The church itself was divided. No matter which side you fell out on, you were in somebody's craw. . . Traditionally, the pillars of Methodism are faith, Bible, tradition, and reason. Well, reason made it a more thoughtful and liberal church. But the Good News movement, I thought, moved away from reason. They moved back into “what the Bible says goes” and no room for interpretation of scripture. Pluralism was a part of Methodism where I grew up. And as far as I knew, in the history of Methodism.

“Evangelical renewal movements” like Good News in the United Methodist Church have become increasingly-assertive in recent years as their members seek to promote more conservative, orthodox styles of Christianity within their respective denominations (McKinney & Finke, 2002). Such efforts, though, proved to be extremely alienating for a religious liberal like Baldwin, who felt a growing separation from the only religion she had ever known.

Ultimately, exhausted by the constant conflicts, she and her entire family left both the church and organized religion in frustration. “I didn't for a minute lose faith in God and the person of Christ,” she pointed out. “Not the resurrected Christ that died for our sins, but the person of Christ who led me to an understanding of how to live my life. . . I still had a very strong sense of spirituality, but I didn't feel there was an organized community [for us].”

In the next few years, she faced several significant life changes. First, Baldwin and her husband discovered that their two children were gay. As lifelong Democrats and social liberals, though, both parents was quick to support their offspring. “It was brutally easy for them to come out to us,” she joked. Now living in Houston, her entire family became involved in the local Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter, and even marched a few times together in the annual Gay Pride parade there. Through these activities, she gradually learned about liberal Methodist churches in the area that officially supported gay rights and were actively lobbying the denomination to end its traditional condemnation of homosexuality. Baldwin was hopeful about these efforts in her former religion, and began thinking casually about the possibility of “moving back into that spiritual circle.”

Instead, though, her life changed dramatically when her marriage of 23 years finally ended after a long process of dissolution. She was 48 years old. Her children were grown and living on their own, and she found herself generally alone in the world.

Attempting to move on from the pain of the divorce and the life she had known, Baldwin re-located to another state and opened a small business there. That transition to a more rural, slower-paced environment three years ago, she found, reconnected her to a sense of the spiritual in life:

When I came out here, my spirituality got centered in the Earth. The sky. The stars. The sheep and goats. And maybe history and tradition. I'm a weaver. I just kind of centered in things like that.

She began meditating on her own, and exploring her thoughts about spiritual matters by writing them regularly in a private journal. Baldwin also became involved in the local branch of an international women's empowerment group called Women Within, which she described as "something like Est" with "a very spiritual side to it."

In time, she began thinking seriously about finding a church home again. "I just missed the community more than anything," she said. "Not the doctrine. Just the community of people gathered looking for faith." Initially, she had no idea if the sort of liberal congregation she wanted even existed:

In my mind, the Methodists were about as liberal as the Protestants got. But when that became too conservative, I didn't really know where else to go. You know, Lutheran, Episcopalian, or Church of Christ are all more fundamental initially, and then seemed to get more fundamentalist as time went by. It seemed to me that organized religion had gotten and is still getting more fundamentalist as time goes by.

After searching the Internet for churches in the area that she might find acceptable, she came across the website for Community Unitarian Universalist Church. Baldwin was attracted to the congregation's advertised self-description as a "liberal religion" that was

socially-inclusive even to GLBT persons, and she therefore decided to visit the church one Sunday.

She was happily surprised by how much she enjoyed her first experience at Community, explaining:

Mind you, I've been a minister's wife so I was used to being coddled. We'd move into a community and we were instantly upstanding members of the group and known by everybody and treated very well by everybody. Just as a person sitting in the pews [at Community], I had a very similar experience to that. Just right from the get go. I came in and found a seat. There wasn't a hymnal, so somebody shared their hymnal and introduced themselves. It was just very friendly community right off the bat.

Baldwin decided to return the next week, and soon began to regularly attend. She also joined a series of introductory classes at the congregation called "UU 101" where she learned more about the denomination's history and began developing closer relationships with other congregants. "A lot of them have had bad experiences with other religions," she realized. "That's one thing I noticed right away. . . I thought I was the only one. A lot of people were raised in faiths that kind of dissed them in the long run. So there's a lot of people here who fell out of other places."

Baldwin also appreciated how socially-liberal congregants were, and their widespread support for charitable and political causes related to social justice. "I love that this is a political organization," she said. "We do have a voice, and it's a pretty certain one. . . It was a big draw to this community." She smiled and in a quieter tone seemed to confess to me: "I voted for Jesse Jackson. I am way on the liberal side."

After five months attending Community and growing increasingly comfortable there, Baldwin decided to become a member. In describing the reasons for her renewed devotion to organized religion after ten years of apostasy, she said:

Church really feeds my spirituality. To come in here on Sunday morning and see people having a common experience of faith. From singing to praying to hearing about other's personal problems. I have a real sense of being a part of a community. And a community that would watch out for me, as much as I would watch out for people in the community. That's something I didn't get out of the just sit around and talk to God or journal about the meaning of life. It's the real sense of community.

Feeling intimately connected to others each week who shared her broad-minded, socially-liberal values ultimately was a sacred experience for Baldwin. “You walk into a church with an expectation that you’re going to connect with people,” she explained. “I think that happens here. . . . By making the commitment to show up on Sunday mornings, I'm setting aside a predetermined time to attend to my spirituality.”

Barbara's Story

Another marginalized spiritual seeker who broadly represented the sort of religious liberal attracted to Community Church was 59-year-old Barbara Thorne. Similar to Olivia Baldwin, Thorne had spent many years outside organized religion while still maintaining an awareness of the sacred in the world through her experiences in nature and a variety of private spiritual practices. “I guess I've always felt that there's this sacredness to life,” she told me. “That ritual was good for the soul.”

Over a thirty-year period, she had explored many different methods and groups in an ongoing quest for spiritual enlightenment. In the 1970's, she participated in a women's spirituality group that introduced her to native American traditions related to nature-worship. A few times, Baldwin attended an “Indian Church” and used the hallucinogenic drug peyote as a way of promoting spiritual awareness. “I actually went to the teepee and spent the night and did the whole ceremony,” she fondly recalled. Such experiences were not only personally-valuable, but inspired her professional work as an

artist. Baldwin also read extensively, exposing herself to a wide range of religious traditions and ontological perspectives. Ultimately, she gravitated towards Buddhist teachings, explaining: “I do believe in the four principles of the Buddha. There is suffering. There are reasons for suffering. There are ways to overcome the suffering. And the 8-Fold Path. To me, that makes total sense.” Her affinity for this eastern faith tradition fueled an interest in meditation, although she admitted difficulty in maintaining a regular practice on her own.

Despite her lifelong interest in spiritual topics and experiences, Thorne had intentionally avoided Christian churches and mainstream religious groups because of what she perceived to be the divisive, judgmental tendencies of traditional believers. As a lesbian, she was especially sensitive to the anti-gay rhetoric and conservative morality linked to most forms of orthodox religiosity. Not only did she find such exclusivity personally hurtful, but also inconsistent with the fundamental teachings about compassion that she had found in her study of many of the world’s religions. She said:

I'm still hugely skeptical of almost every church that's out there. I'm working to be more open because I keep hearing every now and then a good thing about, like, the Methodist church. I guess I still sort of held the door open thinking that Presbyterianism was one of the better ones. But I still think they really don't practice what they say they believe in and what they want. So I still don't think they speak truth, and that they don't walk the talk.

In many ways, she had long ago concluded that the nation’s dominant churches “were hypocritical in their positions,” and had nothing valuable to offer someone like her.

Thorne had known about Unitarian Universalism for many years, and had even attended Community UU Church for the memorial services of a few friends. She recalled how much she enjoyed the ecumenical mural that served as the backdrop in the sanctuary there, saying: “I really liked the symbols of all the different religions of the world. I

thought that was very wonderful.” But despite this affinity, she never became involved with the church, concluding: “I didn't really feel the need for it, particularly.” Like many unaffiliated consumers in the liberal religious marketplace, Thorne was content to generally pursue her spiritual journey alone and was reluctant to formally commit herself to any particular organization (even one with which she found herself in agreement).

Four years ago, however, following the disorienting breakup of a long-term romantic relationship, she began to reconsider her need for a religious home. A family member suggested that she get involved at Community Church, and Thorne ultimately decided to take his advice. “I thought, I'm getting older and think I might like to have a community,” she said. “So I started to check it out. And the more I went, the more I really liked what I found there.” Sitting together each week with other liberal spiritual seekers at Community provided Thorne with the social and emotional support she needed during her difficult life transition. She remembered: “Church was just really inspirational. It would settle me. I would come back home feeling like I had a community there. I felt comfortable and safe.”

Being surrounded by hundreds of people who shared her socially-liberal values was also empowering. “I'm just sitting here with all these people who agree with me,” she would think to herself during services. “This is so wonderful!” Also, Community’s officially-welcoming stance towards gays and lesbians removed what Thorne had always found to be a major barrier to her participation in organized religion. At the UU church, she said, there was just “never an issue on that.” And she loved hearing Corrigan’s messages about spirituality and social interdependency, describing her sermons as

“fantastic” because they were “all about compassion and goodness and fairness and a sense of social responsibility.”

Although Thorne was inspired by the welcoming, multicultural style of UU worship services, she only occasionally was able to foster the sort of deep spiritual focus or awareness that she had developed through Buddhist meditation. Too often, she said, the Christian-structured congregational meetings allowed social distractions—such as restless children and babies—to disrupt the sanctuary and her experience of the sacred:

I really don't think children belong in a serious spiritual practice. I think the Quakers bring them in at the end for the last ten or so minutes. I think that's very appropriate and would be fine. But to be trying to listen to a sermon and having a hard time hearing because a child is crying in the distance—to me, it's a little bit of a problem.

As a new member at Community, Thorne struggled somewhat with the multicultural variety of Sunday services. Because her spiritual experiences were generally linked to non-western religious traditions and meditative practices, the unfamiliar Protestant congregational environment did not easily evoke a sense of the sacred for her. While Thorne appreciated that Corrigan was slowly expanding the amount of time congregants spent in silent meditation during services, this gradual change proved insufficient to fulfill all of her needs for a familiar religious culture that could evoke spiritual awareness.

Thorne eventually joined a small group of Buddhists near her home (located about 40 minutes away from church). They met regularly to meditate in silence together, thus allowing her to supplement her religious involvement at Community with what she called “a very serious practice.” This was not unlike other church members—who lived closer to the congregation—and met during the week in small groups to engage in particular spiritual practices. The UU congregation thus provided Thorne with a “real and good”

experience of social community and new interpersonal relationships while the Buddhists offered an impersonal, disciplined cultural environment for her to engage in spiritual introspection. “I find that the two groups mesh beautifully,” she happily concluded.

After attending Community for a year, Thorne became a member. She then spent the next few years becoming increasingly involved with the organization. In addition to regularly attending Sunday services, she occasionally joined classes and seminars during the week, including some led by Rev. Corrigan. Eventually, she decided to make a more formal investment of time and energy in Community Church, thinking “okay, I’m ready now. I’ve gotten myself a little bit together. A little bit healed from breaking up. I’m ready to explore what else this church has.”

Because of her lifelong priorities as a political liberal, she began attending meetings of the lay-led Social Justice Council (SJC). This congregational committee worked to develop and promote an extremely-wide range of charitable, social, and political activities both at Community and in the surrounding city with which church members could become involved. “I enjoy it very much,” she said. “It really fulfills me.”

She has, though, been disappointed in how few people at Community seemed willing to offer more than passive support for her committee’s activist agenda. As I also discovered at the UU congregation, few congregants were willing to invest themselves wholeheartedly in the denomination’s traditional, humanistic goals of transforming society. Thorne said: “When I took this position [on the SJC], I thought 600 people were just ready to be pointed towards good causes, and I could help. And then to find out that’s really not the truth.” Instead, she realized that most people at Community:

. . .are just content for the church to go along. Now they're supportive, and they're really glad you're doing everything. But they're not going to particularly step out. If we put out a table in the courtyard or petitions on the table in the social hall, everybody signs them. They're just like "give me a form letter, I'll sign." They want to do these things.

Letting go of her hope for widespread socio-political mobilization at Community was difficult for Thorne, but she worked hard to focus on the many positive aspects of the church she continued to appreciate. "It's not quite as blanket liberal as I had first thought, but it's okay," she said, reflecting the sentiments of other activist congregants who continually push Corrigan and the church towards more definitive political stands. Still, Thorne valued the congregation for what it did offer her in the way of an organized church experience. "It's enough," she told me. "It's real."

Chapter 4:

United Church of Christ Congregants and the Limits of Progressive Inclusivity

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

Since being founded in 1957, the United Church of Christ (UCC) has offered liberal religious seekers one of the most lenient styles of organized Christianity in the nation. Although the denomination traces its history back through at least six different Protestant traditions in America and Europe (Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 1990), Congregationalism has clearly played the most prominent role in the organization's ongoing liberal culture and approach to faith. Developed by the descendents of early Puritans in late 18th century New England, the so-called "Congregational Way" minimizes ecclesiastical authority and tends to grant broad autonomy to individual believers in determining personal matters of belief and practice. Ideological diversity usually flourishes within such loosely-regulated, congregational environments, as churchgoers are able to engage and work out their own accommodations between traditional and modern worldviews (Walker, 2005). Within Congregationalist churches, for example, early-19th century Unitarian Christians first found the freedom to express their increasingly unorthodox perspectives about Jesus and traditional doctrines, and leaders of the Social Gospel movements later found support for their world-centered, humanistic expressions of Christianity (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, 2008; Wuthnow, 1988.).

Today, the over 5,500 churches and 2.1 million members affiliated with the UCC continue to cherish the broad-minded style of faith rooted in their Congregationalist heritage, defining themselves according to an orthopraxis of tolerance towards the seemingly-inevitable social variety arising within their churches and existing throughout the larger society. "While some denominations establish their identity by inspecting the walls for breaches and requiring those persons inside to conform to essential standards,"

wrote UCC ministers Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (1990), “the United Church of Christ characteristically has held the gates open wide and cultivated diversity.”

In many ways, the liberal cultural dynamics of the UCC are similar to those of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Both groups have come to embrace the ideological heterogeneity that flourishes within their radically-inclusive congregations, and remain suspicious of traditional sources of religious authority—including literalist interpretations of the Bible or strict adherence to doctrinal creeds—which might impose an unwelcome conformity upon members. Although Unitarian Universalists have shed their distinctly-Christian identity in favor of more broadly-multicultural expressions of faith while UCC congregants today continue to nominally identify as Christians, both liberal religious communities foster high levels of theological variety because of their similarly-lenient member expectations and broad-minded, inclusive values.

The loosely-regulated culture of the UCC has also proven to be an organizational weakness. Just like other mainline Protestant groups that have struggled to maintain distinctive, compelling identities and the devotion of their congregants (Stark & Finke, 2000), the denomination has suffered from a steady, severe decrease in nationwide membership for most of its 50-year history (Linder, 2008; Hadaway & Marler, 2006).

In an effort to halt declining membership levels, denominational leaders launched a nationwide, multimillion dollar promotional campaign in 2003 designed to attract visitors and potential new participants to local UCC congregations. The marketing efforts—which utilized a variety of sophisticated print and broadcast advertising—sought to position the UCC as a unique religious option because of its atypical willingness to

accept all people into fellowship. By highlighting the denomination's radical inclusivity as the cornerstone of its identity, the outreach campaign was clearly designed to appeal to spiritual seekers in America who felt alienated from the nation's more conservative, traditional religious options (Guess, 2004). One popular television commercial produced for the campaign, for example, featured various racial and sexual minorities being forcibly evicted from the pews of what was presumably a conservative church with exclusionary membership standards. The ad closed with the message, "Jesus didn't turn people away, and neither do we. The United Church of Christ." A second tag line commonly featured in print materials—including brochures, newsletters, and websites—was: "Whoever you are. Wherever you are on life's journey. You are welcome here." Such strategic messages of unconditional acceptance highlighted the welcoming orthopraxis of UCC congregations and their congregants' intention to be broadminded, compassionate, and hospitable towards all who would join them in fellowship.

New Heights Church was one of the UCC congregations that fully supported these nationwide outreach efforts. Under the guidance of Pastor Genine Singer and growth-minded lay leaders, the faith community had developed a variety of print and online techniques for promoting their denominationally-distinctive brand of religious liberalism in the local community and effusively welcoming visitors to their church. Central to this outreach were the group's strategic efforts on Sunday mornings to identify and help newcomers quickly begin building positive social ties to other congregants in the faith community. This pursuit of church growth through the projection of warm inclusivity was apparent each time I visited the congregation over a four year period.

Just inside the front entrance at New Heights Church, a long, blue-walled corridor

contained posters produced by the national UCC promotional campaign along with a variety of brochures describing the community's commitment to an open-minded style of religiosity. The cover of one piece of literature prominently featured on a nearby table, for example, asked "Are you looking for a Progressive Church?" and within described New Heights' nondiscrimination policies towards historically-marginalized populations, including gays and lesbians.

Personalizing the congregation's welcome to newcomers, a friendly layperson stood each Sunday morning in the hallway near the entrance to the main sanctuary and greeted first time visitors. Guests were quickly identified in this way, asked to write down their contact information in a visitors' book, and given a name badge to wear. So labeled, visitors then entered the sanctuary and were typically met by a series of longtime members who would shake their hands, provide them an Order of Service pamphlet for that morning, help them find a seat in the pews, and often engage them in friendly conversation before the services began. Pastor Singer was usually included in this steady stream of well-wishers, allowing visitors to feel immediately recognized and included in the church's tight-knit social community. On the walls around the worship space, vertical cloth banners with the embroidered words "Love," "Sharing," and "Peace" seemed to emphasize the Christian values being displayed by the friendly and hospitable congregants. Distinctly-Christian symbols were also featured in the sanctuary, including a large wooden cross hung on a wall and a stained glass window with an image of Jesus featured as a gentle, white-skinned shepherd holding a staff and a lamb.

Each week, services began with worshipers opening hymnals and singing a traditional Protestant song accompanied by piano. Afterwards, Pastor Singer would

move to the area next to the first row of pews and casually welcome everyone to the morning's gathering. All attendees were then asked to write down their personal information on green attendance sheets included in the Order of Service and turn those in to nearby ushers.

When these had been collected from all the congregants, Pastor Singer invited visitors to stand and introduce themselves. As each newcomer would speak in turn and be recognized by the audience with applause, ushers would approach and provide the individuals with a wicker "gift" basket containing a small package of ground coffee and a mug with the name of the church on its side.

After the visitor introductions, Pastor Singer would ask congregants to turn to one another and offer a greeting. Worshipers then stood and shook hands with those nearby, while many moved throughout the sanctuary to embrace friends and welcome the new visitors who had been introduced.

The extremely informal church service would continue with a series of announcements. First, individual members stood and gave details about particular upcoming social and charitable activities being sponsored by the church. Next, congregants who were so inclined would stand and briefly discuss any personal "joys and concerns" that had occurred recently in their lives. While some mentioned lighthearted activities such as their return from an enjoyable family vacation or the birth of a grandchild, others talked about personal health concerns or tearfully reported the death of a loved one. Afterwards, Singer would ask all congregants to "hold these people in your prayers."

For the 60 to 150 congregants who attended either of the two services at New

Heights each week, such personalized, friendly activities were typically viewed as the most meaningful aspects of their church experience. Members frequently reported gaining strong feelings of interconnectedness and devotion to their church “family” through these times of sharing and intimate interactions with the larger faith community. “I feel a warmth here that I never felt,” exclaimed one woman who recently joined the congregation. Continuing, she said:

It just feels like a family that surrounds you. I felt that way from the beginning. They get up with joys and concerns—how nice! I never had anything like that at [previous churches]. Such a personal thing. The people are those I would pick as my friends. I just felt that way right away, like we just landed in a whole group of friends. That meant a lot. If you ever had a problem, people would care. Truly care about each other.

Another new member who shared these positive sentiments told me: “From the beginning, everybody was so nice here. They're just so friendly. They pull you into the fold and make you feel like you were their best friend and they were just waiting for you to return home. Even the first day, everybody came up and talked to us. It was just very, very friendly.”

Only after congregants on Sunday mornings spent up to a half hour engaged in these valued, relaxed times of personal sharing and interaction did more formal, ritualized moments of the church services begin. As worshipers opened their hymnals again, they stood and sang another Protestant melody accompanied by piano. Pastor Singer would signal the change in tone by stepping from the area near the first pews to a raised platform at the front of the sanctuary where a wooden pulpit and cloth-covered altar table were located.

Behind the main dais were large, two-story high windows that framed a panoramic view of the local mountains, offering congregants a beautiful, natural

backdrop for their weekly worship. One new member told me that the first time she entered the sanctuary: “I looked at this gorgeous window looking up at the [mountains], and I decided I was going to choose the church because of the view. It doesn't matter what else is going on. I could just sit here and look at my mountain. That's enough. I think that's a real plus.” Another new member who recently joined with her husband said: “I really love the sanctuary here. That was actually one of the things that drew us to this church. That view of the mountains. You can't help but feel the presence of God when you sit there and look at the sun shining on the mountains or the clouds coming over the mountains.”

After congregants finished the second hymn each week, they remained standing and were led through a responsive “Call to Worship” by a lay service leader standing at the front pulpit. Words for this liturgical practice changed weekly, and were printed in the “Order of Worship” provided to participants when they entered the sanctuary. One example from an April service was:

Leader: How awesome to gather before God! We are here to celebrate with wide-eyed wonder.

All: The God of all worlds is with us. Praise God for this season of Easter.

Leader: Praise God for all the signs of new life. Praise God for all we can do together.

All: Praise God for the life and ministry of Jesus. Praise God for all who share that ministry today.

Leader: Christ came to offer us abundant life. We are here today to reclaim that gift.

All: We gather in the name of Jesus Christ. We want to follow in the steps of Jesus.

On another occasion a few years later, the Call to Worship was:

Leader: This is a time of God's appearing; let us worship!

All: God's ear is inclined toward us. We know that God listens and hears our prayers.

Leader: We are here to offer our thanks to God. We will pay our vows to God in the presence of others.

All: We are grateful for the grace in which we stand. We praise God with great joy and gladness.

Leader: God bears us up on eagles' wings. God draws us into covenant community.

All: We will listen for God's commandments. We will seek to do all that God requires.

Immediately following this responsive ritual, congregants collectively read aloud an "Invocation" that further declared the ideological framework for their Sunday gathering.

This statement also changed weekly. An example was:

God of all creation, help us to recognize your presence among us. May we greet one another as your precious children and as messengers of your care. Help us offer such hospitality to one another that even the most skeptical among us will be touched by love. You are love; in you we find hope amid our weakness and doubt. Let your glory shine in this place today as we lift up the cup of salvation and call on your name. Amen.

These two opening liturgical routines allowed congregants to collectively affirm key principles about their faith community. First, they acknowledged fundamental belief not only in God, but in a God who was nonjudgmental, approachable, and even recognized simply as the incarnation of "Love." Secondly, they revealed their understanding of Christianity as being primarily related to moral actions—showing "hospitality," pursuing what their community could "do together," and behaving in ways that "follow in the steps of Jesus."

Once congregants finished these two ritualized affirmations about the core ideals of their liberal congregation, weekly services proceeded through a series of cultural elements often included in mainline Protestant worship. This included several hymns sung by congregants, a New Testament verse read by a lay service leader, music performed by a 16-20 member choir of laypersons, time of silent prayer, a vocal prayer

given by the minister, a collection of donations, and a sermon. Also, once each month the congregation would engage in a simple Communion ritual together (as is customary within the UCC denomination).

One notable change in the regular services that was implemented during my time observing the congregation and which demonstrated the sort of liberal cultural dynamics at New Heights was the elimination of the unison reading of the “Confession of Sins” by congregants. This liturgical practice had long been a part of weekly UCC worship. Explaining the reason for its elimination at her church, Pastor Singer told me: “That whole thing about corporate confession is something that people don't understand. It makes them angry that they have to confess to something they don't think they did. Well, the fact is, they did. But it was too big a battle. And I didn't like it particularly. And time is always an issue. It's much *more important to me that people do announcements than it is that they confess their sins*. The reason is that I think announcements are a sacred part of the service. They're the part that says this is what's happening. . . This is the life of the church here.”

Dismissing a central component of the historical Christian liturgy in favor of more informal social priorities exemplified the sort of liberal approach to religiosity valued by both Pastor Singer and the overwhelming majority of her UCC congregants. While the religious liberals there continued to retain formal commitments to Christian symbols and practices (similar to those at St. Luke's Episcopal Church), they tended to minimize the inherent authority of those traditions and the fundamental truth claims of orthodox Christianity (like the Unitarian Universalists at Community Church). Most described their congregation's complex blending of traditionally-religious and humanistic cultural

elements as exactly what they had wanted in a church home—granting them a shared religious identity without forcing any sort of strict conformity upon them as individual believers.

This chapter will begin by describing two people who were attracted to New Heights because of the UCC congregation's focused outreach efforts and the friendly, inclusive style of religiosity celebrated by church members. I will then outline the primary characteristics of the church and the key reasons for congregants' devotion to the faith community. Departing from the structure of the previous two chapters, the final section of the chapter will address the more significant challenges to organizational unity I discovered at New Heights compared to St. Luke's Episcopal and Community UU Churches. These congregational problems, including tensions over public support for gays and lesbians, partisan conflicts, and an ongoing debate about the proper role of the liberal religious congregation in addressing societal injustices and political policies, posed major barriers to the long-term devotional commitment of some church members.

I. Member Bios: Snapshots of the Newly-Devoted

Two religious liberals at New Heights who generally demonstrated why people were attracted and became devoted to the UCC community were Harvey Russell and Laurie Anderson. Though separated in age by almost thirty years, they shared a broad skepticism towards religious authorities and had spent most of their lives either apart or only tenuously-connected to formal institutions of faith. But after encountering the warm friendliness and tolerant values expressed at New Height's church, each eventually joined and expressed growing commitment to their new religious home. Their experiences effectively introduce many of the prominent cultural and emotional dynamics of the

entire congregation, and reveal why many visitors and liberal seekers found this UCC church to be a compelling religious option.

Harvey's Story

As a young boy growing up in England, Harvey Russell had attended parochial school, gone through catechism, and been confirmed in the Catholic Church. However, he abandoned organized religion soon after reaching adulthood and subsequently spent most of his life apart from formal faith communities. "It didn't really have too much meaning for me," he recalled about his Catholic upbringing. "At no time did I feel any sort of spiritual draw to the church. It was just something that I had to do."

By the time he married and emigrated to the United States at age 26, Russell had lost all interest in religiosity. He settled in Delaware at a sales job that would last for the next 36 years. His first marriage soon ended in divorce, but he ultimately remarried and raised three children. The decades that followed were filled primarily with the routines of work and family duties, which Russell now judged to have been "a relatively narrow life."

He retired eight years ago and moved with his wife to a warmer, quieter area of the country where they could enjoy their senior years. Both came to enjoy their new home and surrounding city, and gradually developed friendships with other retirees near them. They also pursued a variety of hobbies. Russell enjoyed musical and sporting interests, while his wife volunteered part time at a children's daycare program at a local church called New Heights.

In 2000, Russell's wife became seriously ill and was hospitalized for a short time. During her recovery, the male minister who then served at New Heights (before Singer

was installed in 2001) came to visit and offer support. Since neither Russell nor his wife were members of the congregation or had ever expressed any interest in attending, both were surprised by what they considered to be the minister's display of genuine warmth and concern for their wellbeing. "We were impressed by that," he told me. This act of support ultimately led the appreciative couple to make the decision to visit New Heights during a future Sunday service, despite their limited understanding of the UCC denomination. "I knew nothing about the church," Russell acknowledged. "I just came to it."

The couple enjoyed their first visit and what they discovered was a friendly, broadly-inclusive, and liberal religious community. All of these factors were appreciated by Russell. "It was purely fortuitous that [New Heights] turned out to agree with my attitudes as to what a church should be—more liberal," he said. "Everybody is welcome in the church. That means everybody. And [it was a] very friendly church." After attending for a few months, the couple decided to join and thus became members of a congregation for the first time in their married life.

Both new congregants quickly developed friendships with others in the tight-knit, family-style church, increasing their sense of meaningful devotion to New Heights. In time, Russell began volunteering for various lay-led activities, and eventually agreed to serve as chairperson of the congregation's "Mission Outreach" committee that facilitated social service opportunities for church members. Some of the committee's activities included serving meals to homeless people in the surrounding community four times per year and overseeing the congregation's regular collection and distribution of clothing and financial donations to those in need in their city. Russell appreciated and was touched by

his committee work, saying that it provided him with “a chance to see the degree of poverty and need there is in this area.” He was especially moved by his church’s charitable support for youth, noting: “We’ve been involved with homeless children. Feeding them.”

Russell’s UCC community became tremendously important to him as he discovered both a sense of moral fulfillment and social support there. After a few years, he joined the church’s lay-leadership council and was recently elected to the congregation’s top position of authority—as Moderator. Although Russell was an unlikely candidate for conversion after spending over four decades outside any organized religious community, he has since come to cherish the reliable social network and liberal culture at New Heights where his charitable values are celebrated. “I go because of the companionship of the people here and because of the things that we can do as a group,” he concluded. In addition, his attendance reflected a personal tendency towards the sort of social traditionalism and stability that other members there also widely enjoyed. Russell explained that churchgoing became important to him partly because: “I’m a person of habit. I get into it—if I do something every week.”

Laurie’s Story

While Harvey Russell’s life was generally defined by patterns of conventionality and consistency, Laurie Anderson’s was mostly the opposite. She had grown up in a blue collar household in Wisconsin where her Dad worked as a commercial truck driver. At age 19, she married. But the young couple’s attempts to have a child ended four times in miscarriage over the next six years, and proved to be a tremendous strain on their relationship. Eventually, Anderson did become pregnant. But only six weeks after the

birth of her daughter, she discovered that her husband was having an affair, resulting in their eventual divorce.

The subsequent years of being a single mother were difficult for her. At several of the lowest points of depression, she confessed, thoughts of suicide crossed her mind. She became a chain smoker and suffered through periods of alcoholism.

At age 31, though, Anderson fell in love again and decided to marry for a second time. But within months of the wedding, she discovered that her new husband had a mental illness that led him to occasionally erupt in physical violence. Fearing for the safety of herself and her daughter, Anderson was compelled to file a restraining order against him. Just six months later, she faced another divorce.

Although the years of disappointment, loneliness, and heartache attached to these sudden life transitions were difficult for Anderson, she said that her Christian faith and “personal relationship with Jesus” helped her endure. She had become an evangelical Christian at age nine while attending a church camp in Wisconsin. Her parents later became “born again” as well, and the family attended a conservative Christian church together for many years. At age 18, Anderson decided to explore other orthodox communities in her area, leading to what would become a multi-decade search for the “ideal” congregation. “I was basically church shopping for many years,” she conceded. The numerous evangelical and fundamentalist groups she visited and occasionally attended for a few months or years were each eventually rejected as being too small, too large, too strict, or because the church disbanded following the loss of a minister or various corruption scandals. At one church she attended while in her early 20’s, for example, Anderson ultimately left after being instructed by the pastor there that her

recent miscarriage meant that Satan had “stolen” her unborn child. “I couldn't find anywhere that that's the kind of God that I loved,” she concluded before leaving that group.

Because of her unstable congregational commitments, Anderson's faith and beliefs were generally based upon her own personal experiences of having a direct relationship with Jesus and God that she had nurtured over the years. Her intimacy with the divine was fostered through a variety of techniques that evoked a sense of sacred imminence. This included praying to God spontaneously during the day in a conversational style, speaking in tongues, and listening to contemporary Christian music. Her relationship to the divine provided her a sense of stability that seemed to be missing from other aspects of her life. “I describe God as a loving parent who wants nothing but the best for their children,” she said. “God does not ever run away, regardless.” Anderson felt so comfortable with the Divine that she confessed: “I kind of see him as Santa Claus. You know, come sit on my lap. Come talk to me. Very open. . . . When I talk to God I just call Him 'Daddy' more than anything. Even though He's God, He is a person who listens and who responds.”

Anderson used such vibrant personal experiences of the sacred as a basis for evaluating the ideas and expectations of the many churches she visited over the years. In rejecting so many congregations as inadequate or simply “wrong,” she gradually came to question even the orthodox tenets of Christianity that struck her as inconsistent with her understanding of God. “I had been questioning all these years,” she explained. “What do I believe, and what's really right? Is there anybody who is 100% right? Is this just a journey that we go along your whole life and see what happens? Who is this God? I was

just really questioning.” While Anderson remained committed to her personal God and perceived a need to participate in regular worship with other Christians, she seemed to always have “one foot out the door” in whichever faith community she attended.

Three years after Anderson’s second divorce, her life changed radically once again when she began a romantic relationship with a woman coworker. Initially, she was surprised by her intense feelings of same-sex attraction for this longtime friend, but ultimately embraced a lesbian identity for herself as their intimacy grew stronger.

“People tell me that because I had two failed marriages and a bunch of bad boyfriends that I became a lesbian,” she acknowledged with frustration. “But actually, when I look back, I had two failed marriages and a bunch of bad boyfriends because I was a lesbian.”

Today, she and her partner share a home together and are co-parenting Anderson’s teenage daughter. “I live my life as an out lesbian,” she explained, “but I don’t talk about it anymore than a heterosexual would always talk about their husband or wife. It’s just who I am.” Finding comfort in her new lifestyle was facilitated by her firm conviction that God and Jesus continued to love her. “I never had a problem with loving [my partner] or thinking I was in the wrong. I never had a problem with that. I had really come to the point where I felt like God made me that way.”

Being thus able to maintain a personal relationship with Jesus even after coming out was why Anderson continued to think about eventually joining a church community—but one where she and her partner would be unconditionally accepted as a same-sex couple. She recalled:

I knew that I needed church. I wanted church. I love the community of church people. But I wanted a church that really, truly loved people for who they were, and wanted the gifts and talents that [my partner] and I could bring. . . That we

could be comfortable as a family and not have to explain ourselves. Not have to stand up for who we are.

This quiet, ongoing desire to belong to a community of faith was one reason that Anderson noticed and was excited by a UCC television commercial she happened to see one day. “I had no idea that there was such a thing as ‘open and affirming’ churches,” she remembered thinking about the liberal denomination’s willingness to accept gays and lesbians as members. After talking to her partner, they decided to visit a local UCC congregation.

The first time they attended New Heights Church, Anderson was overwhelmed by the friendliness of the people there. “We immediately felt so comfortable and welcome,” she said. “Nobody questioned if we were together. Nobody asked us ‘where’s your husband?’” The two women enjoyed the feeling of being included quickly and unconditionally in the church. Anderson recalled: “There was so much love. You could just feel it when we walked through the door of that church. People just wanted to talk to you.”

In addition to her positive encounters with congregants at New Heights, she also remembered being happily surprised by the woman minister. “I just instantly fell in love with Genine,” Anderson said. “Not only because she was a woman—because this was the first time I’d ever been in the presence of a woman pastor—but because she spoke with conviction but not condemnation.” Anderson found Singer to be a fundamentally different sort of religious leader than she had ever encountered at conservative, evangelical churches. “I’ve always liked the passion and conviction of ministers over the years,” Anderson explained, “but the condemnation was always there at some point in the sermon.” She therefore appreciated being at a church and in the presence of a

clergyperson without feeling a sense of fear or guilt.

Ultimately, the broad inclusivity and friendliness of the UCC community convinced Anderson and her partner to continue attending New Heights on Sunday mornings, and to become official members of the church after just one month. “There's such diversity,” she said about her new liberal home. “We have retired Lutheran ministers. Retired Baptist ministers. People who haven't been married. Gay people. Straight people.” She came to cherish the support provided by this diverse network of congregants and their shared commitment to practicing Christian values like tolerance and charity. “Most of the time the people who really have to make a point that they're ‘Christian,’ aren't,” Anderson asserted about six months after joining the UCC congregation. “I mean, they are followers of Christ and they try. But there's usually that judgment and hypocrisy that goes with that. People at New Heights just really live it. To me, that's true Christianity. So to me, they are true Christians and they don't have to tell me that they are.”

Anderson expressed a growing enthusiasm for her welcoming, “Christ-like” congregation and nationwide denomination. The United Church of Christ, she believed, served a vital need in America for spiritual seekers like her who desired the sort of unconditional acceptance that she considered rare in most religious institutions:

There are so many people out there that have turned their back on religion because they've been hurt. Because they've been judged. They've been told their whole life that who they are or what they are or what they do defines their afterlife. New Heights Church . . . really does show the true love of God pretty much unconditionally, in comparison to many of the other churches I've been a part of.

Anderson is now convinced that liberal churches “could really help people come back to God.” She may be right, since gay and lesbian Christians like her who experience such

profound acceptance from a congregation often strengthen their religious beliefs and devotional commitments (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Asked whether she has finally found a church home where she will be able to remain for a long time, she replied: “I don't have any inkling at this point that I need to go somewhere else.” But she quickly added: “there are other churches now that are becoming more open to having gay couples in their church.” Anderson’s comment suggested that she would perhaps be open to exploring an expanded local religious marketplace that could effectively meet the needs of marginalized, liberal Christians like her, and that New Heights would therefore need to remain “competitive” in such a dynamic environment.

II. Core Ethos: Inclusive Fellowship and Lay Liberalism

Similar to other people who were attracted to New Heights UCC Church and eventually became members, Harvey Russell and Laurie Anderson primarily cherished their congregation’s defining commitment to practicing a friendly, nonjudgmental style of religiosity rather than affirming particular orthodoxies. One woman who recently joined the church expressed this view clearly, saying: “I don't think of the Bible or quoting verse as being religion. I think of it as a way to live your life. To try to be a good person.” Another congregant told me that the purpose of religion was “teaching individuals how to become better people.” When asked what it meant to be “religious,” a third church member said: “To live your life the best way that you can. Being honest. Being nice to other people. And following the commandments. Like ‘do unto others, as you want them to do to you.’ The Golden Rule.” In ways such as these, congregants at New Heights consistently reflected a style of religiosity that sociologist Nancy

Ammerman (1997) found to be typical among mainline Protestants in the US, and which she labeled “Golden Rule Christianity.” Others have noted that this distinctive mainline style is “loosely tied to the spirit of the New Testament,” and “stresses an ethic of care for self and others, especially children” (Wilcox, 2002).

In their common pursuit of fulfilling Jesus’ commandment to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12), the “Golden Rule Christians” at New Heights supported a variety of charitable activities on behalf of those in need in their city. Like other mainline churches nationwide, they tended to work with other nonprofit agencies in their community rather than sponsoring social services directly through their congregation (Ammerman, 2002). Such efforts included American Red Cross blood drives held at the church several times a year and collecting food and material donations almost every Sunday morning for the area’s poorer residents and/or military veterans. Groups of congregants also volunteered with local programs, offering educational and recreational opportunities to the area’s low-income youth. “These people are not just Sunday church people,” gushed one new member about what she had found to be the consistence beneficence of her fellow congregants. “You run into any person that goes to New Heights UCC anywhere, and they are that sweet, that kind, and that concerned. They always take the time to talk. I didn't know there were people like that.”

Beyond these practical, immediate expressions of humanitarian care, many church members demonstrated their religious values through an ongoing desire to learn more about a variety of societal problems and injustices. Pastor Singer and lay leaders, for example, sponsored educational programs at New Heights designed to inform congregants about broader needs in America and the world. Two issues that were

separately addressed during my time observing the congregation were racism and domestic violence. Interested congregants gathered before or after services on Sundays to discuss these topics and learn more about how others in the nation are impacted by the social problems. While the focus on racism only lasted a few months, the congregation continued to mention and show concern for domestic violence issues for more than three years (such as printing contact information for a local domestic violence shelter in the church's monthly newsletter). This latter topic did not apparently have any particular relevance to the church or particular members, I was told, but was instead merely a problem whose victims engendered broad sympathy and support from New Heights' congregants.

UCC members reported enjoying their collective efforts at upholding the Golden Rule through these various inclusive and charitable activities. One member, for example, described the emotional and moral satisfaction she experienced by engaging in practices that expressed tolerance and support for others, saying such endeavors “give you a feeling of goodness in your heart and your soul.” Like almost everyone else I met at New Heights, she believed that “kindness” was the only truly sacred, religious priority, and that “a good religion is one that values acceptance.” Rather than judging the importance of a religious culture or institution according to the validity of its ideological “truth” claims, these UCC congregants determined a “good religion” based on the sort of peaceful and supportive social relations it encouraged, and which they personally found emotionally-rewarding. Such sentiments, according to religious historian and UCC minister Randi Jones Walker, are common throughout the denomination. “People within the UCC traditions,” she wrote, “tend to begin their conversations over different

understandings of inclusivity with the activity of love rather than a prior ethical or biblical principle” (Walker, 2005).

This values-based, “Golden Rule” style of religiosity celebrated by New Heights’ congregants has also been documented among Presbyterians nationwide and referred to as “lay liberalism” (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, 1994). These mainline Protestants do not generally participate in their congregations because they believe their faith is “truer” than other religions, but instead “justify their religious preference by associating it with something of universal value or validity. . .the shared moral code.” At New Heights, for example, church members did not talk about any particular need to be “saved,” discover exclusive theological truth, or any other issue that might potentially divide or alienate people within their congregation. Instead, their Christian identity was based upon their recognition of Jesus as an inspiring, idealized role model who demonstrated the social values about love they cherished.

When asked to specifically explain why Jesus was worthy of their devotion, though, few congregants cited specific details from the Biblical narratives about Christ’s life and teachings. One member told me that he didn’t take what Jesus said literally, but that “you can see the message that comes out of what he said—and to how meaningful it is in today’s world.” He was unable, though, to cite a single story from the New Testament that exemplified Jesus’ “message.” Another congregant used similarly-vague language to describe her faith, explaining that being a Christian simply meant “carrying on Jesus’ and God’s message of loving people and taking care of the world.”

This minimal knowledge about the Christian tradition suggested to me that congregants’ commitment to churchgoing was based on normative social patterns learned

earlier in life and/or from the cultural expectations of their current faith community rather than a broad, personal evaluation of Christianity's historical beliefs and practices. In general, the religious liberals at New Heights appeared to maintain only vague attachments to Christian culture compared to St. Luke's—using the faith tradition merely as a nominal pretext for sustaining the broad humanistic and humanitarian values that were the true sacred focus of their congregation and religious identities.

Religious Liberalism as “Relaxed” Culture

The lay liberalism displayed by congregants was also shared and promoted by Pastor Genine Singer. In her leadership role, she promoted the flexible, culturally-liberal atmosphere at New Heights through a highly-informal, interpersonal style and relaxed approach to Christian faith. In addition to freely adjusting and removing traditional elements of the Christian liturgy on Sunday mornings in order to spend additional time engaged in what she believed were more valuable social interactions and activities (as previously noted above), she utilized a casual—almost “folksy”—preaching style that enhanced the informal nature of worship services each week and the congregation's overall atmosphere. Never following fully-scripted, written sermons, Singer instead relied upon notes with a minimal outline of her Sunday message that allowed her to transition freely across a variety of topics—spontaneously citing relevant examples from her life and current events—in order to engage her congregants in an almost “conversational” manner from the pulpit.

Singer's easy-going style was somewhat due to her reluctance to using traditional Christian language or formalities during services. “There are certain words and certain formulas that frankly mean absolutely nothing to me,” she shared, revealing her far-

reaching resistance to most of the orthodoxies and structured rituals of historical Christianity.

As a clergywoman who perceived herself as having faced discrimination during her nearly 30-year ministerial career, Singer was especially sensitive to what she viewed as the patriarchal and “outdated” attitudes traditionally associated with institutionalized forms of Christianity. Like many women ministers who must similarly reject the longstanding gender barriers of Christian culture in order to pursue their callings (Deckman, Crawford, Olson, and Green, 2003), she came to question and reject the authority undergirding much of her faith’s other moral and theological positions as well. “It’s very hard to be female in a male-dominated system and a male-dominated faith without having to rethink all that stuff,” she explained. “Having grown up a feminist, we threw all this stuff out a long a time ago. . . I think I have the luxury and freedom to rethink this as a new challenge. I love that.”

Rather than promoting a traditional Christian culture that she associated with restrictive, oppressive conditions, Singer’s style of preaching and ministry instead emphasized a more populist, inclusive Christianity that was only loosely connected to the faith’s traditions. “I’m not sure what it means to be religious,” she offered. “I’m not sure that I’m all that religious. I’m very spiritual, but the rituals of the church—printed words out of a prayer book—are pretty hollow to me. I’ve got to rework it.” As an example, she explained: “I can’t do a communion service out of the book. I mean, those words make no sense to me. I didn’t write them. I don’t feel them. I don’t use them. So in terms of a ritualistic, high-church kind of experience I’m not very religious.” In addition

to deleting the Sunday morning's "Confession of Sins" and performing "free-style"

communion ceremonies, Singer also adjusted the church's baptismal rituals. She said:

In our [New Heights'] bylaws, there's a thing about "anybody can belong to this church who's been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." Huh? I've never used those words when I've baptized a baby. I don't have a clue. It's totally irrelevant to me. Now I can translate the words into "God who gives life, sustains life, and calls you forth in this community," or something like that . . . Every one of those old creeds and old sort of mindsets is a challenge to me, in terms of what it means and finding better words.

Singer thus viewed herself as a self-styled reformer—free to re-arrange, suppress, or develop new religious approaches as she deemed appropriate. By approaching issues of traditional Christian faith and practice in her own highly-individualized, creative ways, she consistently demonstrated the sort of broad religious freedom that was enjoyed by members of her UCC congregation and was a defining feature of their liberal community.

Those who attended New Heights spoke approvingly of Singer's informal, dynamic style of ministerial leadership. One member expressed the widespread sentiments of his fellow congregants by describing Singer as "a good pastor, mentor, religious leader who can focus on living today in our world with some beliefs that it is good and there is a reason for us to be here." Church members tended to view her in this way as a religious authority, often noting her ability to make the Bible relevant to them because of both her low-key approach to preaching and use of modernist deconstruction techniques for interpreting scriptural narratives. "[Singer] won't just teach you what the words in that book are. She will also teach you why the words are in that book the way they are," said one congregant. Continuing, this member explained:

What was a sinner and what does that mean when they wrote the book? It meant something completely different than what it means now. Totally different. We're not sinners. Sinners were like the poor white trash of 2,000 years ago. They were

just the outcasts. They weren't bad people. It makes you look at the book and the world differently.

Such congregants valued the critical and often-unorthodox perspectives presented by Singer, saying: “You get an education. I love that. I think that is part of why you have church—to learn stuff.”

The loosely-regulated, relaxed environment fostered at New Heights both by Singer and the UCC culture was a highly-attractive feature for many old and new members of the congregation. A woman who recently joined the congregation, for example, told me how much she enjoyed the feeling of personal autonomy and guilt-free religiosity afforded her by the lenient faith community:

One of the nice things is we don't have to be there. . . .At UCC, they may just say “hey, we missed you. Are you okay?” But you're never going to hear, “why weren't you at church last week?” So if we decide that we just need to sleep, we can. We don't have that guilty sense of having to go.

Another person who also enjoyed the minimal member expectations at New Heights said: “What I like about the UCC is you may believe whatever you want. If it makes you happy, then believe it.” A third explained that she cherished the ability to “ask questions” at church about Christianity, the Bible and religion in general without being criticized. “No question is right or wrong,” she said. “Your questions are not pooh-pooed. . . .I just feel very comfortable here. The Bible is a book of ideas and things we can learn from. But they're not written in stone that you have to do exactly what was done 2,000 years ago.” For one longtime UCC member, the denomination’s characteristic freedom granted to individuals in determining matters of personal belief and practice was a key reason that she had first joined years earlier. She told me:

I liked the church. I liked what it stood for. I liked the freedom . . . You can have your thoughts be heard, even though they may differ with somebody else. It

wasn't that you were wrong and by God, you'd better go to confession now. That's against what the theology of this church is.

By providing religious liberals such as these the right to choose their own ways of thinking and level of congregational participation, New Heights proved to be a distinct, valuable religious option for those who disdained more traditional, stricter styles of organized Christianity.

The UCC church's lenient culture resulted in an unregulated heterodoxy and broad ideological diversity within the congregation, despite participants' nominal identification as Christians. According to an internal, church membership survey conducted in 2003, for example, over half of New Heights' congregants dismissed the exclusive theological claims of Christianity, agreeing that "all religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth." Such universalist sentiments are typical among lay liberals in other mainline Protestant congregations (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, 1994), and are shared today by the majority of Americans nationwide—including 52% of self-described Christians (Pew Forum, 2008)—who have come to reject the exclusive validity of their own religious traditions. Expressing support for this sort of radical ecumenism, one longtime UCC churchgoer told me:

I believe that God is the creator of all. No matter what religion, they're just different aspects. I don't know how to get that in with some of the sayings about Jesus. It says in the Bible that he's the only way. But I'm not so sure if that's right. I think it's the only way for me. . .I just leave that up to God because I can't figure it out right now. I just can't exclude other people if they share the same values, like caring and loving and peace.

Another lay liberal who recently joined the congregation said:

Part of my philosophy—and why I like [New Heights] so much now—is because it's all the same journey. . .If you want to call it God or the Universe or Father Sky and Mother Earth or whatever, it doesn't matter. It's still all the same thing. I've always believed that the Indians have the right idea, they just call it something

different. Which Christians have a hard time with. You can call it different stuff, but it's still the same stuff. And the rules are all still the same really. Don't hurt each other. Don't be killing each other.

A third congregant, who similarly recognized charitable and tolerant moral practices as the common mark of “true” religiosity regardless of faith tradition, concluded: “I believe that all good people go to heaven.”

Pastor Singer encouraged these broad-minded, universalistic beliefs within her congregation. During one Sunday service, for example, she asked children seated in the pews to write prayers on sticky-notes and then come forward to put them anywhere on a globe of the earth at the front of the sanctuary. She later explained to me: “The message is very simple and very radical: God hears the prayers of all the people around the world. No matter where you put your sticky note, God’s going to hear your prayer.”

In addition to downplaying the traditional exclusivity of Christianity, congregants at New Heights tended to hold unitarian views about Jesus that either minimized or dismissed orthodox doctrines about his divinity. “I see Jesus as being more of a prophet and leader and guide,” said one member. “He believed in people. I think he was God's voice on Earth. He was his representative here.” Another congregant who was unsure of Jesus’ nature reflected:

Was Jesus God or man or both? . . . All these things we are led to believe that I don't know are really true anymore. Like the need for the atonement. If God is really love and everybody's kind of okay, then where does that leave the atonement? Is that literal? Was he just a martyr for a faith? Was he just a prophet?

And a third member was similarly ambivalent about this historical cornerstone of western Christian belief:

I sort of go back and forth. I guess I would call myself a Christian, but I'm not sure. I think Jesus really lived and was wonderful. That he was a prophet,

maybe. A leader of the people. But whether he actually died and resurrected and was truly the son of God, I go back and forth about that. I'm not sure.

Even Pastor Singer, when asked about her understanding of Jesus, admitted: "I don't believe that he was God." Lowering her voice to a near-whisper, she confided: "I am not a Trinitarian. It's way too limiting for me. . . I do not believe that he died for our sins. He may have died because of our sins, but I don't see in him a sense of payoff. I don't think he paid the price for all us in that sort of atonement sense."

Not only did it seem that most congregants shared their minister's rejection of such traditional Christian doctrines, but several of the religious liberals at New Heights embraced alternative and clearly non-Christian theologies. "I strongly believe in reincarnation," one congregant said nonchalantly. Clarifying, she said:

I don't believe in karmic justice that you will be screwed in your next life if you are a bastard in this one. I don't think that's the way it works. But I think maybe you come back until you're done. Then you don't have to come back anymore. Then you just stay. Hang out with Jesus all the time. And all your friends who you've been coming back and forth with for millennia.

A young mother in the congregation also expressed support for this unorthodox belief, saying: "My kids asked me what happens when you die and I told them you're born again as somebody else. Or something else. You're reincarnated."

In addition to holding these non-Christian beliefs in private, some congregants met in small groups at church in order to openly explore such alternative and unorthodox perspectives. One such gathering, called the "Spirituality Group," met before services on Sunday mornings in order for participants to discuss various books dealing with controversial religious views. One book explored by the group over the course of several months, for example, was "Why Christianity Must Change or Die" by controversial former Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong.

Another group of congregants met weekly to read and discuss the New Age book “A Course in Miracles” by Drs. Helen Schucman and William Thetford. One participant enthusiastically shared what he had learned from the text: “[Jesus] managed to completely dispel the ego part of his mind so his mind wasn't shackled by his body anymore. Therefore when he was crucified basically this was all imaginary and the resurrection is him just joining the brotherhood. Becoming one with God.” Pastor Singer attended a few sessions of this book discussion group, before ultimately concluding to herself (and me) that she considered the ideas to be “crap.” Still, she and those at New Heights tolerated the right of small groups such as this to continue meeting at the church and exploring a wide range of unorthodox views without fear of condemnation from others.

Lack of Spiritual Experiences

Despite the liturgical elements included in the UCC church's Sunday services and minority of members specifically involved in the “Spirituality Group” or other religious-exploration meetings during the week, almost none of the congregants reported having any sense of spiritual awareness. In this way, they were similar to many of the secular humanists at Community UU Church who also had difficulty identifying and describing notions of spirituality. For example, when one lay leader at New Heights was asked if she had ever had a spiritual experience, she answered: “I don't think so. I can't think of an instance.” But after pausing a moment and giving the impression of being embarrassed by her response, she replied: “Yes. Last Sunday during the service. It just felt good. The whole morning just felt like it was a great place to be.” Another lay leader was similarly challenged by the question about spirituality, responding: “That is a

tough one. I think it's just my relationships with people. I have met some wonderful people.” A third explained that “Spirituality can occur at any time,” before admitting: “I have to say that I don't get these feelings very often.”

Such responses reflected the general absence of collective, unifying experiences of the sacred, God, or Mystery within the faith community. The congregation's own 2003 membership survey findings revealed this lack of sacred feelings among members, with only 52% of respondents indicating that Sunday morning worship services inspired in them a “meaningful experience of God and the Christian tradition.” Though difficult to interpret meaningfully without comparative data, this may suggest a certain spiritual vacuum in the congregation—especially in light of the fact that the same survey results showed that most congregants listed the task being *least* adequately performed by the church was: “helping members deepen their personal and spiritual relationship to God.”

Despite this apparent lack of focused, unifying experiences of the sacred while at New Heights, many members did share with me what they considered to be spiritual moments outside the faith community. One congregant, for example, described how she often got “goose bumps” when she heard her “son giggling,” and concluded:

To me, that is spirituality. When you just have to reach out and hug someone. Or they just make you feel warm all over. It brings tears to your eyes because it's so absolutely sweet. I would say I get that from my children more than probably any other experience. Almost anything they do.

Another church member linked her sense of the spiritual to nature: “A beautiful sunset will do it for me every time. . . . It's just awe-inspiring that something so beautiful just happens everydayIt's the highest kind of feeling.” A third person at New Heights admitted that he was genuinely confused about what spiritual experience involved, but that he was intentionally trying to find out. “Spirituality is. . . your belief in something

greater than this world, which is beyond comprehension,” he speculated. “I’m trying to understand that thing that’s greater than us. Greater than humans.” In these ways, a significant minority of religious liberals at New Heights expressed either vague experiences of the sacred outside the church and/or a conscious desire to evoke such apparently-elusive “spiritual” encounters in their lives.

What became clear to me was that although many UCC congregants were interested in spirituality, their faith community did not seem to provide them with the cultural tools or formal encouragement for pursuing these experiential needs. Not only was the congregation generally averse to the sort of fixed rituals that might have provided church members with a common “grounding” or sense of sacred unity, but Genine Singer actually tended to dismiss the value of such activities outright. In criticizing the sort of “navel gazing” that she believed occurred within the “Course in Miracles” discussion group at New Heights, for example, she said:

I find that so many of the people who are into that sort of thing want to feel good. It tends to wipe out any kind of action in the community. That type of narcissism makes me crazy. They might say “I want to come to church to feel better.” Well, there are ways to feel better that aren't “ooey gooey.”

For individuals to pursue a private, inner spiritual “peace” struck Singer as an inherently selfish and unproductive endeavor. “Is that an escape from their hectic, miserable lives?” she asked rhetorically about those engaged in reflective activities. “No. Because the people who are doing this are people who are retired, independently well-off, and that sort of thing.” Ultimately, she rejected the value of rituals or meditative practices that allow participants to “zone out,” deriding such spiritual techniques as offering a sort of “cheap grace.” For Singer, spirituality tended to be linked to her social relationships and numerous activities related to liberal social causes in the surrounding community. She

believed that to achieve true spiritual awareness, “there’s more struggle” required of seekers than to simply engage in inner exploration. “How’s that for judgmental?” she asked with a smirk, seeming to acknowledge the harshness with which she dismissed introspective spiritual seeking.

Singer’s disinterest in reflective spirituality may be a typical characteristic among UCC clergy. According to UCC minister Randi Jones Walker (2005), the denomination’s ministers have tended to be selected more for their administrative abilities than spiritual leadership:

Over the course of the twentieth century, the professionalization of the clergy encouraged them to develop business models for organizing church work and to use the methods of psychology in their pastoral care, creating a distance between traditional theological understandings of church life and leadership and the actual practice of ministry.

Rather than learning how to develop moving spiritual experiences for themselves and teaching these techniques to their congregants, many UCC ministers have instead apparently been trained to focus on the practical, measurable, and “real world” functions of running their congregational “businesses.” It was for this reason that Walker concluded: “Little by little the role of the pastor as spiritual leader and advisor was lost. A mystic in the United Church of Christ had virtually nowhere to go for spiritual counsel or understanding of intense religious experiences.”

Singer seemed to acknowledge her own limitations regarding such matters, and the general need for new spiritual leaders who might provide renewed inspiration and relevance to religious life for both laypersons and clergy alike. “There aren’t good teachers out there who talk about how to make this transition in the culture,” she said. “There is a book that needs to be written sometime about how you take the Scripture and

theologize on the culture. How you make it relevant.” Although Singer said that she had found religion to be relevant due to her own involvement in emotionally-charged social activism, passing such “spiritual” passion on to others had often proven to be elusive. “I just don't know how to talk about it,” she confessed. Her ongoing hope was for new authors and religious leaders to emerge who could translate her sense of spirituality and religious devotion into a meaningful form for a new generation of contemporary seekers. “It needs to get written down somehow because we don't know how to theologize the new culture,” she explained. “It's a big, big question.”

Without ministerial leadership to help them address their desire for spiritual awareness, some congregants at UCC ultimately drifted away from the church in search of other groups and opportunities that might better fulfill their needs. “Somebody left our church looking for more spirituality and went to the Unitarian church,” one congregant who was considering a similar move told me. “I think that's something I could explore.”

In Pursuit of Friendliness

In the absence of a shared orthodoxy, ritualized orthopraxis, or common experience of mystical awareness among the religious liberals at New Heights, congregants instead found that the most important reason for their ongoing devotion to the UCC community was the dependable friendliness and fellowship they enjoyed there with one another. “It's a group of people that we've come to love and like to spend time with, for the most part,” said one new member about why she joined the church. “It's really more social.” Another new congregant who decided to join with her husband after only two visits said: “We just found this to be a friendly, warm place.” A third person described how the effusive church members “drag you in” through their welcoming

efforts, and that this approach ultimately helped her “get to know the people better and have a good time.” It was clear that the intentional efforts among congregants to foster positive sociability amongst themselves were the most valuable and defining aspects of the faith community.

In addition to enjoying a sense of intimacy with one another on Sunday mornings during the sharing of joys and concerns and throughout the generally-relaxed services conducted by Singer, members also had the opportunity to develop friendships through a variety of social gatherings each month. There were weekly choir and church band rehearsals, a monthly book discussion group (of popular, secular novels), a monthly potluck dinner for older congregants, various youth meetings, and occasional “all church” special events such as picnics, dinners, and fundraisers. Through these casual get togethers, New Heights’ participants were able to develop a growing sense of affection and commitment to others within the church. Over 58% of congregants, for example, indicated in the 2003 internal church survey that “one or more of my closest friends” belonged to the faith community. Also, 61% reported that “providing fellowship opportunities” was the function being performed most effectively by the congregation.

One technique that Singer had developed to emphasize the commitment and concern members offered to one another was the gift of the “prayer blanket.” Explaining this seemingly simple expression of her community’s support for congregants, she said: “When you lose somebody or there's some major transition of your life, we get one of the blankets and embroider your name on it and give it to you.” The blankets were occasionally presented during services or at other times during the week to those in the congregation who were suffering from some painful life event or transition. “When you

lose your mother and find yourself missing her, you wrap up in a prayer blanket and remind yourself that you are held in the arms of prayer,” Singer said. “It's a simple sort of thing, but when you're hurting and you've been given that in front of a bunch of people, it's very helpful.”

A Time for Families

The fundamental importance of interpersonal connections at New Heights was enhanced by the large number of people there who participated with spouses and other family members. Unlike at St. Luke’s Episcopal and Community UU churches, I observed very few individuals at the UCC congregation attending services by themselves. Instead, almost all visitors and longtime members typically came to New Heights with a partner, spouse, and/or other family members. “One of the reasons we go is that we're going with our family,” explained a new member who regularly attended with his wife, adult son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren. “We love being there. We know that our best friends there are our kids. That's not to exclude the people of our own age because we've now made friends in the church that we also know from other social clubs around town.” Another person who recently joined New Heights similarly said: “My family is so important to me. I think, my gosh, we're up there taking communion together... It's just wonderful.” This family dynamic was a critical aspect of the congregation that provided both a natural source of interpersonal connections between (related) church members and ongoing domestic support for maintaining religious involvement.

Sixty-four year-old Cheryl Krueger was one of the congregants who joined the UCC Church specifically because of her family. She affiliated with New Heights over

two decades ago in order to please her second husband, who had been a longtime member of the faith community. “I never really went to church too much until I remarried and we moved to where he lived,” she explained. “This was his church.” Krueger was not familiar with the United Church of Christ, having been raised attending both Episcopal and Catholic services with her mixed-faith parents as a child. But she was quickly impressed by the overall affability of congregants at New Heights and how comfortable they made her feel in her new, adopted church home. “I enjoyed the people mostly,” she recalled. “I didn't know anybody in the new city, and the people here were very friendly. And my husband liked it.”

Social Stability as Ultimate Value

In addition to enjoying the good-natured UCC congregants, Krueger also appreciated the sense of moral obligation that motivated many members to act in such friendly, charitable ways towards newcomers like her. As a registered Republican and self-described “moderate conservative,” she generally respected the institutions and cultural traditions of the larger society, and ultimately came to view her churchgoing as a way to fulfill her need for social stability and structure. Participating in a church like New Heights with her husband and enjoying the “nice,” friendly social ties there allowed her to experience a sort of idealized society where religious formalities were lax but more traditional, community ties and obligations were cherished. “I think a religious basis within the family is very important,” she came to believe. “Even though my parents went to two different churches, that was a part of our life. And it was respect. Respect was part of our religious upbringing. I think there's just not enough of that in society anymore.” The tolerant, humanitarian-oriented religiosity practiced at New Heights was

experienced by Krueger as an affirmation of her own conservative values and the “respectful” relationships between people that she viewed as essential for maintaining the societal traditions, family structure, and stability she desired in her life.

Churchgoing also provided her with an opportunity to participate in charitable endeavors sponsored by New Heights, which fulfilled her socialized moral expectations.

This was a recurring theme I identified among many of the religious liberals at New Heights, and has been found to be a key characteristic of such “lay liberals” in other mainline congregations (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, 1994). Krueger told me, for example: “I was raised from a very early age to give back to the community.

Volunteering. My parents did it. My grandparents did it. We were involved in church. I was raised that way. My children were raised that way.” She had been socialized at an early age to value churchgoing and volunteerism as important normative endeavors, and this training provided a seemingly “common sense” rationale both for her own ongoing religious involvement and decision to raise her children in a church.

Another new congregant who joined New Heights because of the importance of family ties and more traditional social norms was 32-year old Rebecca Yancey. Neither she nor her husband had ever been involved in an organized religion as adults. Yancey was familiar with the church because her two children had been attending the congregation’s daycare program for about a year. Both she and her husband had always thought positively about New Heights and admired what they knew about its tolerant, friendly culture, but they never discussed attending on Sunday mornings. One day, though, Yancey’s husband suggested that they visit the congregation’s worship service. At first Yancey was surprised by her husband’s sudden interest in churchgoing. “Where

did that come from?” she wondered. “He's usually the one who complains about not having enough free time.” They visited one Sunday, though, and both enjoyed the experience so much that they began attending on a regular basis. Yancey told me that she came to value the weekly services primarily because of what became “sacred” time together with her family. She eventually joined the church’s monthly book discussion group and began making new friends there as well. After two months attending New Heights and coming to value these social experiences, Yancey and her husband joined the congregation.

In addition to enhancing her sense of connection to her husband and children, Yancey said that churchgoing gave her the opportunity to participate in charitable activities. “I like having a place where I feel I can help out the community and give something back—volunteer,” she said. Yancey appreciated that New Heights seemed to be “a very socially-conscious church,” explaining to me how the congregation has “a lot of welfare activities where we help put dinners together for the homeless people or fundraising for various projects.”

The congregation’s second-highest lay leader, 57-year old Vice Moderator Gillian Joyner, similarly based her religious devotion primarily upon her personal social commitments to family unity and localized charitable endeavors. She and her husband first became involved in a UCC congregation in California following the birth of their second child in 1981. Although Joyner had been raised Missouri Synod Lutheran, she was never strongly committed to the orthodoxies of Christian faith, and therefore appreciated the United Church of Christ’s religiously-tolerant, Congregationalist culture. But what she remembered as being especially important in their selecting that first UCC

church was its musical program. “My husband loves to sing,” she said. “I think in our mind—since both of us had grown up going to church—knew it was time to get back into it.” Like most others at New Heights, Joyner was brought up to believe in the inherent value of both formal religious involvement and charitable practices, and fulfilling these internalized, traditional obligations as an adult proved to be emotionally-satisfying. “It’s a place where I do a lot of my volunteer time,” she said, noting one of the primary reasons for her devotion to New Heights. “There are a lot of things that need to be done to run a business such as this. I just enjoy doing that. It makes me feel good.”

Referring to the church as a “business” in this way struck me as odd, although I came to realize that the term reflected a widespread perspective among congregants who tended to view New Heights more as a service-oriented social club than a distinctly-religious organization. Joyner clearly found this style of religiosity—based primarily upon interpersonal relationships and service opportunities—as important. She has now been an active member of the UCC for over 32 years, and joined New Heights 12 years ago after retiring to the local area. Even after her husband death a few years ago, Joyner has continued to participate, serve in lay leadership positions, and devote herself to her UCC “family.”

Politically-Conservative Religious Liberals

Members of the UCC community primarily cherished their religious home as a place where they could celebrate the “sacred” stability of their social relationships—allowing them to respect the patterns of religiosity learned early in life from family and/or to enhance their present valuable interactions with family and new, welcoming friends. This general preference for peaceful order in their lives was not only reflected in

their personal commitments to upholding longstanding social institutions and patterns (marriage, raising children, charitable volunteerism, and organized religiosity), but in their much more conservative social views and political opinions compared to the religious liberals at the other two churches in this study. New Heights' congregants seemed to represent the sort of moderate Republicans who used to dominate liberal and mainline denominations across America (Pew Forum, 2004; Manza and Brooks, 2002; Manza and Brooks, 1997). Over the past several decades, however, these individuals have become increasingly outnumbered nationwide by more socially and politically-liberal mainline participants.

Among all those interviewed at the three congregations, for example, only at New Heights did a few people express support for restricting abortion rights and view sexual relations between unmarried adults as morally wrong. Also, almost half of the UCC congregants I spoke with opposed paying more taxes for healthcare for the poor or increasing the scope of federal welfare services. And only a minority of interviewees believed that the government was spending too much on the military. Reflecting these more conservative sentiments, one older New Heights' member told me: "I sort of resent how many in the younger generation act like the world owes them a living rather than just an opportunity. There's a lot of people who don't take responsibility for their own actions. Whether it's smoking, drinking, or sexual promiscuity." Religious liberals such as these cherished "respect" and displayed a sort of stridently-individualist, libertarian worldview to one based upon the recognition of social and/or ontological interdependencies.

For this reason, their various acts of charity might be interpreted as serving their

own need to fulfill vague social expectations and prove themselves to be “good people” rather than because they feel some deep, spiritual-prompting and feelings of being mystically-connected with those who suffer in the world. Their charitable efforts seemed to represent the rational, moral behavior of individuals acting as they believed they *should*, and not because they felt in such spiritual unity with others that they *had* to support efforts to relieve human suffering. Cheryl Krueger, for example, viewed charitable volunteerism within religious institutions as a positive moral activity for individuals, but did not support most government welfare programs that provided such social services on a larger scale. She said:

I'm against increasing Medicaid and all these social programs because it's not helping people. It's just providing them a crutch. Instead, we should provide better education and facilities that can guide people to try to get them on a better track. I think responsibility is one thing that we've lost. Respect.

Krueger's general rejection of the sort of grand humanitarian idealism that had characterized most of the religious liberals at St. Luke's Episcopal and Community UU congregations was common among those at New Heights. She was a politically-conservative religious liberal who limited her devotional expressions to being friendly, “respectful,” and charitable within and through her faith community rather than supporting a broader vision of universal, sacred interconnectedness among all people or humanist efforts towards societal transformation.

Like Krueger, Rebecca Yancey was also a registered Republican who emphasized the value of her congregation's localized humanitarian efforts rather than public, nationwide social services. In criticizing the Democratic party and “political liberals,” for example, Yancey told me:

I don't think there should be handouts. With welfare, I believe that people do

need a boost to get back on their feet sometimes. But it shouldn't be a way of living the rest of your life. People who already have four children and are living on welfare, I don't think should have their funds increased at all if you have more children. There is no reason in this day and age that people should be getting pregnant when they don't want it. For someone to continue having kids when they're already on welfare is completely irresponsible to me. I think it's appalling that it's allowed to continue.

Yancey explained that her opposition to these sort of welfare issues and policies was one of the reasons she was “a Bush supporter,” having voted for the Republican candidate in both the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections. Ironically, her libertarian style of religious liberalism both inspired her occasional donation of canned food at church on Sunday morning and gave her the freedom to oppose governmental programs designed to broadly-relieve hunger in America.

The sort of limited humanitarian concern displayed at New Heights by congregants such as Krueger and Yancey is apparently common in many other mainline churches across the nation. Although many mainline denominational leaders and laypersons are involved in liberal political activism (Wuthnow, 2002), sociological researcher Nancy Ammerman (2002) found that congregants at the local level are often only minimally interested in “direct action outside the church family” and resist “corporate congregational activity in the pursuit of social change.”

Classical sociologist Max Weber (1993 [1922]) argued that although financially-comfortable social classes resist changes that might disrupt their privileged statuses, they tend to support charitable activities as a core element of their religious expression. Such opportunities to “give back” to the community, he wrote, may provide elite individuals with a sense of moral approval that helps them feel justified and even “deserving” of their secure socio-economic positions.

Certainly for many of the people I spoke with at New Heights, supporting local charitable endeavors while rejecting a personal responsibility to solve the larger problems, inequalities, and injustices of the society helped them maintain a general optimism about their own existence. One member told me, for example: “We're supposed to enjoy life. It's a wonderful gift we've been given. We've been given life and each other. It's wonderful. I don't think it's gloom and doom.” Explaining why she didn't want to spend a lot of time thinking about the pain and problems of others, she said: “I don't turn my back on it, but I don't think focusing on it helps. If you can do something to relieve someone else's suffering, that's good. But to just wallow in the terrible things of life, I don't believe in that.”

Cultivating Tolerance as a Progressive Ideal

Despite their shared desire for a calming, predictable social structure and tendency to support more conservative values, New Heights' congregants faced ongoing encouragement from both their local and national religious leaders to adopt ever-more tolerant, socially-liberal views. Nationally, the United Church of Christ is one of the most socially and politically liberal denominations in the United States, with lay-led governing assemblies meeting annually and consistently adopting official, politically-liberal positions on a range of controversial issues on behalf of the entire religious organization (United Church of Christ, 2008). Such UCC positions have included calls for the abolition of the death penalty, condemning US-led wars in Vietnam and Iraq, demanding the closure of the controversial US Army School of the Americas in Georgia, supporting euthanasia and abortion access, criticizing global capitalism while defending workers' rights, and advocating on behalf of a long list of oppressed, marginalized groups

in America and around the world. The United Church of Christ has also been an institutional leader in working to eliminate traditional, orthodox patterns of discrimination against women in Christian theology and leadership (Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 1990).

“There are some things at the national UCC level that I have had problems with,” sighed Cheryl Krueger regarding the denomination’s well-known social liberalism. She declared: “I am not a quote ‘liberal.’ I wouldn’t label myself that at all.” Like many of the more socially-conservative members I met at New Heights, she was critical of the denomination’s top leaders:

When they go against the government and what the President is doing or not doing. Like the Iraq war. During the Vietnam War there were problems. To me, they tend to go too far to one side. . . Like our UCC national President was just lambasting President Bush. I don't believe in that. You may disagree, but I don't think that is the arena where you should disagree. They also protest certain things that I don't believe in.

Despite this ongoing political uneasiness with the denomination, Krueger had developed a broad tolerance towards those in the UCC with whom she disagreed—just as she perceived them displaying a similar tolerance for her more conservative views. “I think that's part of the beauty of the church,” she said. “Just because I don't back certain things they agree with, they're not going to throw me out of the church. They say I have the freedom to disagree with them.”

The very act of participating in an ideologically-diverse faith community where friendliness and generosity were prioritized as core, sacred values tended to have a liberalizing effect on participants over time, pushing them to progressively re-evaluate their beliefs and behaviors. One longtime member, for example, told me that he valued other congregants at New Heights because they “have a good consciousness about being

socially active and giving to other people.” This collective support for charity ultimately led this participant to examine his own giving habits and level of social concern: “I think that has woken me up to helping other people more. Trying to be more that way myself. It's a good thing.” Similarly, Gillian Joyner told me: “I think since I've been in the Congregational church, I've become more liberal over time.”

By far the most conservative member I interviewed at New Heights was 77-year-old Dennis Brown, and even he had been moved towards greater liberalism during his short time within the UCC environment. He and his wife recently joined the inclusive community after ending their longtime membership in a local Unity Church because of ongoing disputes with the youth-oriented minister there. At New Heights, he said, they enjoyed the informality of Pastor Singer and the Sunday services, and the friendliness of congregants. As a conservative Republican, though, Brown was somewhat hesitant about affiliating with the United Church of Christ. “It is a liberal church,” he said. But Brown talked with Singer about his concerns, and was assured that he and his wife would be welcomed and made to feel comfortable within the UCC congregation. “We happen to be conservatives. But that's alright,” Brown concluded. “There's room for both [conservatives and liberals].” Becoming more involved with the UCC community over time and being exposed to the ideological and social diversity there has ultimately softened his social views somewhat. He said:

I am sure there are more tree-huggers in this group. [My wife and I] are concerned with the environment, but not to the extent that some want to go. That's okay.. . I think it's beneficial to be exposed to a variety of opinions, politics, and social issues. You're not going to agree with every aspect of any church or any company that you work for. But I think you can take out the good.

Brown also explained that the tolerance displayed towards him as a social conservative in

the UCC seemed to compel him to demonstrate a similar generosity towards others. “I think we're much more accepting of different lifestyles than we used to be,” he said, referring broadly to what he perceived to be the cultural changes in today’s society that he found unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcome. “Some of them we don't approve of, but we accept them. They are right for some other people.”

This subtle congregational pressure to progressively display greater inclusivity and tolerance towards those who are different from oneself also affected the social liberals and registered Democrats at New Heights, who were encouraged to show charity and support towards the more conservative-minded members of their faith community. One social liberal, for example, told me: “Some of the people who are here in this congregation [are] Republican. But they're moderate Republican. So there are some issues I'm sure we don't share. But there are many people in this congregation I would share basic stuff with. You can call it values.” These shared UCC values—expressed through the welcoming messages and loosely-defined celebration of “love” within the faith community—provided a basis for personal moral development and gradual change among New Heights’ diverse religious liberals.

Case Study of GLBT Inclusivity

The most dynamic example of this ongoing, liberalizing process involved the congregation’s developing approach to gay and lesbian participants. Two years before I began studying the congregation, church members publicly affirmed their welcoming, denominational values by officially becoming an “open and affirming” community for GLBT persons. At the national level, the United Church of Christ had a long history of supporting inclusivity for sexual minorities within the organization—as the first Christian

denomination in the US to ordain an openly gay minister in 1970 (Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 1990) and officially calling for the legalization of same-sex marriages in 2005 (Dewan, 2005). In addition, the largest, predominantly-gay church in the country—the 4,300 member Cathedral of Hope in Dallas—became the denomination’s fourth biggest congregation in 2006 (Guess, 2007). But despite this high-level, official support for gays and lesbians nationally, each local UCC community has the freedom to determine its own level of tolerance and acceptance towards GLBT visitors and members. In making the decision to become open and affirming, the majority of congregants at New Heights committed to their broader UCC values and agreed to welcome all people into their fellowship. One longtime member who voted in support of the official designation told me:

[New Heights] basically practices what it preaches. If you say “our doors are open to everybody,” that means everybody that [sic] wants to come. . . We have gay couples who attend the church. Both male and female. And they've been assimilated with no problem at all. That's one of the keys is being open to everybody. And of course we've still got a long way to go.

Another member told me: “Church should be open to anybody no matter what their personal preference is in their life. As long as it's not hurting someone else. . . . All people aren't the same. And God made us all. So He made us the way we are and put us here for a purpose.”

The push to include GLBT persons in the life of the church was strongly supported by Singer in her ministerial role. She not only preached about the moral importance of welcoming all people into the UCC “family,” but individually counseled and sought to assuage the fears of those in her congregation who were concerned about openly, publicly including gays and lesbians at New Heights. “Things like civil rights

was purely logical to me,” Singer explained, linking her own sense of being discriminated against as a woman with a lifelong, liberal advocacy on behalf of other oppressed social groups. She said:

It just made no sense to me whatsoever that there would be some people that we treated one way and some we treated another. It's taken me a while to learn that some people take longer. That the process of including gays, lesbians, transgendered persons in the church community is clearly the right thing to do, but it's also very hard to do. It's hard for some people to “get it.” I tend to still be a little bit impatient with that. . .

Despite her acknowledged need to move slowly when implementing congregational changes, Singer was clearly a driving force behind the community’s progressive tolerance—especially with regard to GLBT persons.

Many congregants were still learning to be comfortable with the growing presence of gay and lesbian people (including same-sex couples) on Sunday mornings and in other church activities. The vast majority of members, though, remained committed to keeping the doors of the faith community open to everyone and personally accepting these new participants into fellowship. “I thought parts of gay relationships were better left in the closets, so to speak,” said Dennis Brown. “But now I think in many cases they're the right thing for both partners because they stay together.” He was glad that “the church is open to them.” Still, he noted wryly, “It doesn't mean I'm going to march in a gay parade.”

I also found that Gillian Joyner displayed a somewhat mixed, evolving position towards GLBT congregants. “Jesus loves all people,” she said, expressing her broad, religiously-liberal worldview. But she then listed specific examples of social categories “loved” by Jesus: “The physically challenged. Mentally challenged. Gays, lesbians, and transgendered. Whatever. They are all his people.” In grouping homosexuality along

with forms of disability, Joyner subtly revealed her view of GLBT persons as somehow-flawed human beings. She seemed to suggest that gays and lesbians deserved her compassion rather than her respect as people of equitable value and dignity. While Joyner fully supported New Height's open and affirming position, she gave me the impression of being motivated more by a sense of charitable obligation for her social inferiors than a true feeling of spiritual interconnectedness with GLBT persons or a humanitarian commitment to broader egalitarian principles in society.

Another member who was ambivalent about gays and lesbians at New Heights was Rebecca Yancey. "I know that there are several people in the church who are homosexual," she said. "Everybody accepts that and is fine with it." However, she also reaffirmed her conservative values, saying:

I'm sort of along the lines of "don't ask, don't tell." It's like, I feel the same way about homosexuality as I do about heterosexuality. I don't expect people making out in public who are heterosexual or homosexual. It's sort of the same thing here. They'll accept it and that's great. That's fine. But you don't necessarily have to constantly make it stand out.

Although Yancey—like many other social conservatives and registered Republicans within the church—was not a strong supporter of gay visibility or strident advocacy on their behalf, she was nonetheless committed to their inclusion in the UCC community. Endorsing the broad tolerance celebrated and projected as the core identity of those within her Congregationalist church, she explained: "It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight or liberal or Republican or Democrat or any race. It doesn't matter here. Here it's just like we'll accept you whoever you are."

While most church members formally supported the inclusion of gays and lesbians, others did not and ultimately left the congregation. In some parts of the country,

disputes over gay rights have led entire UCC churches to drop out of the denomination (Seewer, 2006). At New Heights, lay leaders informed me that some people departed right after the congregation voted to officially become open and affirming. Others did so a few years later in protest after an official contingent from the church marched in the city's annual gay rights parade. During that latter event, about 25 more socially-liberal, activist members of the congregation participated in the parade, and the church's openly-gay, male choir director was even featured in an article in the local newspaper afterwards. "Some people here got really upset about that," one lay leader recalled. The controversy apparently erupted due to the increased visibility given to the congregation's official support for gays and lesbians. "Some people left the church because they were so upset," I was told. Such reactions suggested that the departing congregants may have been only loosely committed to their denomination's core value of practicing tolerance (thus "mismatched" with and tenuously-connected to their religious organization to begin with) and/or simply confused and alienated because of the unfamiliar GLBT persons joining their progressively-inclusive faith community.

To Cheryl Krueger and others at New Heights who were committed to progressive inclusivity, though, the members who departed were eventually replaced by new participants who strengthened the UCC congregation. She said:

To be quite honest, I believe the people we have gained have made us a more vital and interesting church. Because they're people from all perspectives and society. I'd rather be around somebody who has a more open mind than someone who has a closed mind and won't even listen to the other side of the story. The people who have joined here are quite interesting and have a lot to offer. I just feel we are better people for being exposed to that.

Krueger clearly endorsed the liberalizing trends at New Heights and the inclusion of GLBT persons there. Still, like many of her fellow conservative-minded congregants,

she retained a measured commitment to social traditions and continuity. “I don't espouse gay marriage,” she noted, drawing an apparent limit to her level of tolerance for gay rights and willingness to adjust traditional cultural institutions. But perhaps reflecting the influence of her progressively-diverse and accepting faith community, Krueger conceded: “I do support partners. I think marriage is a different thing. Legal partners are great. Just don't call it marriage.” While she opposed changing the traditional definition of marriage, Krueger's evolving sense of social tolerance and inclusivity had led her to support the legal recognition of same-sex couples and providing them with the rights and benefits of marriage.

As in some other mainline churches today (Moon, 2004), numerous congregants at New Heights held complicated views about gays and lesbians despite their church's officially-inclusive position. They found themselves in an apparent tension between their religiously-liberal and socio-politically conservative identities, which seemed to ultimately have a moderating effect on both. Such progressive dynamics in other mainline congregations around the nation may be why Manza and Brooks (2002) found a “shift of mainline voters to the political center” over the past thirty-five years as more conservative church members left in frustration and national denominational leaders voiced increasing support for liberal socio-political views. Social conservatives who chose to remain active in mainline churches are therefore often under growing pressure to moderate their positions—especially around issues of abortion and gay rights. Certainly at New Heights, people like Krueger and Yancey revealed an ongoing process of reconciling their conservative socio-political views with their liberal faith community's progressive commitment to “tolerance.”

III. A House Divided: The Challenges of a Liberal Community

While the majority of congregants attending New Heights Church seemed genuinely satisfied with their liberal faith community and many had proven their religious commitment through years of devotion, a number of others I encountered there were frustrated by various aspects of the group's diversity. Underlying tensions and occasional outbursts between members who disagreed over how to collectively express their religious values as a group exposed a clear challenge to the church's sense of unity. Although members shared commitments to religious leniency, inclusivity, and charity, they frequently disagreed along political lines about what—if anything—their liberal Christian faith required of them in the broader society. For most, simply supporting a welcoming, nonjudgmental environment fulfilled their religious expectations. Others, though, pursued a much more activist agenda, seeking to apply their compassionate values through broad society-building endeavors rather than just local charitable activities. Ultimately, these competing priorities among congregants eroded their social connections to one another. Some of the subjects I interviewed even ended up leaving New Heights due to the strains and lack of support they perceived there for their own values—a phenomenon not observed at either of the other two liberal churches included in this study. The subtle but ever-present tensions identified among a number of the religious liberals at New Heights presented a real problem for the church that contributed to organizational weakness.

“There are certain people here who I know I could never be what I'd consider close friends,” said Rebecca Yancey. Although she and her husband joined the church because of the affability of members there and had befriended many people in the

congregation, there were others at New Heights whom Yancey found herself consistently avoiding because of their outspoken, liberal political views. She explained: “I wouldn't ever want to be close to them, and I'm sure they would probably feel the same. There isn't any animosity there, but I wouldn't say there is friendship either.” In some cases the social separation maintained between Republican congregants like Yancey and social liberals at New Heights was sharp. In other cases, though, the tensions were much subtler. For example, Yancey said: “There are others who I know are quite liberal that I feel very comfortable and close to. We just kind of agree to disagree, and go on.” Many people I spoke with at New Heights had adopted this attitude of “agreeing to disagree” with those who did not share their political values. While on the one hand such efforts to overlook individual differences might serve as a strength in building and maintaining organizational unity, feeling detached and alienated from specific others in the officially “friendly” church—as Yancey indicated—suggested that the group’s solidarity was actually quite fragile and superficial in many ways.

Genine Singer recognized the political tensions that existed within her congregation, and the challenges faced by some of her diverse participants as they struggled to tolerate one another. “One of the issues that the church has to grapple with continually is the fact that [members] don't always like each other,” she acknowledged. “They don't always respect each other. Some of them speak off the top of their head without thinking. Some of them complain a lot.” Echoing this sentiment, one congregant described a conflict that often arose among members of the church’s monthly book group: “Before we invaded Iraq, we had some discussions here. Most of us who were discussing it were very much against invading Iraq. But there were always a few at the

table who would get up and leave. I learned later that they disagreed.”

In order to minimize the potential for this sort of intra-church discord, therefore, both Singer and the majority of lay leaders at New Heights intentionally sought to avoid conversations about political issues and the extent to which their religious values should be applied to broader public policy concerns. “Some people want political issues brought up and other people don't. So we try not to,” explained Vice Moderator Gillian Joyner. “We don't talk about politics from the pulpit. . . There are clearly people here who are very conservative.” Similarly, Cheryl Krueger told me:

The church should not take a stand on political issues. If a group of people from this church feel that this is a project they want to move forward with, that's fine. But that doesn't mean the whole church believes that. That's why I hate to see politics in here. I don't think a place of worship is a place for that to happen. You're supposed to be able to come here and thoughtfully work out problems. Where everybody can talk.

In defending the muted political discourse at New Heights and her own limited ability to promote her liberal socio-political views there, Singer said that the purpose of the church was not to be an agent of change in society, but merely: “To raise issues. To raise questions. To do some things. . . The church is here to open doors to change.” She seemed resigned to trusting the inherently-liberalizing dynamics of her diverse community to inspire greater empathy among her congregants over time, eventually leading some to embrace the sort of humanitarian public policies and programs she personally valued.

Frustrated Liberals

Unfortunately, some socially-liberal members at New Heights resented this gradualist approach and the congregation's limited involvement in social justice activism. Reflecting such views, 68-year old Francis Pressley told me how deeply unhappy she was

with her faith community's reluctance to engage in public policy discussions and advocacy. As a registered Democrat, self-described liberal, and lifelong Congregationalist, she had long cherished the UCC because of the national group's consistent outspokenness on issues of social justice and equality, which she viewed as matters of spiritual concern. For over four decades, she and her husband were active members at their local UCC congregation in southeastern Texas, and served in a number of lay leadership positions there. Pressley had also organized several social justice activities at that church, including a "Just Peace Institute" which allowed UCC congregants to join with members of the area's other liberal, mainline congregations in publicly opposing the use of the death penalty in their state. Pressley's social activism was not limited to church-related activities, but extended to years of involvement in her local League of Women Voters. For her, religiosity was closely linked to such society-wide humanitarian efforts, and working with other social liberals at church and elsewhere in her community on issues of shared concern gave her a tremendous sense of spiritual fulfillment. "I think the church provides the avenue for working on a spiritual journey," Pressley said in describing her devotion to organized religion. "You're with like-minded people, of course. It's a fellowship and support group."

However, after she and her husband retired to a warmer area of the nation in 2000 and joined the UCC congregation near their house (New Heights), Pressley was surprised to gradually discover how different her new church was compared to the one she left in Texas. Although the members at New Heights were similarly friendly and highly-tolerant of theological diversity, she realized that most of the religious liberals there were much more socially-conservative than the Congregationalists she had always known. In

trying to describe the differences she observed, Pressley said:

Justice versus charity. Charity work this church does. They've always done charity work. Typical charity work. Feed the poor. Give money. And it's important. But to figure out [the broader societal causes] and what I ought to do—I think the church should be on the cutting edge of that. I think the churches should be doing that ahead of everybody else. After all, isn't that what Christianity is about? The United Church of Christ is definitely at the forefront of justice among mainline churches. But that doesn't mean every congregation is because we're so autonomous.

This apparently-more subdued expression of liberal religious values at New Heights was quite different than how Pressley interpreted her own calling as a Christian:

If Jesus is my role model and you believe that God created each individual with all our shortcomings and all our hang-ups—that each individual requires the same integrity and respect—then justice issues is what we should be doing. I feel very strongly that the Christian church should be involved. We should be out there in front of everybody else. Leading the way. But we aren't.

Though Pressley was clearly disappointed with this aspect of her new UCC congregation, she initially made the decision to continue attending the church.

In order to pursue the sort of socially-liberal activities that were so important to her, she joined New Heights's Mission Outreach committee that oversaw the congregation's social service activities. In this lay leadership role, she and other liberal congregants on the committee not only sponsored many social justice opportunities for their fellow church members, but promoted what they believed to be the moral necessity of these far-reaching, humanitarian endeavors. Their efforts generally reflected the liberal social priorities of the national denomination as they promoted activism around issues such as abortion rights, gay and lesbian rights, anti-war efforts, and environmental protection.

Their attempts to create societal change, however, were often criticized by more socially-conservative members at New Heights. In one step taken by the committee, for

example, Styrofoam cups were eliminated at the church in order to reduce landfill waste. But Pressley told me that many congregants “didn’t understand why we did that.” In another case, she and the liberal-dominated committee encouraged congregants to use only free trade coffee in their homes, during church social gatherings, and in the welcome packages given to visitors on Sunday mornings. But this too was met with resistance. “The Moderator called me and said that I was making people at church feel guilty because they were drinking coffee that wasn't fair trade,” Pressley sighed. “For me, it's a no-brainer. But people didn't understand why we should be doing that. They said it doesn't taste good and it costs more. It costs more! I thought 'yes, that's the point. And you can afford it.' So I didn't know what to do about that.” On issue after issue over several years, Pressley said, she and the other liberal activists at New Heights were hindered by more conservative members of the church. “We were going too fast for the people who weren't on board already,” she explained. “I guess those of us working on the committee had been on board for years.”

Gradually, Pressley came to realize that some of her differences with others in the congregation came down to their competing views about the need for change. While she was inspired by and pursued personal, congregational, and societal transformation, the majority of New Heights’ congregants prioritized social stability and order in their lives and world. “Some people want to come to church and have it the same every Sunday,” Pressley described as one example of this fundamental difference among congregants. “The same old things. Sing the same hymns. For me, I want to come and have it different every Sunday. I don't want everything the same. I don't want to sing the same thing twice or do the same thing twice. For me, it's all about new learning.” Still, she

conceded that the process of development can be difficult: “Change is hard. I understand that. And it's harder for some people than others.”

Genine Singer seemed to understand this better than anyone in the congregation. Although she was highly involved in the surrounding community as a liberal activist on a number of social justice issues, she was extremely cautious about appearing to impose this agenda on others at New Heights. It was for this reason that she encouraged Pressley and other socially liberal congregants to avoid partisan divisions and lower their expectations about quickly changing people in the UCC community. “For someone like Francis,” Singer told me, “the only reason the church exists in her brain, is for social change. Well, I'm sorry, that is not the only reason the church exists.”

Pressley told me that she tried to tolerate the socio-political diversity at New Heights and be sensitive to Genine Singer's difficult position as minister. “I know where her heart is,” she said, “but Genine needs to be pastor to everyone in the congregation. I think she started out supporting justice issues in a very large way. But people must have complained. Because she had to back down.” Reflecting on the challenges that Genine faced, Pressley concluded: “I wouldn't be a pastor for anything in the world. Having to hold everyone together with differing views. I can't imagine how hard that must be.”

Singer acknowledged the general accuracy of this statement, saying that her work as a socially-liberal minister within a socially-conservative congregation was often frustrating for her. “I'm tired of the battle,” she said shortly before retiring in 2008. “I think there's a level at which I want people to just trust me. I've done the research. . .But people still fuss about it, and I just kind of roll my eyes.” Nearing the end of her professional career as a minister, she confessed to feeling “beaten down” by her struggle

to appease competing interests at New Heights. Such sentiments are common for liberal mainline ministers—especially women—who preside over more conservative congregations (Lummis, 2006). “I’ve never learned how to take myself in that kind of tension,” Singer said.

For Pressley, continuing to speak out and advocate on behalf of liberal social justice issues within her congregation resulted in escalating confrontations and a growing sense of being alienated from her fellow churchgoers. Finally, after the controversy over the congregation’s participation in the local gay pride parade, Pressley found herself at a breaking point. As a parent with an openly-gay daughter, she was personally committed to GLBT civil rights issues, and considered this fight for equality to be an expression of her most cherished, liberal spiritual values. Discovering how many congregants at New Heights did not apparently share her commitment to public advocacy on behalf of gay people, she said, “kind of broke my heart.”

Stung by what she considered a broad, consistent lack of support from her faith community, Pressley told me that she had decided to gradually “pull back from the church.” In explaining her reason for reducing her involvement, she said: “I guess I’m more comfortable with people who think like I do. That’s my problem.” Pressley noted that she was not the only one who had given up on New Heights. “Some of the people at church who I worked with on social justice issues are no longer active in church,” she lamented. “Like myself, their hearts were broken because the congregation didn’t appreciate what we were doing.” A little over a year after I interviewed her, Pressley joined these similarly-frustrated liberal congregants and dropped her membership at New Heights.

Frustrated Conservatives

Not only were some social liberals upset by the UCC congregation's lack of support for their values and priorities, but—as described at numerous points in this chapter—social conservatives often were as well. There were minor schisms within the congregation following the church's vote to become “open and affirming” and the group's later participation in the gay rights parade. Other social conservatives continued to attend, but seemed to view themselves as an embattled minority within the broadly-liberal denomination. Republican participants like Cheryl Krueger, for example, openly rejected the liberal outspokenness of national UCC leaders and disassociated herself from their views. Some new congregants, like Rebecca Yancey, similarly came to dismiss the liberal opinions of those around her. “After getting to know people at the church, I know there are people who are more conservative,” she observed. “I think the ones who are liberal are just more vocal about it.”

Although most social conservatives at New Heights seemed to find a way to peacefully coexist with their political opponents in the pews next to them, several families left the congregation during my observations there specifically due to outrage over perceived partisan slights against Republicans. One couple told me they had been increasingly frustrated while participating in a small group at church because a few socially-liberal members there insisted on talking about politics. Other conservatives didn't appreciate what they considered the occasional liberal rhetoric presented during Sunday morning services by visiting UCC ministers or other speakers who departed from New Heights' typical partisan neutrality. One military veteran, for example, complained: “Sometimes I get irritated when I don't want to hear that you were in Vietnam. That is

not why I came to church. Now you're going to tell me [Iraq is] the same war and we should fight about it. No. I don't come to church for that. I just don't. But they still do it.”

The most significant public conflict and subsequent loss of members during the course of this study occurred after an associate minister led a church discussion one Sunday morning around what congregants considered their most pressing worries for the nation. A number of socially-liberal participants took the opportunity to stand and publicly deride President George W. Bush, his Republican policies, as well as those Americans who voted to re-elect the administration in 2004. As a result of that inflammatory incident, three families in the audience—including one person I interviewed—were so offended by the attack on their conservative political views that they subsequently dropped their membership in the church.

Inability to Manage Conflict and Maintain Unity

New Heights was not the only church where tensions existed between congregants. As I detailed in the previous two chapters, religious liberals at both St. Luke's and Community churches also expressed degrees of resistance, frustration and disillusionment towards various aspects of their inclusive, ideologically-diverse congregations. Some disliked or were unsure of changes being made by their group, while others encouraged progressive transformations. These tensions arose around such areas as the proper use of rituals, how to incorporate and interpret historic symbols, which narratives to use on Sunday mornings, appropriate levels of social action, whether to speak out collectively on political issues, how to share lay leadership opportunities, and who was truly welcome to join the faith communities.

However, it was only at the UCC community where these simmering disagreements seemed to exist so widely and intensely among church members, escalating over time and ultimately leading several participants to abandon the religious organization altogether. Mainline churches marred by such conflict and internal divisions are often unable to grow (Roozen, 2006), suggesting that although New Heights' focused outreach efforts were able to successfully attract new members to the church, these individuals may be unable to develop strong, long-term devotion to their diverse faith community.

Chapter 5:

Sources of Devotion Among Religious Liberals

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

Despite the obvious cultural differences between the three churches described in the previous chapters, those participating at each location shared much in common with one another. Their culturally-lenient approaches to faith and similar preferences for “inclusive” congregations sharply distinguished them from the majority of American churchgoers who tend to be associated with more conservative social views and traditional religious beliefs (Pew Forum, 2004). In acknowledging these differences, Tim Barnesworth at St. Luke’s told me: “I think in some ways we have more in common with a congregation like Community [UU Church] than we have with an Episcopal church that uses the same worship as St. Luke’s but where it’s really not okay to have diversity of thought.” The commonalities among those participating at each of the three churches in this study revealed their clear positions in the liberal niche of the nation’s religious marketplace.

By far, one of the clearest traits to emerge among the people I interviewed was their near-universal opposition to religious fundamentalism. It was by contrasting themselves with what they obviously believed to be the more typical, conservative approaches to faith in America that they often constructed their own religious identities. “I’m very opposed to fundamentalist Christianity,” said Louise Johnson at St. Luke’s, explaining:

I grew up in the buckle of the Bible Belt in Nashville, TN and I watched the Baptist church throw out all of their moderates—the hurt of those people to be abandoned and betrayed by their own denomination. I just don’t think like those people, and it’s been very hard for me to live there all of my life because I’m totally opposed to everything that they believe.

Likewise, Delores Nichols at New Heights expressed the views of most of her fellow UCC churchgoers: “I’m not a person who believes that if you grew up not knowing

about Jesus you would go to hell. I believe God is definitely the Father of all people. So I wouldn't want a real fundamentalist church.” And Barney Thompson at Community UU simply said: “I would not be a member of a fundamentalist, conservative church because I would be in conflict with them all the time.”

Not only did they often criticize fundamentalism directly, but they demonstrated their rejection of conservative religiosity indirectly by supporting “loose” religious approaches that involved the selective interpretation and application of Christian culture. In different ways, the participants at all three liberal churches broke from the orthodoxies and moral precepts of historical Christianity. Congregants, for example, typically held to a universalist theology that dismissed the existence of hell and—like most mainline Protestants nationwide (Pew Forum, 2009)—believed that salvation was not limited just to Christians. They also expressed varying levels of distinct opposition to ecclesiastical authority. The UCC and UU communities did this most overtly by supporting a religious heritage of decentralized, congregational governance. Those at St. Luke’s, on the other hand, did participate in a denomination with a very hierarchical structure, but were also willing to challenge systems of authority. This was demonstrated by both the parish’s opposition to local, conservative diocesan leaders and support for the national Episcopal Church’s defiance of the worldwide Anglican Communion over GLBT issues. Interviewees were not only willing to question the power of religious institutions, but all rejected a literalistic interpretation of the Bible—or any other scriptural authority. Instead, they viewed sacred writings traditionally-held to be beyond challenge to actually be socially-constructed, historical artifacts that contemporary readers needed to discern using critical perspectives.

In addition to minimizing and/or rejecting fixed sources of religious authority, a second characteristic that religious liberals shared was a desire to maintain—and, perhaps, celebrate—modernist moral values related to individual freedom and social inclusivity. Most people I interviewed were pro-choice regarding abortion and supported equal opportunities for women in both society and religious institutions. Just under two-thirds had also been divorced, with one in five having experienced more than one marital dissolution. The extent to which their liberal faith communities tolerated such historically-sanctioned behaviors—deviating from more conservative religious institutions in the US—was most clearly demonstrated by the groups’ willingness to welcome gay and lesbian persons into fellowship. This stance was not only appreciated by the few individuals included in this study who were themselves homosexual, but by the 40% of all interviewees who told me that a member of their immediate family was gay or lesbian, and that they would only feel comfortable participating in a religious organization which supported their loved ones. Even those without any direct connection to GLBT issues tended to find comfort in their faith communities’ uniquely-inclusive religious positions. “There was an attraction from the gay and lesbian population to come here because we were Open and Welcoming,” said pro-choice, liberal Democrat Renee Pennington at St. Luke’s. “I would like to think that we stand for open and welcoming, period, regardless of what the issue is.”

A third and final characteristic that joined many of the religious liberals together was their general reluctance to believing in a traditional, supernatural notion of God. Like most other mainline Protestants nationwide (Newport, 2006), their beliefs about the divine were inconsistent and often subject to doubt. Many members at Community UU,

for example, were openly agnostic or atheistic, while those at New Heights tended to struggle when asked to describe their experiences of spirituality. Likewise, many at St. Luke's rejected or minimized the traditional Judeo-Christian words used to describe God, preferring instead to simply feel and worship what they encountered as a good, loving Sacred Mystery. Some individuals at all three churches looked for spiritual inspiration in Buddhist, Native American, and other nontraditional religious practices and ideas. And almost all told me that many of their most moving, sacred experiences occurred outside of their churches in natural settings.

Because of these variously-unorthodox and nontraditional positions expressed by religious liberals, it was perhaps unsurprising that many felt uncomfortable calling themselves "religious." Just like one third of Americans today (Gallup Jr, 2003), a number of people at the three liberal churches in this study described themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." This self-descriptor was used even by most of the lay leaders at the three faith communities—despite the clearly "religious" devotion they demonstrated through their longtime church memberships and/or official titles within the organizations. Tina Lindsey at St. Luke's Episcopal church reflected the views of many in the parish, saying: "[Being 'religious'] has almost a pejorative tone to it. . . . Being religious to me, has a lot of connotations of just living by the rulebook. Without thinking or questioning. Whereas spirituality has a far deeper component to it than just being religious." Echoing this sentiment, even atheist Marsha Avery at Community UU church recognized what she perceived to be the unique, profound moments of her existence, saying: "I don't consider myself religious, but I definitely have a spiritual life." In emphasizing the private experiential basis of "spirituality" over the cognitive (and often

supernaturally-oriented) affirmations of “religion,” Pastor Genine Singer at New Heights told me:

Spirituality cuts at the core values that you live by. Core things like hope, trust, sense of transcendence, self-identity and self-worth. Those kinds of things are the deep meaning parts of your life. I look at that as spiritual needs. Everybody has them. Some people seek to meet those needs in religious institutions. They join a church. Some people do it independently. They find meaning and spirit and their place in the universe without a church or religious institution.

This definition of spirituality demonstrated the sort of postmodern existentialist perspectives that led religious liberals to define the value of reality for themselves. For those who are “spiritual but not religious,” the sacred is determined by private, internal sentiments and emotional encounters. It was this emphasis upon personal *feelings*, I discovered, that the devotion of most religious liberals—including the overwhelming majority of seekers being attracted to liberal churches today—was based.

Religious liberals, especially those under 60, are not devoted to their respective faith communities because of any actual or perceived compulsory elements. The majority of people I interviewed did not fear divine punishment, the threat of excommunication, or of declining moral status for not being an active churchgoer. Instead, their religious activities were entirely voluntary, and motivated by the positive emotional and/or “spiritual” sentiments their churches aroused in various ways for them. Gillian Joyner at New Heights summarized this widespread approach to faith, telling me that a religious gathering is valuable if “you feel good when you're at the service or after the service.” Likewise, Susan Nelson at Community UU said: “I consider a successful worship service if I've cried. I love to cry. I always have my Kleenex handy.” This focus on emotional states was also shared by most of the Episcopalians at St. Luke's who found themselves drawn back to worship each Sunday morning in order to enjoy the

positive feeling of “being grounded” during liturgical routines.

Rather than specifically seeking to interact with traditional concepts of God or the supernatural, the liberal Episcopalians, Unitarian Universalists, and UCC congregants primarily pursued religiosity and became church participants because of what they found to be a variety of rare emotional experiences available in their faith communities.

According to sociologist Wade Clark Roof (1999), religious groups in America today are not only being shaped by traditional believers who share a supernatural orientation and sense of dependency on the divine, but by a growing number of people embracing congregational settings because of what are perceived to be the valuable emotional rewards associated with these environments. “Spiritual seekers,” he wrote, are on a “quest for something more than doctrine, creed, or institution.” Their attraction and commitments to formal religious expressions—if any—have “more to do with feelings, with awareness of innermost realities, with intimations of the presence of the sacred.” My research substantiated and expanded upon this finding, showing how religious liberals establish their devotional commitments based upon their emotionally-defined encounters with the “sacred” in their churches.

This chapter will examine the sources of these sacred experiences, and how those who use religious cultural tools loosely—or liberally—develop their devotional attachments to a faith community. I will begin by describing how postmodern dynamics have influenced spiritual seekers and those religious communities trying to attract them. I will then describe three distinct types of emotional fulfillment I identified among this study’s participants that served as a basis for their religious devotion (summarized in Table 1 in the Appendix), and consider the extent to which these emotional “products”

might support a culturally-liberal church's long-term growth and vitality. The chapter will conclude by introducing the concept of progressive-mysticism, and explain why I believe this cultural development may hold the most promise for revitalizing those organizations looking to thrive within the liberal religious marketplace today.

I. Postmodern Pursuit of the Sacred

Learning to appreciate and treasure a religious community based on the positive emotional sentiments aroused by the group is not a new phenomenon. Almost a century ago, classical social theorist Emile Durkheim (2001[1912]) described the distinctive ability of ancient ritualized religious gatherings to evoke “effervescent” feelings among participants and focus these sentiments into culturally-defined beliefs about the divine. The powerful experiences of the “Sacred” brought about through collective routines, he observed, seemed to prove to religious participants that their group's cultural practices and worldviews were morally right and useful, and that the envisioned supernatural totem they worshiped—and each personally felt—was indeed real. When such like-minded communities gather together today and engage in particular cultural routines and ceremonies, intense passions can be aroused within participants that infuses everything in their environment with an intense emotional energy unlike anything else experienced in profane, everyday life. This overwhelming, transcendent experience leads each member to feel personally touched by God and that divine blessings are upon his community and its distinctive symbols and practices. For Durkheim, this sacred emotional dynamic is key, serving to maintain social solidarity, stabilizing religious cultures and traditions over time, and inspiring the devotion of each new generation of the faithful.

In contemporary American society, though, such passionate, unique emotional

experiences are no longer limited just to religious settings. For over five centuries, the modernizing trends toward individualism have ever more unraveled the so-called “Sacred Canopy” (Berger, 1990 [1967]) that once sustained a hegemonic Christian faith in western societies. People have come to explore the world using a growing number of diverse cultural tools and to celebrate their own conceptions of meaningful, “sacred” experiences in a variety of settings (Demerath, 2000). Not only are people in the U.S. today frequently exposed to a plethora of religious claims besides those of orthodox Christianity, but a growing number are rejecting organized religiosity altogether and simply identifying themselves as “none” on nationwide religious surveys (Hout and Fischer, 2002). These unchurched individuals have presumably concluded that ultimate meaning in life is not predicated on traditional religious involvement.

Competing with religiosity today are a multitude of products that discriminating consumers are able to use to satisfy their personal needs. Within this crowded marketplace of both material and ideological products, successful sellers must usually employ advertising strategies that break through the cacophony of the public square and gain the attention of potential buyers. One of the most effective means for accomplishing this task is by appealing to and manipulating human emotions (Odih, 2007; Davidson, 1992). Products that succeed or fail in this competitive atmosphere are often not only those that satisfy the practical needs of consumers, but—perhaps more importantly—provide them with an enjoyable emotional experience. What gets noticed and “purchased” by many people, therefore, is not necessarily what is most practical or rational, but what individuals find to be most impressive and arousing.

As contemporary society has become increasingly charged with these

emotionally-stimulating dynamics, a gradual shift has taken place in how millions of people perceive reality and determine “ultimate truth.” While the emotional power of ritualized communities traditionally revolved exclusively around what Durkheim described as the sacred experiences associated with a specific Totem/god(s), the constant exposure to the affect-stirring claims of countless products today has seemingly scattered the “sacred” in all directions. This trend became so pronounced towards the end of the 20th century that social observers began describing the emergence of a new cultural dynamic which they awkwardly labeled as “postmodern” (McGuigan, 1999; Slater, 1999). Although no official, single definition for the phenomenon has yet been agreed upon—including whether postmodernism even comprises a separate, distinctive worldview or is merely a late-stage expression of advanced modernity—changes have clearly taken place in how many Americans perceive and interpret what is of ultimate value in their realities.

Whether thoughtfully adopted after a critical rejection of all fixed narratives as social constructions or simply fostered indirectly by the relativistic flux of living in a multicultural society where each consumer is granted the ultimate power to determine the value of products in the marketplace, this new life orientation is essentially an abandonment of externally-based meaning-making. Those expressing postmodern perspectives develop their own interpretations of ultimate meaning based upon the fluctuating, emotionally-compelling elements of life. Such moment-to-moment constructions of individual reality express an approach to living that philosopher Jean Paul-Sarte (1985 [1957]) once championed as “existentialist.” What matters most to these individuals is not what others have collectively determined as real, valuable or

sacred, but what their own experiences convey as being most important to them alone. Their broadly relativistic outlooks radically depart from the West's dominant philosophical and theological traditions of the past 2,500 years that were based upon the presupposition that "fixed truths" could be discovered which applied to all people. Among those expressing postmodern views, according to literary scholar Steven Connor (2004), "narrative logic is broken down, removing one of the central organizing principles of western thought. The notion of the 'real world' is permanently encased in quotation marks. . ."

Existentialism and the Search for Emotional Meaning

Those who seem to be most affected by postmodern trends and the emotionally-charged relativism of the marketplace are the financially and/or culturally-privileged members of society who have the time and financial resources to pursue active consumerism. It is perhaps unsurprising that these individuals are also the least likely to regularly participate in traditional religious communities or express strong support for supernatural concepts. According to a recent Gallup Poll of religion in America, for example, "an inverse relationship exists between levels of education and income and belief in God" (Newport, 2006). Formal, conventional religiosity has simply become irrelevant and unpersuasive to many of those who are exposed to the broadest range of stimulating ideas and diverse experiences in society. Some have even noted that the rise in college education in the US beginning in the 1950's was likely a factor associated with the eventual decline in social influence and membership levels of mainline Protestant denominations (Wuthnow, 1988).

Because consumer-minded postmodernists tend to find ultimate meaning in their

diverse experiences, they are often inherently “seeker-oriented.” These individuals are prone to moving between situations and optional “products” they find most emotionally-persuasive and thus valuable. They are searching for the sort of defining, “sacred” moments that traditional religiosity reliably provided to fixed communities, but that contemporary existentialists must find for themselves—and often in multiple locations over time.

The capitalist marketplace has responded by seeming to make emotion itself a product desired by consumers. Multi-million dollar movies, passionate radio and television programming, extreme sporting events, themed amusement parks, video games, the Internet, sex and pornography, food, and prescription and illicit drugs are just some of the many choices designed to appeal to, manipulate, and temporarily satisfy consumers’ emotional needs. Existentialists, especially, assemble their own notions of value and importance in reality around the fluctuating patterns of high and low emotional states evoked by these products. Even politics today often seems to be dominated more by officials who can successfully influence unstable public passions than by those who hold the most experience or informed positions on public policies (Westen, 2007). Uniquely postmodern lifestyles and notions of reality are thus propelled by ever-shifting personal impulses and capitalist market forces, and contribute to the cultural dynamics of contemporary society. The demands of existentialist seekers ultimately determine the success of consumer-oriented products—including religious ones—being promoted in the marketplace (McCracken, 1988). For goods to be successful, therefore, they must usually prove themselves to be emotionally-valuable and capable of meeting the personalized, subjective needs of potential buyers.

The Sacredness of Contemporary Relationships

Of the many products available to discriminating, self-oriented consumers today, perhaps none provide more positive affect and ontological meaning than one's interpersonal relationships. Feelings initially evolved, after all, through increasingly complex interactions among social animals (Evans & Cruse, 2004; Evans, 2001; Darwin, 2007 [1872]). It is thus unsurprising that people often pursue and discover their highest levels of joy in relation to others. The cult of romanticism, for example, has thrived because of the overwhelming emotional (and sensual) pleasures of being "in love" with a significant person. Family relations have likewise been raised by some to an almost cult-like institution due to the potential emotional rewards associated with interacting with one stable, intimate group. Affect defines the value of these postmodern products, creating pseudo-religious devotion for what are felt to be the precious, "sacred" experiences of romantic and familial relations. But as the nation's high divorce rate reveals, relationships that maintain value solely upon the basis of subjective, oft-fleeting emotions are inherently fragile. Still, the promise of living "happily ever after" and discovering ontological meaning through personal connections remain compelling to millions of existentialist seekers.

The emotional power of relationships also drives the cult of celebrity, with pop stars, musicians, and actors often inspiring passionate affect among their loyal (and sometimes obsessive) followers. The charisma of high profile individuals and groups can be intoxicating, especially for postmodern consumers who have come to equate the impressive with the important. Committed fans thus surround themselves with images of their obsessions—posters, buttons, screen savers, bumper stickers, t-shirts— and often

demonstrate a faithful adoration historically reserved for more traditional religious symbols like the cross or crucifix.

Indeed, the extreme devotion that postmodernists hold for their real or perceived relationships with others stems from the effervescent, “sacred” emotions they often derive from these experiences. This is not unlike traditional religious believers whose worldviews and sense of meaning were sustained by the unusual, intense sensations sparked by their mystical relations to the god(s). What drives existential consumers in contemporary society more than anything is their active search for the sort of sacred, typically-relational encounters that might fill their lives with purpose and value. According to sociologist Randall Collins (2005), romance, families, and perceived connections to celebrities often evoke pleasant, meaning-building experiences because they involve ritualized interactions. Pleasant emotions, he contended, are unleashed anytime two or more people interact with one another, even in just a simple conversation. Extrapolating on Durkheim’s theory of religious rituals and the sacred, Collins argued that “emotional energy” can be generated whenever people share any common focus of attention and follow traditional patterns of behavior. Simply speaking with another person draws both participants temporarily into a common frame of reference where the words operate as shared symbols of value that follow an already agreed-upon system of order. This collective focus creates a moment of meaningful clarity in the flow of life, and thus unleashes positive feelings of security and comfort. The more often the same people successfully engage in these “interaction ritual chains,” the greater the affinity they often feel for one another.

Unfortunately, even as the postmodern demand for sacred relational encounters

has grown, the number of actual opportunities for people to engage in social interaction is declining. According to research by political scientist Robert Putnam (2000), there has been a dramatic decrease in social capital and community ties in America over the past 60 years. The breakdown of these interpersonal connections are due to the pseudo-social alternatives provided by TV and the Internet, increasing time required for suburban commuting, declining financial resources of families, and the death of the civic-minded generations who were shaped by the Great Depression and world wars. Increasingly-isolated lifestyles thus amplify the postmodernist's emotional hunger and raise the value of relational products that might fill their lives with meaning.

Selectively Consuming the Relational Products of Religiosity

This may explain why a growing number of existentialist seekers in recent years have come to value the stable cultural environments offered by faith communities. Within these settings, they find opportunities to develop the sort of reliable, intimate relationships they crave. Rather than selecting religious institutions because of their fixed claims about the supernatural and ultimate truth, though, relativistic postmodernists tend to take from religion only those elements they enjoy. They selectively consume the various sacred emotional products available in religious settings, breaking apart and often separately evaluating each component of the cultural environment. For example, in describing this increasingly-common, contemporary approach to religious involvement among Baby Boomers (perhaps the first postmodernist "Me" generation), Wade Clark Roof (1993) wrote:

Especially educated, middle-class boomers, from all religious backgrounds—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim—look upon religion much the same way they look upon choice of life-style and consumption patterns. One rejects a fixed menu and picks and chooses among religious alternatives. Personal growth is at

the basis of such choice: one participates in a congregation or cultivates New Age spirituality, or does both as is not so uncommon, much for the same reason as one is involved in a 12-step recovery group—“if it helps you,” as we heard repeatedly in our interviews with boomers.

In a postmodern society, being “helped” by religion means that various cultural tools and/or aspects of a faith community evoke some sort of experience that discriminating, consumer-oriented individuals find personally and emotionally satisfying.

Religiosity has become ever-more subject to the same sort of individual preferences that govern the success or failure of all other affect-stimulating products competing in the contemporary marketplace (Warner, 1993). While traditionalist churches that serve more culturally-conservative, lower classes may grow or be sustained by superfluous demographic factors such as the birth rate of their loyal members and immigration trends (Hout, Greeley, & Wilde, 2001), religions that primarily serve postmodern, privileged individuals must be capable of fostering affect-producing experiences in order to attract new participants and remain viable institutions.

As I discovered through my interviews with the religious liberals in this study, existentialist seekers do not view religious traditions as single, inseparable cultural systems, but as assemblages of individual “products” with varying emotional values. Rather than accepting a religious culture or institution as exclusively “true” and worthwhile (and evoking an all-encompassing “Sacred Canopy”), postmodernists evaluate the experiential significance of each component of religiosity. Some religious liberals, for example, are devoted to their formal organizations because of the social opportunities available to interact with others “like them” (however defined). Others find their strongest emotions are related to the ritualized cultural tools that seem to connect them with idealized social communities extending beyond their local congregation.

Finally, there are those churchgoers whose devotion relies mostly on compelling experiences of spiritual awareness, and of being mystically connected with some Sacred Reality beyond themselves.

Postmodern religious institutions, therefore, do not survive because of an explicit, collective celebration of a single traditional Totem, but by evoking separate types of sacred experiences that variously affirm the inclusive preferences and ideals of their members. These communities succeed to the extent that they can develop, market, and steadily supply each of the three Durkheimian “products” of religiosity—social group, culture, and spiritual experiences—to consumers who express differing levels of attraction to and ability to utilize each one. As I discovered in the present study, faith communities that effectively offered these different sacred experiences to existentialist-oriented seekers not only appealed to more segments of the liberal religious marketplace, but were given opportunities to teach new members over time how to appreciate additional relational connections within the church. To the extent that these emotional products inherently were or gradually became valuable to participants, they ultimately provided sources of devotion that enhanced the viability and long-term success of the liberal religious organizations.

II. Social Relations as a Source of Devotion

For a significant number of skeptical liberal consumers, the most compelling relational dynamic encountered in their churches was from interpersonal interactions with similar people. In describing his reasons for attending Community UU Church, for example, atheist Barney Thompson told me: “[Churchgoing] enriches your life through commitment and relationships. . . . I don't see it as an external act or a divinity or some

greater love of mankind, and all that. It just basically makes for a better life.” Thompson participated in his congregation specifically because of the social opportunities that he thought could be obtained there. As someone who recently moved from another part of the country, he was eager to meet new people in his area and viewed the local UU church as a place where he would find others who shared his interests and values. Thompson was not seeking answers to theological questions or spiritual experiences with fellow congregants, but what he acknowledged was probably a “very selfish” interest in his narrow social goals.

Such “friend-seeking” congregants could be found at all three liberal churches, and seemed to reveal to me that these individuals represented a specific type of consumer in the liberal marketplace. These included Alex Tilley at St. Luke’s and Harvey Russell at New Heights, both of whom were recent retirees, had moved from other areas of the country, and were specifically looking to meet friends in their new city. As I described in previous chapters, Tilley decided to attend St. Luke’s after seeing a newspaper article written by Tim Barnesworth that promoted the parish’s hospitality towards GLBT persons, while a hospital visit by the New Heights’ minister was what convinced Russell and his wife to try the UCC church. Neither Tilley nor Russell had ever been very interested or involved in organized religion, and had spent decades among the growing “unchurched” segment of American society. Even after joining their respective congregations, they told me that “God” remained a relatively abstract, elusive concept. Yet the social connections they began developing in their welcoming faith communities were emotionally-compelling for them, leading to a growing sense of religious devotion for the first time in their lives. Among more highly-educated individuals who are less

likely to believe in God with certainty—and who predominate within most mainline churches nationwide (Newport, 2006)—the most persuasive emotional rewards available in a church setting may be related to the social relations enjoyed with other congregants (Fletcher, 2004).

The three churches in this study certainly provided numerous opportunities for members to develop such devotional bonds. All of the congregations, for example, sponsored a “coffee hour” after their Sunday services, orientation meetings for prospective new members, and a variety of classes and small group activities during the week around typically “religious” topics and practices. These included Bible studies, religious book studies, DVD viewing and discussions (such as the “Saving Jesus” program at St. Luke’s), and/or small groups focused on meditative practices and spiritual development. Social relations were also fostered during the various charitable and social justice activities sponsored by the faith communities, and during the regular administrative meetings attended by lay leaders. Similar to most other mainline churches nationwide that sponsor a variety of small group programs designed to enhance social and interpersonal dynamics among participants (Wuthnow, 1996), numerous opportunities for social networking were available within the three research settings I observed.

Especially at Community UU and New Heights UCC, encouraging informal interactions between members became a key source of their organizational missions and identities. At both churches on Sunday mornings, visitors were asked to stand and were personally welcomed by lay leaders at the front of the sanctuaries. This was a routine part of the two groups’ services, emphasizing the importance that interpersonal dynamics

played in the solidarity of these congregations. New Heights went even further, committing a significant amount of time at the beginning of services for members to casually engage one another and share news about their personal lives. During the week, both congregations also sponsored a variety of socially-oriented, recreational programs for members, such as potlucks, picnics, secular book discussions, craft classes, and/or gatherings for playing cards and other games. With so much focus on the importance of interpersonal connections between congregants, it was perhaps unsurprising that so many of these religious liberals defined the concept of “spirituality” in terms of their encounters with friends, family, and loved ones. For them, the sacred was in the social.

Demographic Homogeneity and a Family Feeling

The development of positive sentiments around social relations was possible at all three churches primarily because of the similar socio-economic and educational statuses of their participants. Because social classes each have distinctive cultural perspectives and values (Bourdieu, 1973), the generally white, privileged members of the middle classes who predominated at the three congregations seemed to enjoy an easy, automatic comfort with one another. Not only did their similar backgrounds and lifestyles serve as natural sources of conversation and connection between members, but their more tolerant, relativistic outlooks as postmodernists contributed to similarly-liberal social and moral values.

Many people I spoke with noted the common demographic features of their communities. One Unitarian Universalist, for example, said: “I think everyone there is pretty highly-educated. They're all probably pretty liberal. I think everyone's nice, friendly, and nonjudgmental, for the most part.” An Episcopalian made a similar

comment about those at St. Luke's: "We read a lot and hold similar political views. We are involved in community affairs. There's a lot of people in political office there. . . . We have a fairly high level of education, which is neither here nor there. But it is a common feature." A lay leader at New Heights also described what he recognized as the common features of the UCC congregants:

A very high percentage of highly-educated people come to this church—and to similar other types of churches. That is my observation. We have a relatively high percentage of people who have higher degrees here. And so there's a lot in common.

Through such comments, interviewees revealed their awareness of the social traits they shared with others in their intentional, moral communities.

In making these observations, though, most people generally downplayed the possible relevance of this social homogeneity as "neither here nor there." A UU congregant, however, was among the few who openly acknowledged the importance of being in a church with demographically-similar others:

Aside from there [being] a lot of people with similar progressive values, the other thing I like about our church is that there's a lot of intelligent people in the Unitarian church. There's an intellectual dimension to it that's nice. . . . People who go to the Unitarian church are predominantly white and middle class, I'd say. Not exclusively. I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. And I've wondered sometimes if that's one reason I feel comfortable there.

A fellow member of her congregation was even more direct:

I'm in a church [with others who] I have more things in common with. It gives me a sense of comfort. It makes it easier if you can agree with most of the people there. . . . I guess what I'm saying is that I'm not terribly interested at this point in my life in spending time with people I strongly disagree with.

So openly attributing one's sense of comfort in a religious community to the typically class-based values and perspectives shared by other churchgoers is perhaps unusual for a layperson to admit. Scholars, though, have long recognized the importance that race,

region, and class have played in maintaining the various denominational divisions in society (Niebuhr, 1984 [1919]). Even today, mainline churches nationwide continue to serve mostly white, older, educated professionals (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002), with the Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and Unitarian Universalist denominations being especially appealing to society's powerful and cultural elites (Davidson, Pyle, and Reyes, 1995; Davidson, 1994). I found that the social similarities among those within the three churches in this study was a key reason why many new members felt comfortable so quickly in those communities. Such common dynamics allowed many of these culturally and/or financially privileged postmodern consumers to develop enjoyable social connections with one another, and to sometimes rely upon these alone as the basis for their organizational devotion.

At Community UU and New Heights UCC in particular, the similar social characteristics of congregants was why the groups were able to so successfully promote interpersonal interactions as such a central component of their identities. The members of these churches tended to emphasize the "friendliness" and "family-like" feelings they encountered with one another. Some participants at the Community UU church even went so far as to form "Extended Families," with one member telling me that she felt more comfortable among the similar-minded people in this small church group than among her actual biological relatives. Other UU congregants participated in a variety of social groups at church that formed around even narrower, demographically-defined interests, such as those for seniors, youth, gays and lesbians, men, women, and people interested in particular hobbies or crafts.

The religious liberals at New Heights UCC especially emphasized the "family

like” relations they enjoyed at church. This was not only because of the friendly interactions between congregants that was formally promoted by church leaders, but because so many people attended with their actual family members. Most participants brought into the religious setting one or more people with whom they already felt closely connected, and these emotionally-fulfilling bonds were a primary reason that Sunday morning services were viewed as sacred, socially-oriented experiences.

Like many such UCC members, Dennis Brown joined the church with his spouse, and their weekly religious attendance quickly became a positive, anticipated activity for them as a couple. Similar to many “Golden Rule” Christians in mainline congregations who view religiosity as socially-desirable, though not mandatory (Ammerman, 1997; Wuthnow, 2000), Brown and his wife appreciated the sense of moral and social approval derived from their association with a formal religious organization. “Church is a guide or roadmap on how to live to the best of your abilities,” Brown said, indicating the seemingly inherent moral value he attached to “church” as a vague social institution. “It involves giving your time, experience, and funds to support an institution that is supportive of you.” In this way, Brown revealed how his sense of religious devotion stemmed primarily from the positive emotional and moral “support” that he and his wife enjoyed within their comfortable, “family-like” faith community.

Limitations of Socially-Oriented Devotion

Despite the valuable role that friendships and family dynamics clearly played in the religious commitments of many liberal congregants I encountered, churches that rely too extensively on promoting this one emotional product above other types of relations often prove to be fragile organizations. An empirical analysis by Roozen (2006) of

factors associated with growth in mainline congregations, for example, showed that having a “close-knit family feeling” among members was not associated with organizational expansion. Likewise, a study of Unitarian Universalist churches by Cooley (2006) found that “rapidly declining congregations were much more likely to see themselves as a ‘close-knit family’ than rapid growth congregations.” Frequently, therefore, mainline and liberal churches strongly defined by tight social relations between participants tend to be unsuccessful institutions in the postmodern marketplace.

One reason for the limited appeal of such groups may be that the demographic homogeneity enjoyed so much by current members and emphasized by church leaders also restricts the sort of new participants who might be attracted to the congregation. This may explain why so many faith communities with older congregants appeal mostly to other older people, just as more highly-educated participants primarily attract other highly-educated individuals. With many liberal churches relying so heavily on the interpersonal interactions between their socially-similar members in order to evoke sacred emotional experiences that inspire devotion, it is perhaps no wonder that so many mainline youth ultimately abandon the churches (Pew Forum, 2004). These young apostates simply are unable to connect in emotionally-fulfilling ways with the older, experienced, and educated professionals who predominate in these mainline, socially-oriented communities. For example, despite Laurie Anderson’s enthusiasm for having discovered the “welcoming,” gay-friendly Christian environment at New Heights, she did feel alienated from the mostly older members there. “I know they have a lot of small group things, but 90% of the people who participate are over 40,” she said. While admitting that there were a lack of meaningful social opportunities for her at church,

Anderson told me: “I can still be a member of New Heights and go find other things. I do need a social group that I'm comfortable with and have things in common with. But I can start hiking or biking. It doesn't have to be church.” Similarly, 33-year-old Heather Atkins at Community said: “I wanted to join to meet more people I could identify with.” But after participating in a few small groups and classes, she had yet to develop any meaningful social connections. “The people at church were all older than me, so I didn't meet any great pals there.” While Atkins continued to enjoy the UU services each Sunday because her parents also attended and Anderson valued the UCC community because she and her partner were accepted there as a couple, both congregants were generally unable to connect with or form emotionally-valuable relationships with the mostly-older members of their faith communities. For those postmodern seekers without parents or partners to share such a religious environment, churchgoing would hold little social-relational value.

A second limitation for churches that rely extensively on socially-oriented emotional products is that members may resist any changes occurring within the congregation that might disrupt the familiar relational patterns they have come to enjoy. Some may even resent outreach efforts to potential new members, and foster a sort of “cliquish” environment that visitors find alienating (Olson, 1989).

I was surprised to discover, for example, that despite the prominent recruitment strategies employed by Genine Singer and lay leaders at New Heights, a number of congregants did not support these activities. Gillian Joyner told me that a few church members did not understand why specific practices were adopted to identify and welcome visitors during services. “Some people really wondered why we had to have

greeters every Sunday morning and why we needed to wear our name tags,” she said.

“They thought ‘we’re friendly and like each other. We must be a great church.’

Fortunately, not everybody feels that way. They want to open up and be friendly towards new people.” Acknowledging the effort involved in maintaining her congregation’s outreach efforts, Singer went even further, offering this bleak prediction about the future of the UCC community after her retirement:

Growth has been steady for five years. But it's going to stop now. Because not many people know how to grow a church. Especially among the hospitality group who greet new members, nobody knows how to follow up on that and do it well. While I'm doing it, it works. Nobody else gets it.

Although none of the people I interviewed at New Heights said they personally opposed the church’s outreach efforts—or would fail to maintain them after Singer’s retirement—many did refer to what was apparently a subtle undercurrent of opposition among some members towards the group’s broad recruitment activities. Overall, the UCC congregation had publicly, officially defined itself as an inclusive, friendly community that eagerly welcomed all people into fellowship. Beneath this veneer, however, Singer and various lay leaders revealed to me that keeping the doors of their socially-oriented church open proved to be a constant challenge.

I repeatedly heard in various ways from those at New Heights that: “change is hard for some people, and harder for others.” Nothing better demonstrated this reality than in how some UCC congregants negatively responded to the church’s growing outreach to gays and lesbians. As I described in the last chapter, a few people left the congregation when the group first became “open and affirming” towards GLBT persons, while others departed after the church’s gay choir director was featured in a local newspaper and a contingent from New Heights participated in the city’s annual gay pride

parade. But I doubted that many of these disgruntled individuals abandoned their faith community because they were passionately opposed to homosexuality along moral grounds. After all, they had been members—sometimes for many years—of one of the most publicly gay-friendly denominations in the United States (Dewan, 2005). Instead, their departures were more likely prompted by what they feared would be the imminent, unwelcome changes occurring within their familiar social environment as more unknown GLBT persons joined their local religious “family.” I suspect that such religious liberals were content to tolerate gay equality in society as an abstract moral ideal, but felt threatened by the possibility that “foreigners” might suddenly disrupt their stable, demographically-homogenous, and “sacred” congregational home.

For churches like New Heights that sustain organizational unity primarily by promoting “friendly” relational products to socially-similar participants, members’ devotion often depends on maintaining fixed, relatively-conservative dynamics within the communities. This was also demonstrated at Community UU, where a few longtime atheistic members felt threatened by the expanded use in printed materials of the church’s logo with a Christian cross and Rachel Corrigan’s evolving references to spirituality during sermons. Just like at New Heights, religious liberals at Community who relied on their stable, enjoyable social relations in order to maintain their devotion were easily upset by any perceived changes to their familiar social environment. Clearly, such reactions from some churchgoers place significant limitations on those congregations seeking to be relevant, attractive, and successful sellers within the competitive, postmodern marketplace. This is also, perhaps, a significant reason for the ongoing membership decline in those mainline churches nationwide where socially-oriented

products have become so overwhelmingly emphasized that other elements of organizational identity are diminished (Wuthnow, 2002; Wuthnow, 2000).

III. Cultural Relations as a Source of Devotion

A second key relational product that served as a primary source of devotion for many religious liberals related to the distinctive subcultural features utilized within their churches that they perceived as connecting them to a larger ideological community. Rather than enjoying their congregations primarily because of interpersonal relationships with specific, demographically-similar “friends,” they instead cherished their sense of being a part of an expansive and mostly-faceless social network with whom they shared a common cultural experience. Rich Parsons at St. Luke’s, for example, expressed this sentiment when he described feeling connected to historical Christian believers throughout history, and belonging to something bigger than just his Episcopal parish. He said: “I would dread the day that Tim [Barnesworth] retired, because it would certainly change our church's life. But we still have a central, shared experience that will be alive beyond all of us.” Similarly, Marsha Avery at Community UU was moved to tears while telling me about her first months attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation decades ago when she came to the powerful realization that “this is what I have been my whole life.” For such devotees, the unique cultural dimensions of their churches resonated in deep, meaningful ways by allowing them to experience an idealized sense of being embedded within an abstract, sacred community extending beyond their local settings.

Peaceful Subcultural Routines

One way that such cultural relations were fostered was through the ritualized use of particular cultural tools. Each church was defined by certain symbols, narratives, and

practices that were unique to their denominations and faith traditions. While the environment at St. Luke's was largely shaped by the "high church" celebration of ancient, widely-used Christian liturgical routines, Community UU and New Heights UCC reflected the sort of cultural structures and congregational dynamics that are more typical of mainline Protestantism in the US and what has been called "Golden Rule Christianity" (Ammerman, 1997). Although the Unitarian Universalist congregation had adopted a multi-faith identity rather than a distinctly Christian one, there were nonetheless numerous ways in which the church continued to reflect the UU denomination's Congregational and Social Gospel heritages.

For the few life-long denominational loyalists I encountered at each church (including all three ministers), the particular subcultural elements of their respective faith communities served as important sources of personal identity and organizational devotion. Tim Barnesworth, for example, told me how important the liturgy was for him, and that it "sort of gets under your skin," revealing how the familiar cultural routines he learned in childhood were able to evoke a seemingly-automatic and positive emotional response. Rachel Corrigan was similarly committed to the institutionalized skepticism, social liberalism, and multiculturalism that was associated with her upbringing in the Unitarian Universalist denomination. For Genine Singer, the United Church of Christ was cherished for the group's social justice activism and the sort of loose, flexible interpretations of Christianity that had long defined her religious identity. In ways such as these, long-term devotees of each denomination expressed a loyalty to the broader social movements and networks represented by their religion's subcultural characteristics.

Even for those who recently joined the churches and were not raised as

Episcopalians, Unitarian Universalists or UCC members, the distinctive cultural patterns utilized within each setting were often interpreted as familiar and indicative of a larger faith community with which they could identify. This was perhaps most evident at St. Luke's where over half the people I interviewed were former Catholics. While over one third of Americans who were raised in the Roman Catholic Church eventually leave that organization (Pew Forum, 2004), the large number of Catholic apostates participating at St. Luke's indicated that many continue to enjoy and find value in the liturgical patterns learned earlier in life. Disgruntled ex-Catholic Larry Best—who visited several liberal churches in his area before deciding upon his current Episcopal parish—told me: “You really do need to ultimately find your way back to something you're familiar with.” Likewise, many of the new participants at Community UU and New Heights UCC had been raised in and/or immediately transferred from other culturally-similar mainline Protestant denominations. In describing her UU community, Susan Nelson said:

There's a lot of aspects about [UU churches] that are very much like Methodist churches, and Presbyterian churches. You know, mainline denominations—Protestant churches. With the organ, and the order of service is very Protestant and a couple of hymns and so on.

What such individuals at all three churches ultimately revealed was how the liberal religious marketplace is largely composed of “subcultural families,” with niche groups of consumers possessing particular cultural frames that allow them to more easily identify with and foster certain types of cultural relations over others.

For many of those in each church who “matched” the particular cultural routines utilized in the setting (or who were willing to make a dedicated effort to learning such patterns), ritual became a cherished postmodern commodity that served as the primary source of their devotion and sense of being in relation to a larger group. Such routines

were expressed in many ways, from the liturgical and meditative to shared learning opportunities and collective community activities. At St. Luke's, the structured liturgies and weekly Eucharist clearly served as the most important methods for fostering subcultural identity and unity. "The liturgy is the 'A-number one' component of the life in this church that I'm drawn to," Rich Parsons told me. Echoing this sentiment, Louise Johnson said: "Ritual is very important to me, absolutely. It gives me strength and comfort." Even Wendy Allen, who was raised in the Methodist tradition, enjoyed these cultural routines, saying: "I like liturgy. I like that repetition. And I like the words. I like communion every Sunday. That seems so connected because it's such a physical experience." Some members at Community UU shared similar comments about the more liturgical elements in their congregation. Freda Starr observed: "The church has a definite order of service. You can just expect what's going to happen and when. It lends itself to what I would call liturgy." Similarly at New Heights, church services followed a clear structure and utilized features that certain congregants found enjoyably familiar. "I like what Genine does at the end—the Benediction," said one new UCC member. "I love it. I don't feel like I get church unless I have it." Other UCC congregants mentioned how much they enjoyed singing familiar Protestant hymns together. Through such rituals conducted at all three churches, religious liberals often came to identify with and enjoy the varying expressions of subcultural unity that regularly took place within their communities.

Along with the use of liturgical and meditative routines, cultural relations were also fostered during sermons when each community collectively focused on the symbols and narratives expressed by their ministers. For many interviewees, the impressive

speaking styles and messages of a religious leader was what initially led them to feel connected to the church. In addition to personally affirming the typically “liberal” and variously “unorthodox” content expressed by the ministers, participants seemed to experience a sort of bonding with one another as they realized that those around them also supported the spoken message. One UU congregant highlighted the importance of the sermon, saying: “A time [when] I feel really in the moment or purposeful is when I'm learning something useful or interesting. Stretching my mind. Then I do feel a rush from that and more connected to the other people. We're all learning something really important.” Similarly, Bradley Reynolds said: “St. Luke's has been deeply meaningful to me because of Tim's sermons.” In describing one of the key reasons why she continued to be active at New Heights even after her husband died, Cheryl Krueger told me: “To hear what the lesson is. I need a good pastor / mentor / religious leader who can focus on living today in our world with some beliefs that it is good and there is a reason for us to be here. Without that, it would make my days less fulfilling.” The collective, ritual-like focus upon and affirmation of a minister’s words, therefore, proved to be another enjoyable subcultural element within the groups.

External Threats and Countercultural Unity

In addition to being pulled into closer cultural relations through the familiar, peaceful cultural routines of their particular faith communities, many churchgoers also variously experienced a sense of being forced together by hostile, threatening forces perceived to be in the larger world. While my description in chapter three of the “countercultural sanctuary” at Community UU was perhaps the clearest example of this process, I encountered some people at each church whose institutional loyalty and

enthusiasm relied heavily on such conflict-oriented dynamics. The way some religious liberals criticized the spread of fundamentalist Christianity, growing social conservatism, and/or the political dominance of Republicans in the early years of the George W. Bush administration, for example, often reminded me of how fundamentalist believers are unified by collective denunciations of the “evil” and “sinfulness” in mainstream society. For the liberal congregants who sensed strong threats in the world, the subcultural elements of their churches similarly marked the dividing line between a community deemed to be safely “us,” and a dangerous “them” lurking beyond.

Aside from the near-universal condemnation that congregants in this study expressed for the general phenomenon of religious fundamentalism—and which I previously noted was a key characteristic of their shared status as religious liberals—many participants also felt directly threatened by what they perceived to be the activism of conservative, orthodox believers in America today. Some liberal churchgoers feared the growth of conservative, evangelical churches around the nation, while others were particularly disturbed by the significant influence of religious conservatives in shaping the policies of a Republican Party that at the time controlled all branches of the federal government. Research has shown that during the Bush Presidential administration, ideological divisions throughout the country became sharper. Religious polarization and exclusivity, for example, increased in almost every major faith group—including evangelicals, mainline Protestants, black Protestants, and Catholics—with growing numbers of devotees asserting their religion alone was the “only truth faith leading to eternal life” (Pew Forum, 2009). The sharpness with which conservatives have increasingly defined themselves in both US religion and politics has in turn generally

prompted greater unity in those groups opposing them (Lerner, 2006; Hays, 2005; Hunter, 1991), and even sparked a voter backlash against a Republican Party that has largely embraced the rhetoric and views of the Religious Right (Wallis, 2007, 2005; Bolce and DeMaio, 1999; Bolce and DeMaio, 1999).

Such confrontational tensions seemed to increase the value—and distinctiveness—of the three liberal churches I observed, and made their expressed subcultures more significant to those who felt threatened in the larger society. A liberal Episcopalian told me that “you don’t have to be a Bush hater to attend [St. Luke’s].” After pondering the very few Republican parishioners who attended there, though, she smiled and admitted: “I don’t know how [they do] it. The people here are so liberally-oriented. You stand on the patio on Sunday morning and you know what’s going on. Just the passing conversation.” As I previously described, the congregants were more politically-divided at New Heights UCC, but even there the Republicans I interviewed were openly critical of their party’s socially-conservative policies. Rebecca Yancey, for example, said:

I am a Bush supporter, but I don't agree with everything he says. The things I disagree with him on are what a lot of people would consider the religious beliefs. Because I think he's pretty far right on some of the religious beliefs. As far as family and things like abortion, I don't agree with him. . . I don't think anyone has the right to tell you that. I think that should be a personal decision.

Fundamentalist and conservative trends in the larger society were most often viewed as threats because they undermined the sort of personal freedoms that religious liberals of all political stripes tended to cherish.

The churchgoers who perhaps felt most directly threatened by socially-conservative religious and political trends in the US, though, were GLBT persons, and

their families, friends, and supporters. These religious liberals told me they were particularly worried by the ongoing backlash against same-sex marriage in the country in recent years, as well as the more assertive minority of orthodox believers in many mainline denominations who were exerting greater influence within those institutions. Gays and lesbians often feel alienated from religious groups, leading most to either abandon organized religiosity altogether or find supportive liberal faith communities that help them defuse attacks from conservative believers (Yip, 1997). Some interviewees at each church had previously left more conservative religious traditions because of conflicts involving GLBT issues, and tended to remain quite aware of the “threatening,” anti-gay forces organized against them in many segments of society.

Specific, current events around the nation also provided opportunities to highlight and reinforce the distinctiveness of those in the liberal churches. Most liberal Episcopalians I observed, for example, seemed quite aware of the growing institutional conflicts occurring within their denomination and the worldwide Anglican Communion, especially over issues related to homosexuality. Barnesworth even mentioned these ongoing debates and developments occasionally during sermons on Sunday mornings. The charged, condemnatory rhetoric of socially-conservative Anglicans against “inclusive” Christians in the US (and elsewhere) actually seemed to strengthen the religious identities of parishioners at St. Luke’s and their devotion to the unambiguously liberal faith community. Those at Community UU and New Heights UCC were also sometimes reminded in dramatic ways of the fervent conservative forces marshaled against their liberal religious approaches. In 2005, the mainstream media reported that a UCC congregation in Virginia was torched by a man after he broke in and wrote “Gays

lover” and “UCC sinners” in red spray-paint on the sanctuary’s walls (Morello, 2005). Three years later, a man known for his passionate hatred of “liberals and gays” entered a UU congregation in Tennessee during a Sunday service and shot eight people, killing two (Dewan, 2008). According to the local police chief who investigated the latter incident, the man targeted the well-known inclusive church because he believed “that all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country.” Such incidents demonstrated the sort of intense “anti-liberal” sentiments in the larger society that often drove churchgoers in this study into tighter, ideological unity with one another.

It is also worth noting that the nationwide promotional campaign implemented by the United Church of Christ (and supported by New Heights) seemed to target unaffiliated liberal consumers by specifically emphasizing the common tensions between this group of religious minorities and more dominant, conservative Christian organizations. The message utilized in the denomination’s television commercials and print ads stating that “Jesus didn’t turn people away and neither do we” (Elliott, 2006) not only distinguished the nonjudgmental practices of the UCC from more traditionally-exclusive churches, but subtly attacked orthodox Christian groups as failing to model Jesus’ life and teachings. By contrasting their style of religiosity with more conservative religious organizations, therefore, the UCC sought to strengthen and clarify its own liberal identity. There were numerous indications that this approach proved effective in enhancing the group’s “brand,” with a rise in the nationwide sale of church-oriented promotional items (Guess, 2004) and new, prospective members—including some of the gays and lesbians I met at New Heights—being prompted to visit their local UCC congregations after viewing the denomination’s television commercials.

Inclusive Religiosity as Destination or Journey

Religious liberals who were devoted primarily to the sacred emotional experience of belonging to a subcultural community generally did so for two very different reasons. For some, participating and identifying with their particular religious family (liturgical Christian, Golden Rule Protestant, agnostic/heretic, multi-faith, or simply “religious liberal”) was experienced as a safe, nonjudgmental cultural “destination” that affirmed them as they were. In their inclusive churches, they were not only welcomed despite the social, moral, and or theological traits that typically prevented them from joining or feeling supported in more orthodox, conservative congregations, but they were free to use and interpret their group’s cultural tools in almost any ways they wanted. These devotees often felt at home in their churches, enjoying the steady supply of emotionally-fulfilling cultural products they found variously interesting, entertaining, familiar and/or personally empowering. Other churchgoers, though, looked through their congregations and used the cultural tools available there to envision an even broader ideological community that propelled them ever-forward *towards* shared ideals. They did not participate in church or claim a religious identity in order to feel settled, but to engage in a process that challenged them with new perspectives and experiences, and which inherently called them to undergo ongoing self-evaluation and personal development. While the first group tended to feel satisfied simply by identifying with and participating in their particular faith communities, the latter valued their group’s subculture because it provided resources for them to change and evolve. One saw their ideological network as a final, sacred “destination,” while the other embraced it as part of a sacred “journey” that inspired them to engage in ongoing personal transformation.

For those who cherished their church and its respective subculture as an apparent end in itself, the cultural relationship was generally expressed as a sort of partnership between equals, with neither seeking to impose expectations on the other. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated at Community UU where critically-minded and skeptical individuals who had often suffered the judgments of stricter religious believers and/or churches seemed particularly sensitive—and resistant—to social dynamics pressuring them to “better” themselves. Many of these religious nonconformists who sought refuge in their church’s countercultural sanctuary were only interested in feeling loved and affirmed unconditionally by their ideological network of fellow “outcasts.” While the acceptance provided by the liberal culture was what moved atheist Marsha Avery to tears in her first UU church, that same self-empowering style of faith seemed to justify her somewhat selfish disregard for fellow congregants who asked her to share leadership opportunities with them (as I described in chapter 3). Avery was devoted to her liberal subculture because it affirmed her as an individual with atypical beliefs in the religious marketplace, and not because it asked her to improve anything about herself. Many people who join Unitarian Universalist churches nationwide apparently demonstrate this sort of relationship with their cultural communities—appreciating the support their inclusive groups provide for their pre-existing beliefs, values, and needs, while feeling very little desire or pressure to engage in personal transformation (Niekro and Casebolt, 2001).

Similarly, many of those at New Heights UCC were devoted to their religion because the subculture emphasized social tolerance and promoted a friendliness between congregants that allowed each individual to simply feel accepted as he or she was. “They

pull you into the fold and make you feel like you were their best friend and they were just waiting for you to return home,” was how one UCC congregant described what was obviously experienced as a sacred destination. “Even the first day, everybody came up and talked to us. It was just very, very friendly.” Not only was this cultural style popular to religious nonconformists and others who had been shamed by conservative believers elsewhere (such as gays and lesbians), but by libertarian Republicans who told me they often had trouble feeling comfortable in culturally-lenient churches dominated by socio-political liberals. Longtime GOP supporter Delores Nichols best summarized why congregants like her cherished New Height’s expression of UCC subculture: “Here you can have different points of view and respect each other. I think if the world would learn that too, it would be wonderful.” Within her church, Nichols enjoyed a sacred, stable environment where she felt accepted as a member of a political minority, and seemed to find in the subculture’s tolerant, friendly values support for her own “live and let live” social and political orientation.

I had expected to find most people at St. Luke’s approaching their religious setting as a sacred destination as well. After all, the liturgical routines featured there seemed to emphasize the sort of cultural continuity that traditional, orthodox Christians probably prefer and find intrinsically sacred. Indeed, a minority did seem to express this style of faith, including one older parishioner who told me:

There are two days that are sacrosanct in my life. There's Sunday morning, and Thursday morning when I come to the Eucharist and the book study. Unless it's a matter of my health, I don't miss those. . . .Coming to church and being in a community. It's a safety net.

This liberal churchgoer viewed her religious activities and participation in the cultural community as emotionally-valuable experiences. The familiar orthopraxis and structured

environment offered the sort of “safety net” such devotees cherished. Another person at St. Luke’s said: “What I get from it is a sense of peace that I draw out of there. There's a constant reminder to me that I'm part of a greater family. There's a connection. And there's a lot of comfort in that.”

Bradley Reynolds also demonstrated this approach when he confessed to being “quite disoriented” by the “Saving Jesus” program that disrupted his understanding of the familiar religious symbols, narratives, and routines he valued. He had long experienced the patterned expressions of his religious subculture as a source of soothing comfort because they seemed to provide a fixed structure that helped him maintain control over his life. “Growing up, I always had to be in control of everything,” he said. “I had to have tight control of everything and everybody around me.” Even today, he confessed, “letting go is a big issue for me.”

As he began to “let go” of his church environment as a sacred destination, though, he seemed to join the majority of other parishioners I interviewed at St. Luke’s who generally described themselves as being on a spiritual journey together. Their membership in a distinctly Christian community was not experienced as being sacred in itself. Instead, they valued their parish’s “grounded” subculture because it provided a framework for engaging in ongoing, personal discovery and development. This reflected what has been described by scholars as a “quest” orientation among some religious seekers (Batson and Schoenrade, 1991; Batson and Ventis, 1982). A woman who recently joined the parish, for example, described her sense of feeling both challenged to pursue self-evaluation and change, and at the same time being unconditionally accepted by her inclusive community:

The church helps me know myself and be comfortable with standing back and looking at myself. It helps me do better in various areas. Or, just affirming me. That I'm okay just the way I am. That's been very helpful. Being affirmed. You don't have to be like anybody else or everybody else. You don't have to fit into a prepared box. You're a unique expression of whatever God wanted you to be and that's cool.

Similarly, Renee Pennington described her participation in the subculture as involving elements of both affirmation and change. "I think sometimes it's a very painful process of surrendering," she said. But at the same time, she continued: "It's renewing. There's something for me about kneeling down and confessing sins that allows me to go forward and recognize, you know, we're all human, we all carry this baggage with us, and it's a part of who we are and we can kind of start over and start over and start over, and we will."

Because Community UU and New Heights UCC did not practice any sort of similar "confessional" rituals like those at St. Luke's, it was perhaps unsurprising that far fewer of the churchgoers in those communities expressed the sort of "journey" approaches to their cultural relations. Without specific cultural routines guiding these individuals to prioritize and regularly reflect on self-improvement, few seemed willing or able to think about how their religious environments might provide a framework for creating ongoing change in themselves.

There were exceptions, however, especially among those who had more recently joined the congregations. Olivia Baldwin at the UU church, for example, told me that she became a member specifically because she missed "the community of people gathered looking for faith." Years earlier when Freda Starr had joined the denomination, she had also done so because she wanted to belong to a group that was in a collective, sacred process of "looking" for something more in life and in themselves. She told me: "I was

on this spiritual journey and just loved it. I didn't expect it to ever end. I didn't have a destination. . . One of the things that just blew me away about Unitarianism was the principle that there is wisdom in all religions.”

While congregants like Starr enjoyed the overall multicultural dynamics of her journey within Unitarian Universalism’s broadminded community, others were more appreciative of the specific small groups that met at the church and which supported the particular cultural tools and religious practices they valued. Some congregants, for example, enjoyed the structured, collective meditations conducted during the week or the pagan rituals sponsored by Community’s coven group. Barbara Thorne was among the many Unitarian Universalists who valued the insights of Buddhism because of what was deemed a useful framework for experiencing both personal acceptance and a process of inner transformation, and appreciated the presence of other Buddhist practitioners in the UU church. Religious liberals used the tools of this eastern religion to propel them along a journey, just as many parishioners at St. Luke’s did with the elements of Christian culture. Thorne said:

We are working towards something. We are going someplace. And, yes, some people are kind of miserable human beings, either because they're wounded or because they're selfish and horrible. But we all get to keep working on it. We all get to keep improving and learning. So that's what I think carries me through.

She thus constructed a framework from various elements of a particular religious subculture in order to see change as an inevitable—and desirable—part of life.

Such journey-oriented seekers represented perhaps just over half the parishioners at St. Luke’s and just under half the congregants at Community UU. But I encountered hardly any such individuals at New Heights. Francis Pressley was one of the few who did seem to identify with this religious approach, saying: “I think the church provides the

avenue for working on a spiritual journey. You're with like-minded people, of course. It's a fellowship and support group.” Her desire to be around those who also wanted to pursue an ongoing religious journey was certainly a key reason why she felt so alienated from most others in her congregation. Although she tended to describe these tensions in terms of political differences between herself and the more socially-conservative churchgoers at New Heights (as I described in chapter 4), her broader desire for personal growth was the more likely reason that she did “match” her UCC community. Pressley looked to her religion to provide her a sacred journey of new experiences and change, while the majority of her fellow congregants preferred a religious subculture that provided a fixed, peaceful destination.

Journeying from Personal Crisis

One factor associated with whether a religious liberal valued a stable cultural community or one that propelled them along a shifting, inner journey seemed to be whether the individual had ever experienced crushing emotional pain from what was perceived as some personal defeat in life. While those who enjoyed their religious subcultures as sacred often did so solely because of the affirmation and empowerment they received there as individuals, “journeyers” tended to not trust this personal affirmation so completely. Most tended to have encountered a powerful loss of confidence at some point in the past which prevented them from placing complete trust in their own views and perspectives. Because of a divorce, death of a loved one, discovery of a gay child, personal moral failure, a personal illness, or some other event that created a violent interruption in the perspectives and life routines they had once enjoyed and taken for granted, their confident sense of self-sufficiency had been eroded. While they

clearly needed and demanded the sort of personal validation offered by their inclusive religious organizations, they often wanted more than this from their religion.

In coming to doubt themselves because of their personal crisis, they were often more open to empathizing with and taking developmental cues from larger idealized social networks. They were less individualistic in their style of religious liberalism, and able to empathize with, rely upon, and learn from their subcultural community. UU Church President and former communist organizer Susan Nelson described how this process occurred in her own life following her second divorce:

This was the thing that brought me down more than anything else that had happened in my life. . . I had been—clearly—affected by lots of things, but I'd never been brought down to my knees. So this one did it. And what I found was – there's millions of other people who are in this situation all the time. You know, alcoholics who are constantly trying to keep from having to take a drink. People who have disabilities and have to figure how they're going to get out of bed every morning. People who have disabled children. People who are sick. People who are elderly. People who are sad. I mean, all of a sudden I felt a sudden connection with the rest of the human race in a way that I'd never been connected before. With the sadness. And the misery. . . .And so it was a tremendously transforming experience to be brought low by circumstances over which I had no control—in the most intimate levels—and have 250 close friends helping me through this. It was because of this church.

Having her sense of self-confidence and sufficiency so thoroughly undermined by a painful divorce seemed to transform both Nelson and her relations within the UU community. Rather than merely feeling affirmed as an individual, she seemed to adopt a concept of interdependency with those around her at church and those who suffer in the larger world.

Many of the people I met at St. Luke's Episcopal Church had undergone similar, transforming experiences. Wendy Allen struggled with marital infidelity, Larry Best with alcoholism, and a number of others with humiliating and painful divorces like Susan

Nelson's. Through these personal tragedies, their faith in themselves as individuals was undermined. In their religious subcultures, though, they were often surprised to discover useful tools that helped them recover and develop new ways of thinking about their own self-worth that arose from connections to others. Instead of simply pursuing their own self-fulfillment in religious settings, they empathized more deeply with those around them and came to understand—through suffering—the unexpected challenges and “spiritual journey” they shared with those around them.

IV. Mystical Relations as a Source of Devotion

In addition to the social relations and cultural relations that served as key sources of devotion for many of the people I interviewed, a third emotional product that inspired a number of individuals to join and remain active in their faith communities was the distinctive sense of spirituality evoked by and associated with these settings. Liberal churchgoers often described their enjoyable social connections with particular people (especially family members) and/or with the larger subcultural community as “spiritual” activities. However, what I identified as mystical relations was expressed by those who concluded from these diverse, spiritual moments that a Sacred Other was present with them in the gatherings as well. These individuals described their sense of being intimately connected with some larger force beyond just humanity. Whether referring to this reality as God, Jesus, nature, the universe, energy, and/or some vague notion of a “Sacred Mystery,” I found that these individuals shared a similarly-moving, awe-inspiring interaction with Ultimate Reality. While chapter six will explore how they used particular narratives and symbols from their religious traditions to express these mystical sensations, the section below will focus specifically on the role these sacred emotional

encounters played in their devotion to organized religion.

Recognizing the Spiritual

Despite Durkheim's theory suggesting that sacred emotions are exclusively generated in relationship to a social group and/or totem, millions of people today are now building their firm notions of spiritual awareness in private while watching the rising or setting sun, the countless stars at night, expansive natural views and horizons, tall mountains, and other physical environments that take their breath away. Others feel themselves transformed and propelled into spiritual states of consciousness by private practices such as meditation, chanting, hiking, exercising, or engaging in yoga. None of these activities require religious symbols or the presence of others in order to be enjoyed, which is probably why a growing number of Americans are coming to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Their own emotionally-stirring, spiritual encounters—taking place in a variety of settings—are helping them to directly encounter and define some convincing notion of a sacred Ultimate Reality on their own. What these experiences typically convey to them is that there is some higher meaning to life which can be personally detected in rare, sacred moments. Some surveys have found that about a third of the unchurched population nationwide report having had such mystical experiences (Argyle & Hills, 2000), while other research has concluded that most people perceive "a sort of mysticism. . .which does not. . .receive a primarily religious interpretation" (Holm, 1982).

Like the majority of mainline Protestants nationwide who tend to foster doubts about the divine (Newport, 2006), most of the people I interviewed minimized or outright rejected traditional notions about God. But despite this critical mindset, they nonetheless

revealed having often encountered notions of the mystical that they could not reconcile with modernist rationality. A UU congregant, for example, told me that she didn't really believe in God, but then clarified:

I wouldn't call myself an atheist, though, because I don't know for sure. Sometimes I feel very spiritual like during a sunset or hiking. When you think there just has to be something magical out there. So I feel that there should be—or I feel the presence sometimes. But I don't intellectually believe it.

New UU member Laurel Alexander was also quick to describe her feelings of spirituality out in nature, as well as during her interactions with her children. Though she found great meaning and sacred value in these encounters, she confessed: “It's hard to describe a spiritual connection. I don't know. It's hard to say these things in words.”

What typically evoked these sort of oft-ineffable experiences of spiritual awareness among liberal churchgoers was their interactions with nature. Repeatedly, people at all three faith communities told me that natural settings was where they felt most spiritually-inspired and convinced that there was something more wonderful and universal to life than what modernist conceptions of knowledge could explain. “My spirituality is enhanced by taking the dogs for a walk, and being able to go up in the mountains and just being able to look at how beautiful the world is,” said one parishioner at St. Luke's. “It's a true gift.” Another Episcopal churchgoer said: “I wake up in the morning and see the mountain, and it just gives me a super high.” As I described in chapter 2, the parish's top lay leader, Larry Best, also found himself deeply moved by nature:

There was a day a couple of weeks ago when I was driving in to work and the sunrise, and the mist from the previous day's rain all conspired to really—it was an absolutely heart-stopping beauty that I felt physically. That, to me, is a spiritual connection. There were no words. All of those things happened together. There was maybe a couple of minutes and I was there. And it might not

have been the same for the guy in the car in front of me or the one behind me. But there is a palpable feeling throughout. Physically. And that doesn't happen every day.

Several people I interviewed also found “a spiritual connection” in these ways. A congregant at Community UU, for example, said:

The sacred for me is nature. Being up in the mountains. Being by the ocean. Being at the Grand Canyon. These places that just take your breath away. . . . The sacred for me is just what fills me up and puts me over the edge. I'm a part of it. I like being in it. I love to go hiking and just get out in it. Even around here, just going outside and working in the yard.

At New Heights UCC, Pastor Genine Singer reflected these sentiments, saying: “So much of my spiritual strength is in nature. In wilderness. In that space. It's real. I don't know why.”

For some of these people, being in nature and feeling closely connected with what they considered a sacred source of inspiration even proved to be occasionally more attractive than attending church. This was demonstrated by a new participant at New Heights who recently moved to the area from another part of the country, and revealed: “When we first came here, I have to tell you, we didn't come to church every Sunday. We were out there exploring. I'd see these gorgeous rocks in the sunshine. It wasn't an experience that I'd done before.” A woman who decided to join Community UU after years of living apart from organized religion similarly admitted: “I've always been such a part of nature. I didn't really feel the need [for church], particularly.”

The familiar spiritual feelings that nature stirred in many of these individuals was what frequently inspired them to explore more focused practices for fostering mystical sensations. As described in previous chapters, some people at all three churches had explored an assortment of Native American rituals, New Age activities such as the use of

crystals, and—most commonly—eastern meditation before becoming formally involved in organized religion. These efforts seemed to indicate a desire to routinize the enjoyable sensations of mystical experience. Paige Jennings at St. Luke’s was one of those who demonstrated such a background. “I never connected with religion until I was 20 and I started getting into Tibetan Buddhism,” she said. “Doing some meditation and finding that solitude that comes from meditating.”

Using “Spiritual Triggers” to Attract Seekers

Because so many of those who joined the liberal churches had previously encountered mystical feelings in nature and/or through a variety of diverse, spiritual practices, they often described feeling quickly comfortable within those faith communities that featured these familiar “spiritual triggers” within their settings. Rather than focusing merely upon traditionally “religious” symbols in the sanctuaries—such as the cross, altar, or images of Jesus—what the majority of seekers often mentioned as being most spiritually-evocative were the vaguer, mystical elements on display.

Each church, for example, had developed unique ways to include “nature” in their sanctuaries. All of the settings incorporated plentiful natural lighting with wall and/or floor-to-ceiling windows that seemed to connect the space to the outside. The architecture at St. Luke’s also featured natural stone on the walls, a water fountain made out of rock, natural wood pews and altar, and a dark brown, hard floor. At Community UU, nature was emphasized through tapestries of natural settings and numerous artistic photos hung on the surrounding walls, as well as the view of an outdoor garden beyond the windows at the front of the room.

The focus on nature was perhaps most important at New Heights UCC. The large

window behind the pulpit not only allowed light to enter, but framed a picturesque mountain scene that seemed to become the true source of inspiration for most worshipers on Sunday mornings. When she first joined the congregation, for example, one member said: “Looking up at mountain, I decided I was going to choose the church because of the view. It doesn't matter what else is going on. I could just sit here and look at my mountain. That's enough.” Another UCC participant told me: “Some Sunday mornings when the sun is just right on the mountains—just watching that is amazing.” A third expressed a similar sentiment, saying that she sometimes felt spiritual by “looking up at those mountains in that church.” One woman I interviewed directly connected this natural scene at New Heights with a more “religious” concept of the divine, telling me: “You can't help but feel the presence of God when you sit there and look at the sun shining on the mountains or the clouds coming over the mountains.” The mystical experience aroused by natural settings—both inside and out of churches—was at the heart of the spiritual connection for most people, and intertwining God and nature in this way was typical for many religious liberals.

In addition to offering visual and symbolic cues to nature, a second method used in the faith communities to trigger mystical feelings among seekers was by encouraging and actively supporting a wide range of different religious practices designed to evoke spiritual awareness. The routines of the Christian liturgy, for example, often sparked mystical sensations among churchgoers in the Episcopal parish—especially those who had been raised to appreciate these cultural dynamics. Tim Barnesworth's own experience, I found, was similar to that of many of his churchgoers. He said:

In worship, I'm often taken out of my own personal concerns. Whatever I'm caught up in. And I get a sense of the really big picture of life, God, the goodness

of love, that everything is alright, that there's this sort of energy in the world and life that is. . .it's sort of a feeling of peace and equanimity, an assurance. . .and that comes often in worship.

St. Luke's did not, though, just offer these traditional Christian elements. Like Community UU, the church also recognized, encouraged, and actively sponsored a variety of alternative religious styles as well. Especially for those seekers who hadn't used, were simply uncomfortable with, or had specifically rejected Christian cultural tools, the availability of alternative spiritual practices was why they felt spiritually "comfortable" in the churches.

Providing such diverse cultural options may be particularly important for those organizations serving liberal seekers, since such individuals are much more likely than most churchgoers in the US to have engaged in extensive spiritual "experimentation" (Roof, 1998; Marler and Hadaway, 1993). By supporting many different "paths" for people to foster spiritual awareness and connection, therefore, culturally-diverse liberal groups addressed the assorted styles of their targeted market niche, and often came to be viewed as "exciting" institutions by participants. Numerous people at St. Luke's, for example, considered the Contemplative prayer meetings and Kirtan Mass started by Tim Barnesworth to be bold, unique activities that ultimately made them feel more comfortable about joining and staying involved in the Episcopal church. Such creative programming at another Episcopal parish was what first inspired one seeker to become active again in the religion of her youth. She explained:

In '82 my mom died, and my next door neighbor. . .suggested that I go with her to this one [Episcopal] church in New Orleans. And I went. And it was an incredibly spiritual experience, as opposed to a "church-going" experience. . . There were a variety of programs and interests in trying to help you find a spiritual path that resonated with you. So there were different options for exploring your own spiritual path. And I got hooked.

Appealing to seekers in this way by satisfying their assorted interests and spiritual approaches was even more pronounced at Community UU, where church groups meeting during the week explored a wide range of religious approaches, from Christianity and Paganism to New Age practices and Buddhism.

Both St. Luke's and Community proved especially attractive to those seekers who had already come to value such diverse, multi-faith techniques on their own. These individuals tended to devote themselves to their churches because the structured religious environments helped them focus upon and sustain the assorted spiritual practices they enjoyed. "By making the commitment to show up on Sunday mornings," said former Methodist and now "earth-centered" Olivia Baldwin after joining the UU congregation, "I'm setting aside a predetermined time to attend to my spirituality. . . I think that we do that intentionally in the church." Research has indeed shown that compared to the unchurched, churchgoers report having mystical experiences on a more regular basis (Marler and Hadaway, 1993). Based on the self-reports by those I interviewed, this phenomenon seemed to be true for religious liberals who began attending a church as well. A number of new members said that joining and participating in an organized faith community had provided them with the structural support they desired in order to be more consistent about maintaining the mystical practices and focus they already appreciated. Some such individuals seemed happily surprised to discover that they could be "spiritual" in an organized "religious" setting.

Even more orthodox, denominational loyalists, however, seemed to approve of their liberal faith community's diverse programming. Some viewed these activities as interesting, and occasionally as valuable opportunities for them to pursue new and

perhaps more effective methods for experiencing a mystical connection. This was demonstrated both by older Episcopalians I encountered at St. Luke's who participated in the contemplative prayer services there, as well as by agnostic humanists at Community who gradually came to accept and value their own intuitions of "spirituality." One new UU congregant told me that the church has taught her to "slow down," and to become more attuned to—and appreciative of—the sort of mystical sensations that she had previously overlooked in her life. "My task is to make sure I pay attention at the right moment," she said. "To say, ahh. This is one of those times I want to remember when I had this feeling."

Helping people to slow down, pay attention, and actively try to develop the sort of mystical sensations previously aroused primarily in awe-inspiring natural settings was by far the most frequently-mentioned reason that spiritually-focused seekers were devoted to their churches. Religious settings provided these individuals with rare, treasured moments of silence and contemplation when they could pay attention to Ultimate Reality. Tim Barnesworth at St. Luke's taught his parishioners to transcend the strictly-orthodox meanings around the Christian liturgy, and to simply enjoy the "mindful mindlessness" of that "grounded" spiritual practice. One new member who was drawn back to the Christian church because of this method of creatively using the "Christian form" told me:

When I meditate and when I'm in church, I take that time to just quiet my mind and stop thinking about all the daily activities. There's just sort of a peace there that comes. That makes me feel like you're connected to something bigger than just your individuality. There are things that you can do to help you attain that connection, or that take you away from it. Like I think you can distract yourself with mundane issues in life. Or you can meditate, and that helps you get to the place.

Such seekers thus found meaningful opportunities in their religious settings for silence

and reflection in order to “connect” with what was perceived to be a more emotionally-fulfilling, sacred reality.

This enjoyable, inward reflection proved to be so central to the experience of many people at St. Luke’s that it was not uncommon for me to meet parishioners who admitted to not being “really close” to anyone else at the church. This even included one of the top lay leaders I interviewed. What primarily motivated their religious involvement was the spiritual connection they developed through their quiet, reflective routines on Sunday mornings and during other rituals conducted during the week. Social relations played a much less important role in the devotion of these liberal churchgoers compared to those at the other study locations. These “liturgical liberals” were similar to Catholics nationwide, among whom only a minority report going to church “in order to have the fellowship of other worshippers or because of a sense of community” (Newport, 2007).

While those at Community UU were more likely than the religious liberals at St. Luke’s to know and regularly interact with others at church, I found that many were also devoted to the reflective rituals, moments of silence, and spiritual encouragement available through their faith organization. Rachel Corrigan’s focus on spirituality resonated with many people in the congregation, including former Episcopalian and UU convert Shannon Young, who said:

I remember a few years ago that Rachel preached a sermon and, among other things, she said that some spiritual experiences often happen in silence. And that if spirituality often occurs in silence, then it's important to have enough silence in your life. That's one thing I really took away from that sermon and try to do. To try to have some time –peaceful reflection, contemplation time, when it's quiet. I'm not sure if I'm that strongly spiritual of a person. I'm not sure. But it's a strange thing. I don't think you can sort of make it happen. But it does happen. Especially since I became interested in Buddhism, I've tried to focus more on the

present. Making the present meaningful. Some sort of spirituality in everyday life.

Through the use of various collective rituals on Sunday mornings and gentle ministerial prompting to develop silence and a reflective focus as spiritual techniques, both Community UU and St. Luke's frequently inspired mystical awareness among their churchgoers. To the extent that members came to associate their religious settings with emotionally-fulfilling mystical relations, they typically showed more enthusiasm and devotion to the churches.

From Liberal Erosion to Progressive-Mysticism

Religious marketplace theories usually define liberal consumers as individualists who selectively adhere to a faith's particular beliefs, practices, and membership requirements. In resisting group pressures towards conformity, such presumably "marginal" participants are thought to inevitably undermine the strength and solidarity of those religious organizations that serve them (Stark and Finke, 2000).

Historically, mainline denominations in the US appealed to these modernist and independent-minded participants by promoting "liberal Protestant" cultures that variously "relaxed" expected member adherence to traditional Christian beliefs, practices, and/or moral expectations. As the institutions became increasingly loose in their interpretation and application of Christianity's historical culture, however, they tended to lose the emotionally-evocative resources designed to spark members' shared, "spiritual" experiences of being connected to some idealized Ultimate Reality extending beyond the local community.

New Heights UCC seemed to exemplify this association between erosive, liberalizing processes and the loss of spiritual passion. Neither the minister nor most

members seemed to value the liturgies of traditional Christianity, and even the few rituals that did remain in use on Sunday mornings seemed to be threatened (as demonstrated by the abrupt decision to end the “confession of sins” practice—described in chapter four). These liberal, nominally-“Christian” congregants neither affirmed traditional, orthodox Christianity nor the purely secular perspectives of modernity, and accommodating these tensions seemed to fuel the ongoing erosion of Christian culture. The result was a sharp decline in experiences of “spirituality” among congregants, prompting some to turn to one another for guidance. These seekers formed small groups in order to discuss alternative Christian or New Age books together, and to try to discover/recover the sort of intimate spiritual encounters often associated with more traditional styles of faith. However, these efforts received little to no ministerial support (and were even privately derided by Genine Singer during an interview with me). With only a limited and declining supply of cultural tools available to help congregants foster mystical experiences—or make sense of the vague spiritual sensations that several told me they encountered in nature or elsewhere outside the church—it was no wonder that the majority of participants complained about the lack of unifying spiritual awareness in their faith community. The emotional products available to postmodern seekers in such a “thin” cultural environment tended to be those associated with social relations, and this ultimately proved to be an inadequate framework for overcoming the ideological diversity of liberal members.

At Community UU and St. Luke’s, however, the traditional elements of Christianity that were lost or simply minimized were increasingly replaced with new, innovative resources designed to attract and fulfill the needs of a variety of distinctly

“liberal” religious consumers. The progressively-evolving cultures of these two churches not only promoted unique, alternative interpretations of Christian symbols, narratives, and practices but steadily incorporated interfaith elements from other religious traditions. Whereas the liberal Protestant culture at New Heights was defined by a permanent and growing resistance to the single religious tradition (Christianity) in order to *accommodate* the individualistic and inclusive values of liberal consumers, the progressive dynamics in the Episcopalian and Unitarian Universalist churches sparked ongoing cultural innovations that *explicitly* celebrated and promoted spiritual experiences around liberal, inclusive ideals. By encouraging their members to focus upon the mystical sensations they encountered both inside and outside the religious settings—confirming postmodern perceptions of sacred diffusion—St. Luke’s and Community UU fostered the sort of Durkheimian experiences of collective effervescence that inspired their participants’ devotion to one another and their respective faith communities. While each person often interpreted their group’s rituals and symbols in different ways, the inclusive dynamics of the culturally-lenient churches became the de facto ideal ultimately being “worshipped” by the enthusiastic participants.

This was most effectively and powerfully accomplished when mystical relations were evoked. Many churchgoers described how the cultural elements of their faith communities aroused a compelling intuition that some greater spiritual “Mystery” connected them with one another and the whole universe, offering what seemed to be an ontological foundation for their inclusive values. I heard this perspective expressed many times in each setting, both by members and their respective religious leaders. Through their varied spiritual experiences, they had become convinced that “something more” and

“bigger than them” undergirded Ultimate Reality. They generally did not reach this conclusion because of social pressure or religious upbringing, but because of their own seeking efforts and spiritual intuitions. “I always knew that there was something more to life,” said Tina Lindsey at St. Luke’s. “Knowing that I’m not alone. Knowing that there’s Something way bigger out there than just our petty concepts, and that there is that ultimate spirit of love.” A new UU congregant similarly described “a higher state of being. . .that feeds a person’s soul”—leading him to conclude that “almost all of life is a spiritual experience.” Episcopal convert Wendy Allen expressed the sentiments of many spiritual seekers in both progressive churches, saying: “Whatever this Great Mystery is gives me the power to step back and say ‘there’s a bigger story here’.” The next chapter will examine the many ways that such liberal religious consumers sought to enhance and interpret their relationship to this Mystery using the symbols, narratives, and practices available within their churches.

Chapter 6:

Unifying Around a Sacred Mystery

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

In the last chapter, I explained how liberal churchgoers committed themselves to their culturally-lenient faith organizations because of the emotionally-evocative and existentially-“sacred products” they could obtain in these settings. For the overwhelming majority of these liberal religious participants, traditional systems of authority associated with Christian conformity and orthodoxy—including literal interpretations of the Bible, the inherent sovereignty of ecclesiastical institutions, and even the historical beliefs about divine judgment and the threat of eternal damnation—were simply not compelling. Instead, their religious devotion was voluntary, oriented around temporal perspectives, and sustained by the various social, cultural, and/or mystical dynamics they enjoyed in their church communities. For these mostly-privileged, postmodern consumers, devotion depended upon the sacred, relational encounters that they perceived as adding unique meaning to their lives.

While many of the people I met easily described the importance of the interpersonal and cultural connections they maintained in their faith communities, those whose religious enthusiasm relied strongly on interactions with some concept of the Sacred, God, and/or Ultimate Reality often found it difficult to explain these *mystical relations*. When directly asked to describe God, for example, several interviewees seemed confused by the question and even embarrassed by their hesitancy in responding. “I’m going to have a tough time answering that,” replied one UCC congregant forthrightly. Others dryly recited memorized doctrinal statements about God, Jesus, and Christian theology in ways that this interviewer perceived as detached from any personal, confirmatory experiences of the sacred (made more plausible since interviewees who used such formal religious phrases often later described their lack of spiritual awareness).

The terms used by some of these individuals even seemed contradictory, giving me the impression that they had not given much critical, thoughtful consideration to their personal beliefs. One congregant who demonstrated this casual style said: “God is a Being. God can be a He or a She. God is Everywhere.”

Though explaining what they *did* believe about the Sacred frequently proved to be a challenge, many people were quick to declare that they did *not* believe in anthropomorphic images of God. “He’s not the grandfather in the white beard—certainly not,” said an Episcopalian at St. Luke’s. Another parishioner told me: “I don’t believe that God is some white male with a long beard sitting in the clouds that has predetermined everything about our lives. I don’t believe that.” A new UU congregant made similar comments: “I think that ultimately what I believe about God is certainly he doesn’t have a beard. Certainly, she doesn’t have long, flowing hair. I don’t think there’s a human form for God at all.” This was also expressed by a UCC member at New Heights who said: “The God thing has been a puzzle for me, and will probably always remain a puzzle. To pray to God that is a he or a she or an it up there—we can’t imagine. I’ve discovered for me that doesn’t work.”

There are probably several reasons why study participants often found it difficult to make confident declarations about the divine, even while firmly dismissing humanized conceptions of God. First, because most mainline denominations in the US are characterized by liberal Protestant cultures that tolerate high levels of ideological diversity among members (Tamney, 2005a), churchgoers may have been informally socialized to not talk about their faith with one another in order to avoid offending or conflicting with those around them who hold divergent theological views. As previous

chapters described, there was an overall lack of distinctly-“religious” discussions during the casual social encounters at all three churches I observed. It may not be surprising, therefore, that representatives of these faith communities were often awkward and unprepared to speak about God during interviews. Avoiding casual discussions of one’s “private” faith tended to be normative within the intentionally-inclusive churches.

Secondly, of all consumers in the religious marketplace, members of the liberal niche are the most committed to the values and perspectives of modernity, especially individual freedom, tolerance for diversity, and critical-rational thinking (Stark and Finke, 2000). Therefore, they inherently face ongoing intellectual tensions between “this worldly” secularism and “other worldly” faith, resulting in their religious expressions often being characterized more by spiritual doubts, skepticism and nuanced beliefs than fixed, confident affirmations. This was especially demonstrated by higher-educated churchgoers in this study who were the most reluctant to talk about God using specific terms. They seemed uncertain how to publicly discuss their religious identities and activities in coherent, rational ways. Physician and new Episcopalian Wendy Allen, for example, acknowledged that she was initially reluctant to tell others at work about her new church involvement. “I was around a lot of people who were very sarcastic about church,” she said of her fellow medical professionals, explaining why she initially found it difficult to talk with them about her growing involvement at St. Luke’s.

In time, however, Allen’s confidence grew as she became “so certain” of her adopted religious identity, primarily due to the compelling experiences of mystical awareness she encountered within her new faith community. Still, describing the nature of God and the Sacred did not become any easier for her. If anything, she merely became

more convinced about the inadequacy of language regarding God. “When nothing else is there, that Something's there,” she told me. Allen continued:

I still can't say what that is. I guess you call it God. It's this power or this strength or this comfort that everything that happens is just as it should be. . . . It's just a great Mystery. It's what was there before the Big Bang. Some power. Some strength. And it is a part of us, around us, and in us. And I don't know any more than that. But I know that thinking about it, or praying to it, or being centered in it, gives me incredible calmness and strength.

Although she was unsure how to think or talk definitively about her beliefs, Allen had become quite certain about her mystical, confirmatory *feelings* of the Sacred. She perceived an omnipresent, real “Something” that was in and around her, and to which she attributed her enjoyable experiences of “incredible calmness and strength.”

Many of those participating at St. Luke's and Community UU were mystically-oriented religious liberals like Allen, a dynamic which I found contributed to the development of much more “spiritual” atmospheres being maintained in these churches compared to New Heights UCC. Whereas churchgoers who were less interested in spiritual concerns tended to be inconsistent in their enthusiasm for traditional religious culture and mystical relations (resulting in their emphasizing the importance of social and/or cultural relations within their churches instead), *seekers* were often highly-committed to the contemplative, ritualistic practices of formal “religiosity.” They also contributed to the development and introduction of innovative, new techniques within their religious communities.

This included Tim Barnesworth and Rachel Corrigan, both of whom were inspired by their own experiences of what they variously described as a “Sacred Mystery.” The mystical perceptions of these ministers and the unique types of participants they attracted to their churches seemed to re-infuse the mainline and liberal

faith communities with spiritual focus, confidence, and distinctly “religious” identities.

This final chapter examines why St. Luke’s and Community UU proved so much more effective than New Heights UCC at attracting and meeting the needs of mystically-oriented spiritual seekers. Rather than trying to serve the range of liberal and conservative Christians who were historically targeted by mainline denominations in the US (Stark and Finke, 2000), the two “progressive” churches I observed focused on developing interfaith cultures around mystical experiences that not only attracted the sort of “spiritual but not religious” consumers who are often unchurched and dissatisfied with the nation’s available religious options (Barna, 2004; Roof, 1999), but stoked the spiritual interests and passions of many of their conventionally-liberal members whose mystical relations were often uneven. The organizations were thus able to offer compelling “relational products” around all three sources of religious devotion—social, cultural, *and mystical*—providing a range of liberal consumers the opportunity to development multiple types of emotional linkages within their vital, growing institutions.

I begin by examining the different ways that religious liberals I interviewed described their notions of God, highlighting the vague, mystically-oriented perceptions of Ultimate Reality that were affirmed by “spiritual but not religious” participants and briefly reviewing the cultural history behind these dynamics. I will then analyze why Barnesworth and Corrigan were able to attract and earn the devotion of so many spiritually-oriented seekers, and how the presence of these individuals contributed to an evolving, invigorating cultural phenomenon labeled here as “progressive-mysticism.” Lastly, I will describe how approaches to the sacred derived from experiences of mysticism at St. Luke’s and in other specifically Christian churches nationwide are

contributing to changing expressions of Christianity, and why devotion to a “Sacred Mystery” instead of a supernatural Being may portend significant future reconfigurations to the nation’s religious landscape.

I. Two Conceptions of God

Several people I interviewed—especially those who self-identified as “spiritual but not religious”—were similar to Allen in describing their personal relations with a “Sacred Mystery” that they believed could not be adequately conveyed using any words. Such individuals typically viewed the traditional concept of “God” as too limited and limiting to capture their abstract and ineffable experiences of spirituality, and even those who did use this term were uncomfortable with the conventional meanings associated with the divine. One Episcopalian with a history of diverse spiritual seeking and contemplative practices clearly articulated this sort of struggle between what she felt with certainty about a universally-accessible “Sacred Mystery” and the concept of “God” which Christians have historically associated with a separate, spiritual Being. She explained:

I'm continually working on expanding my concept of God, and sometimes it's pretty darn uncomfortable. . .It's hard to think of a personal God that isn't a person. It's hard to talk about theological concepts that are hard to express verbally. That tension between those two concepts of God is something I work on all time, or just try to live with. In my better moments, I can just live with the uncertainty of not knowing what It is. Sometimes, it's a real 'damn it, I want certainty! I want God in a box!' And I can't have God in a box.

This parishioner’s ongoing efforts to align her mystical sensations with available religious symbols and cultural tools was similar to almost half the people I interviewed at St. Luke’s, a slightly lesser percentage of those at Community UU, and only a few congregants at New Heights UCC.

Three descriptive approaches were utilized by those who expressed certain but “vague” spiritual relations with a Sacred Mystery. The most common way these typically “spiritual but not religious” churchgoers talked about Ultimate Reality was by using the words Energy and/or Force. Several Episcopalians expressed their notion of the Sacred in these ways, including one who said: “I think for me God is the ultimate source of energy. . . .As I practice my faith and if I spend quiet time in meditation, I’m able to access that sense in me. . .it gives me a spark or a connection to that Energy and that Ultimate Being. Whatever that is.” Another told me: “It’s that connection that flows through all of us. That power within and without. When you tap into it, you know it’s there. But if you don’t tap into it, I don’t think you’ll ever know it’s there.” A UU congregant I interviewed also expressed this perspective: “I think in my own life God is this sort of sacred energy, this sort of special energy, this force. Whatever it is. . . I think it’s real. And it’s not fully understood. And I think it’s this sort of Mystery.”

In addition to associating the Sacred with energy and force(s), another set of concepts employed by such individuals were the terms Nature and Universe. These interviewees seemed to locate their sacred, mystical relations in the immediate, natural environment. As I previously noted, a majority of study participants at all three faith communities encountered their most transcendent, sacred feelings in natural settings, and frequently associated “God” with these scenes of worldly beauty. It was perhaps unexpected, therefore, that some who struggled to define their diverse experiences of spirituality perceived that “Nature” itself was the sacred source of their transcendent, mystical awareness. Such views were especially common at Community UU where numerous individuals participated in the neo-pagan coven group, and where this

subculture's earth-centered worship influenced the thinking of others throughout the congregation. Church President Susan Nelson, for example, said that she had come to value this sort of language: "It's not the universe, it's Universe. So it has a name. It's like something named 'Universe,' so it's alive. . .the entire Universe as a living thing. . .just look at the world and you'll find all the mystery and magic you want. Look at the world."

A third idea that several spiritually-oriented interviewees used to describe God was psychologist Carl Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious" (Jung, 1968 [1964]). A new Unitarian Universalist interpreted the Sacred in this way, saying:

I think what God is made up of is all the thoughts. I'm kind of Jungian like that. The collective unconscious idea—that what I know of God is not just from my ancestors, but everything else that's ever happened in history. From astronomical occurrences and the thoughts for millennia, we've had all that go up into the 'Thing' that makes up who we are. For me, that defines God.

The top lay leader at St. Luke's, Larry Best, also thought of God as some sort of unified and eternal "inner awareness" within all of humanity (and which he reported to have personally *felt* during his own treasured moments of mystical transcendence):

There is a collective spirit. There is a collective conscience [sic]—the Jungian term. There is a Oneness of Being that our souls all represent. And that to me is what God is. And it's that Collective Force which you're either in tune with or not at any given day—to a higher degree or not. Some days I'm totally out of it. Other days—it does require attention to that part of me. But it is Something that is within every being on the planet. That is where I see—where I find God. . .To me, it's all very vague.

Indeed, Best and other churchgoers like him typically invoked "vague" terms to convey the transcendent "Something" their own experiences had convinced them was real. For these "mystically-oriented seekers," the Sacred Mystery was not only difficult to express in words, but was perceived to be a very different sort of "God" than the separate,

spiritual Being conventionally worshipped by Christians.

Uneven Spirituality among Liberal Christians

A second group of interviewees who affirmed a style of mystical relations were those I labeled “conventional liberals.” These included almost all churchgoers at New Heights, half of those at St. Luke’s, and only a few people at Community UU (where a plurality of participants expressed no mystical relations or spiritual awareness whatsoever).

Similar to the mystically-oriented seekers I encountered, conventional liberals also tended to struggle when asked to talk about their notions of God. The concepts and terms they did ultimately use, though, related to traditionally-orthodox images of God as a supernatural Supreme Being rather than as a vague “force,” “energy,” etc. Almost all had been raised in Christian churches and had never engaged in the sort of interfaith exploration that characterizes the nation’s spiritual seekers (Roof, 1998)—including those I interviewed. Even among individuals who had spent a number of years (or decades) disassociated from organized religious communities, none had engaged in a serious interfaith exploration of other possible religious options or approaches. The only “God” they could conceive or describe was the One they had learned about within Christian culture.

Several of these liberal churchgoers maintained devotional practices for interacting with God that they had developed earlier in life from parents and/or more conservative religious institutions. The most common of these routines was private, spoken prayers to God that were independent of other church activities. Some people told me they prayed each evening, said grace before meals, and/or engaged in intimate,

“casual” conversation with a traditionally-conceived “Father” in Heaven. Former evangelical Laurie Anderson at New Heights and former charismatic Catholic Rich Parsons at St. Luke’s were especially committed to such compelling, emotionally-fulfilling styles of mystical relations, with each maintaining levels of intimacy with the divine that had been developed before joining their current liberal churches.

Despite these private or collective devotional routines, though, I found that conventional liberals usually displayed a very “relaxed” attitude about God which was not unlike their lenient approaches to other sources of religious authority (such as the Bible and ecclesiastical institutions). “I don't ever see God as in control, so to speak,” said one prayerful churchgoer who demonstrated this style of liberal mystical relations. “I'm in control. But God is there to help me, guide me, show me what's best.” Smiling , she then confessed somewhat sheepishly: “I don't always listen.” Another interviewee called God a “partner” to whom he prayed each night, explaining:

I know I can't go it alone. I need Somebody above and beyond, and to me that's Christ and God. I pray for things I feel are good. . . I pray for what's good for the country and what's good for our church. And I pray for guidance and the welfare of those I love. I think guidance is super important. There are some things that for some reason I can't seem to handle, and I try to turn it over to God. *I don't always do that*, but I try.

Such churchgoers thus displayed ongoing relations with the conventional, supernatural Deity of Christian faith, but tended to minimize the authority of this “Partner” and the extent to which they pursued a self-transcending experience of the Sacred.

A conventional liberal at St. Luke’s was apparently even confident enough to directly question and challenge the sacred character of this Supreme Personage, saying:

I have a lot of questions for God. If I ever meet Him in the afterlife, I'm going to cross examine Him. I mean, how the hell can we believe you're a decent, loving God with all the shit that's going on all over the world? It's just pathetic. . .these

people who are suffering in desperately despicable circumstances. They're dying alone in pain and agony. In fear. What the hell is that all about? What's going on there? Explain it to me. . . .So I got a lot of questions for God.

This parishioner's desire to "cross examine" the universe's Highest Power seemed to reveal that what he knew about God had been based on the theological, "religious" doctrines of his Christian culture, rather than from personal, enjoyable experiences of spiritual awareness that might have enhanced his sense of trust and faith in this Sacred Being.

Comments from such interviewees revealed two defining characteristics of conventional liberals. First, these churchgoers tended to encourage a clear separation between themselves and God by strongly defending their own individual autonomy. For some, this was because their social and/or political views conflicted with traditional moral codes of Christianity, and they had been forced to variously-minimize or deconstruct religious authorities in order to resist those normative expectations that conflicted with their personal values. In doing so, however, some had undermined their confidence in the overall religious culture, including the conventional God described by the faith tradition. In rejecting the historical gender roles associated with Christianity, for example, Genine Singer at New Heights was ultimately led to question much broader aspects of her faith tradition, saying: "It's very hard to be female in a male-dominated system and a male-dominated faith without having to rethink *all* that stuff." For other interviewees, the distance between themselves and God was simply due to the fact that they had never developed or maintained very strong mystical relations of any kind. But despite their general lack of spiritual experiences or personal awareness of the sacred, their religious socialization had nonetheless trained them how they *should* talk about

God. This was demonstrated by those churchgoers who were initially awkward and hesitant about describing the Sacred in terms of their own experiences, but who seemed to suddenly switch and recite “packaged” religious phrases about the traditional, supernatural Being of Christian faith.

Because conventional liberals maintained their individuality so strongly, a second characteristic of this group was that their level of spiritual passion was very uneven. This was most evident at New Heights, where the congregation of mostly conventional liberals was marked by an ongoing erosion in Christian culture (symbols, narratives, and rituals) and a widespread lack of spiritual fulfillment among congregants. While some people felt very comfortable and close to God as a separate Deity, the majority indicated that they did not derive much emotional or spiritual value from mystical relations within the church.

St. Luke’s and Community UU, though, served a broader range of consumers in the liberal religious marketplace. In addition to attracting conventional liberals, these churches supported significant minorities of mystically-oriented seekers who confidently celebrated a “vague” Sacred Mystery in and around them all. While these seekers tended to reject or be uncomfortable with traditional Christian notions of a separate, supernatural Being, they nonetheless usually displayed higher overall interest in and personal experiences of a sacred Ultimate Reality than conventional liberals. The spiritual search undertaken by such individuals ultimately demonstrated the continuing influence of a cultural transformation sparked decades earlier in America.

II. Cultural Descendants of “The New Religious Consciousness”

Beginning in the 1960’s, the nation’s mainline denominations accelerated what

would become a multi-decade membership decline, partly fueled by the inability to retain the interest and loyalty of millions of middle class youth who had been raised in the liberal Protestant institutions (Wuthnow, 1988). By losing the support of the next generation, the long-dominant religious organizations began slipping from social prominence.

Even as many young Baby Boomers abandoned “organized religion,” though, they were also laying the cultural foundations for the sort of “progressive-mystical” cultural dynamics and institutional growth observed in this study at St. Luke’s and Community UU. For the youth who were shaped by countercultural influences over 40 years ago usually did not stop asking spiritual questions or pursuing transcendent experiences of the sacred, despite their widespread apostasy from mainline groups. Instead, they began exploring the nature of Ultimate Reality for themselves and promoting alternative conceptions of spirituality rather than conventional styles of religiosity (Stone, 1978).

Fueled by this cohort’s intense, countercultural demands for existential experiences, American society during the 60’s and 70’s saw an explosion of new sects, charismatic “gurus,” eastern spiritual practices and teachings, groups associated with the human potential movement, “New Age” techniques, and a countless array of other emotionally-evocative activities that early postmodern seekers used in order to *feel* for themselves what was most meaningful in their lives (Robbins, Anthony, and Richardson, 1978). The diverse and alternative spiritual expressions that arose during that time period evoked a unique social phenomenon which sociologists Charles J. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (1976) labeled a “New Religious Consciousness.” What the various groups and

activities shared in common, Glock and Bellah observed was the ability to provide devotees with “immediate experience rather than doctrinal belief.” The new consciousness was characterized by a focus on self-discovery and personal, sacred encounters.

Although many of the alternative sects and movements initially spawned by this phenomenon had collapsed within a decade, the unique sensibilities and spiritual seeking dynamics that sparked them were not only continuing, but spreading out into the larger culture (Stone, 1978). Research conducted at the time by sociologist Thomas Robbins (1977) led him to conclude that while countercultural youth had served as the “initial ‘carrier group’ ” for the new spiritually-oriented trend, the “consciousness has now transcended its original hippiesque base.” Such cultural diffusion may explain why surveyed Americans who reported having had “direct personal experiences of the Ultimate” increased from 20.5% in 1962 to 53% in 1990 (Yamane and Polzer, 1994). Because a growing number of people have apparently come to value their own experiences of the sacred apart from traditional institutions of faith, “religion” has widely come to be negatively “characterized as ‘narrow and institutional’,” while the concept of “spirituality” has become preferable and associated with the “personal and subjective” (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott, Kadar, 1997). For much of the public, therefore, conventional forms of religious culture have become irrelevant due to an ability to evoke sacred emotions.

The Success of Evangelical Christianity

Although conservative Christian movements in the US have variously utilized the term “evangelical” for centuries (Sweeney, 2005)—and perhaps most notably in

conjunction with the Los Angeles-based Azusa Street Revival of 1904 (Balmer, 2002)—much of the late-20th century success of what is collectively referred to as “Evangelical Christianity” has been driven by the “new religious consciousness” of countercultural Baby Boomers. This is traced to the late 1960’s when young “hippies” at a small conservative church in southern California called Calvary Chapel first began developing the contemporary “praise worship” that has now been adopted by almost every evangelical mega-church in the country (Miller, 1999; Enroth, Ericson & Peters, 1972). This highly-arousing style of religious celebration—with contemporary music and lyrics sung by devotees directly, intimately, and passionately to an orthodox Christian image of God—has proven exceptionally effective at enticing millions of middle class youth and spiritual seekers to commit themselves to organized religious institutions (Smith, 1998). The movement’s overall success and cultural influence have led some to even describe this four-decade old religious revival around Evangelical Christianity as the nation’s “Fourth Great Awakening (Fogel, 2002).

Evangelical worship services are often marked by participants becoming overwhelmed by emotion as they raise their hands, sway, and even cry at the feelings of joy evoked by their sacred perceptions of intense mystical relations. Such participants, in fact, often define their devotional activities and spiritual enthusiasm as being based upon a “personal relationship” (to Jesus and God), rather than a human “religion.” Analytically, of course, such enthusiasm relies upon a group’s collective routines and religious culture (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]). But in the lived experiences of the original “Jesus People” who gathered at Calvary Chapel four decades ago and developed their new, intimate, styles of worship, “God” was interpreted as the exclusive and “real”

source of their passionate joy. Such perceived direct relations with the divine continue to inspire evangelical devotees today to write and sing words of praise in order to convey their powerful emotions around the sacred.

When mystical experiences become so individualized and dynamic, though, there is potential for religious traditions to be transformed by devotees. For example, although the majority of U.S. evangelicals interpret their spirituality through the framework of orthodox Christian doctrines, some believers in recent years have begun challenging those elements of Christianity that seem to conflict with their own spiritual perceptions. The sense of mystically interacting with a God who loves them and Savior who sacrificed His life to redeem the world has led such individuals to question or outright reject those elements of traditional Christianity which they view as promoting hate or hurt towards others—including those scriptural passages which condemn homosexuality (McLaren, 2006, 2004, 2001; Sweet, 2004; Miller, 2004, 2003). For those who are officially or unofficially promoting this so-called “emergent movement” in Evangelical Christianity, ultimate religious authority has gradually shifted from traditional interpretations of the Bible to the intuitive experiences of believers. This development likely demonstrates the inherent risks faced by those religious organizations that encourage participants to encounter the Sacred for themselves. Though groups that can successfully attract and satisfy the needs of spiritual seekers today may display organizational growth and vitality, their cultural systems will likely face transformative pressures due to what is ultimately a passionate individualism underlying the personal experiences of the “new religious consciousness.”

Alternative Perceptions of a Sacred Monism

Even as many people who express preferences for the “spiritual” over the conventionally “religious” have been attracted to the sort of compelling mystical relations with God and Jesus fostered by the emotionally-evocative dynamics of Evangelical Christianity, other experiential seekers in the religious marketplace today remain largely detached from and/or suspicious of such exclusivist styles of faith. In fact, most expressions of the new “religious consciousness” initially associated with countercultural youth of the 1960’s did not foster orthodox Christian conceptions of God as a separate, supernatural Deity, but ontologically-monistic views that conceived of the Sacred as underlying all of existence (Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony and James Richardson, 1978; Campbell, 1978). These spiritual seekers did not merely claim to be *near* God during their intense moments of transcendence, but to interpret their personal, compelling experiences of *mysticism* as an indication that they—like everyone and everything else in the universe—were already and forever a part of a unified Sacred Reality.

According to religious historian Karen Armstrong (1993), mysticism and monism have evolved as alternative, minority expressions of faith throughout human history, including within almost all of the world’s major religious traditions. Roman Catholic contemplative prayer, traditional Eastern Orthodoxy, the Society of Friends/Quakers, Jewish Kaballah, and Islamic Sufism are all examples of this long-standing—typically marginalized—approach to spirituality and the Sacred within the great monotheistic faiths. Among eastern religions that emphasize individual transformation above intermediary-oriented salvation, such as early Vedic Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism, however, mystical elements became central features of the traditions. Taken together,

these eastern and western styles of faith all reflect the relatively-similar experiences of mystics across traditions who interpreted the Sacred as being the whole of existence.

Whether the mystic was rooted in Islamic, Christian, Jewish, or eastern cultures, spiritual discovery historically came about by focusing thoughts on the Sacred alone and allowing all inner distractions and outer distinctions in the physical world to gradually merge into a singular *experience* of unified reality. In the midst of such attentive, meditative transcendence, the Sacred was momentarily perceived to be everywhere and everything. It was immediately present in one's breath and shared physical space, and the supposed separation between God and the created order (including humans)—a perceived dualism that is codified within most popular religious theologies in both East and West—was seemingly-revealed to be illusory. Describing this experience, psychologist Leo Schneiderman (1967) wrote:

The successful completion of the mystic's quest involves nothing less than the temporary abrogation of the profane state of Becoming, and *a taste* of the joys of Being. The state of Being. . . cannot be achieved unless something is left behind. This unwanted remnant of his profane existence the mystic tries with all his heart to leave behind him, knowing that he cannot achieve deliverance unless he *overcomes the sense of duality* between himself and the 'Other.'

This “taste” of radical, blissful union with sacred reality is apparently an elusive, temporary reward, and one reserved for a spiritual vanguard possessing the monastic discipline to momentarily achieve such mental focus. But for those encountering this contemplative state of ultimate spiritual awareness—including both ancient mystics and many contemporary spiritual seekers today—all of existence is momentarily transformed and perceived to be a sacred, mysterious Unity.

As described in the last chapter, millions of Americans are encountering and defining their experiences of the sacred in diverse ways today. Many do not perceive

God as a separate, supernatural Deity mediated exclusively through a single, traditional religious culture, but as a universally-accessible spiritual *experience* they have personally encountered in a variety of natural settings, during intimate social interactions with loved ones, while journeying from one peak, postmodern emotional product to the next, and/or through private, contemplative practices such as meditation and intentional moments of silence. Such *sacred diffusion* throughout postmodern society seems to be leading a large segment of the public to support pseudo-mystical conclusions about Ultimate Reality, and would likely explain why over a quarter of US adults now choose to describe the Sacred as an abstract, mysterious “Force” or “Universal Energy” instead of using the more traditionally-Christian idea of a “personal, spiritual Being” (Barna, 2006; Bishop, 1999). Similar to the mystically-oriented seekers I identified at St. Luke’s and Community UU, these individuals struggle to define a sacred Ultimate Reality they have often perceived to be almost everywhere and which challenges typical notions of God.

The rise in mystical or pseudo-mystical perceptions in contemporary society may also explain the ongoing popularity of alternative and non-Christian spiritual resources—including countless books, websites, seminars, and speakers—that espouse the utility of so-called “New Age” practices, eastern meditation techniques, pagan and Wiccan rituals, Native American spiritualities, and nature-centered theologies. All of this seeking activity suggests a longing among millions of Americans for new words and cultural forms that are capable of helping them make sense of their diffuse spiritual intuitions and alternative perceptions of God, the Sacred, and Ultimate Reality. Especially for those who have explored or come to regularly utilize meditative and contemplative spiritual practices, mystically-oriented perceptions of the Sacred are likely being encountered that

defy most western religious interpretations (Garfinkel, 2006; Rosin, 2000).

Public demand for such explanatory narratives and cultural framing perhaps explains the popularity of authors such as Deepok Chopra and Echart Tolle—both of whom have written extensively about the paradigm-shifting experience of mysticism. Giving voice to the experiences of both historical and contemporary mystics, for example, Chopra (2000) wrote: “Our whole notion of reality has actually been topsy-turvy. Instead of God being a vast, imaginary projection, he turns out to be the only thing that is real, and the whole universe, despite its immensity and solidity, is a projection of God’s nature.” Similarly, Tolle’s popular book, *The Power of Now*—which gained a high cultural profile after being enthusiastically promoted by Oprah Winfrey on her syndicated television program (McKinley, 2008)—seemed to offer a sort of manifesto for “spiritual but not religious” seekers. Expressing the general frustration with traditional religiosity that many of the mystically-oriented churchgoers in this current study shared, Tolle (1999) wrote:

The word God has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse. By misuse, I mean that people who have never even glimpsed the realm of the sacred, the infinite vastness behind that word, use it with great conviction, as if they knew what they are talking about. Or they argue against it, as if they knew what it is that they are denying. This misuse gives rise to absurd beliefs, assertions, and egoistic delusions, such as “My or our God is the only true God, and your God is false,” or Nietzsche’s famous statement “God is dead”.

Such a declaration would likely resonate with those seekers across the nation whose personal, contemplative, and diverse experiences of the sacred have convinced them of the reality of “Something” within and around them that they feel but cannot describe. Their perceptions of a “Sacred Mystery”—as reflected in the vague terms used by those I interviewed such as Energy, Force, Nature, Universe, and Consciousness—are “bigger”

than conventionally-dualistic or exclusive religious concepts about a separate God could convey. The popularity of figures such as Chopra and Tolle likely demonstrates the widespread demand among such individuals for alternative explanatory narratives that help them interpret and convey their experiences of mysticism.

Such fervent, ongoing searches for cultural frames of meaning that define the Sacred Mystery may be due to the fact that mystical awareness can be emotionally-powerful and life-changing. Psychological researchers William R. Miller and Janet C’De Baca (2001), for example, found that encounters with mysticism can foster what they called “quantum change” in some individuals—defined by radically altered ways of thinking and acting. Describing the sense of sacred interrelatedness with all of reality than can reorder the lives of mystics, they wrote:

People who have a mystical experience often have a powerful and direct experience of unity with other people, with nature, with the universe, with everything. It is as though the boundaries of individual identity drop away and the person perceives an interconnectedness of all being. In the mystical type of quantum change, this new perception seems to “stick” and stay with the person over time.

Encountering the Sacred within oneself and all of reality can be a profound experience that fundamentally changes an individual’s priorities. This was best demonstrated by Tim Barnesworth (see chapter 2), who was able to return passionately to his ministerial role only after his Buddhist meditation practices led to his “discovering” an intimate unity with the God of mysticism.

Seeking for Syncretic-Mysticism in the Religious Marketplace

Spiritual seekers who describe their intimate awareness of a monistic reality often view multiple religious cultures as all offering equally useful “tools” for enhancing their

relational encounters with the universally-accessible Sacred Mystery. Sociologist Wade Roof Clark (1998) observed:

Mysticism emphasizes. . . a universal religious consciousness, or a relative stance toward religious truth, and thus a polymorphic conception, or notion that truth may be found in many ways and in many traditions. Mystics transcend conventional religious boundaries and, in so doing, develop a broadened outlook on the meaning of the religious.

Roman Catholic monk Wayne Teasdale (1999; 1997) also observed that those who celebrate a single, mystical reality often do so through a variety of diverse religious practices and cultural techniques—a contemporary phenomenon he called “interspirituality.” He wrote:

Interspirituality—the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions—is the religion of the third millennium. . . Interspirituality is not about eliminating the world’s rich diversity of religious expression. . . It is not an attempt to create a new form of spiritual culture. Rather, it is an attempt to make available to everyone all the forms the spiritual journey assumes. Interspirituality. . . is made possible by the openness of people who have a viable spiritual life, coupled with their determination, capacity, and commitment to the inner search across traditions.

For those who are mystically-inclined, the cultural tools of particular religious traditions are not interpreted as exclusively “true” expressions of God, therefore, but as more or less *effective* resources for evoking and helping them live with an ongoing awareness of the Sacred Monism. “The type of religion matters little—western, eastern, ancient, modern,” wrote Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff regarding this mystical approach to religiosity (Dawson, 2004), “so long as it supports and continuously nourishes the radical experience of reconnection.”

The individualism that characterizes mystics’ spiritual journeys and the relativism with which they approach all cultural traditions and techniques reveals their ultimate identification as religious liberals. Mysticism has been described as being highly

resistant to institutionalization (Weber, 1993 [1922]), and those who display this spiritual approach are often considered to be weak supporters of collective religious identities.

Theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1992 [1931]), for example, argued that all forms of “mystical religion” inspire “radical religious individualism,” and therefore contribute to inevitable organizational instability (and, occasionally, cultural renewal).

Indeed, the majority of self-defined “spiritual but not religious” persons in the US today are “less likely to be involved in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance, but more likely to hold nontraditional religious beliefs and to have had mystical experiences” (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott, and Kadar, 1997). Perhaps a rise in mystical and pseudo-mystical experiences among Americans partly explains why the number of unchurched adults has risen from 21% in 1991 to almost one-third of Americans today, and why most of these individuals reject the ontological dualism and moral exclusivity of traditional Christianity (Barna, 2004).

But despite the fluidity with which mystically-oriented and unchurched spiritual seekers typically transition through diverse contemplative practices and religious traditions, they have come to represent a culturally-distinct “family” within the religious marketplace. Sociologist Kelly Besecke (2001) has argued that the mystically-oriented syncretism which Wade Roof Clark (1999) called “reflexive spirituality” represents a loosely-defined, contemporary subculture whose members share distinctive linguistic expressions. “To be reflexively spiritual,” she wrote, “is to maintain a constant awareness of the ever-increasing variety of religious meanings available in the modern world, and to engage in an *intentional* but critical assimilation of those meanings into one’s own spiritual outlook.” Besecke emphasized how such individuals use and re-

interpret a variety of religious tools in order to synthesize and interpret their broad, diverse experiences of the sacred. Rejecting the idea that such reflexive approaches were inherently self-centered or radically-individualistic, she claimed:

The language of reflexive spirituality is not primarily therapeutic; it is not primarily a tradition-eschewing method of personal spiritual fulfillment; it is not Sheilaism. The language of reflexive spirituality is primarily a method of making religious traditions meaningful. . .if reflexive spirituality is primarily an individualist phenomenon, then what does it mean that people gather together to practice it interactively, in groups?

Rather than promoting the sort of strident or utilitarian individualism of modernity, widespread experiences of mysticism today may be leading to the development of a unique type of “spiritually-reflexive” cultural capital that both defines *and informally unites* a distinct segment of the liberal religious marketplace (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Verter, 2003).

With mystically-oriented seekers apparently demonstrating their devotion to “culture-like” linguistic patterns that express their similarly syncretic and mystical styles, they may be capable of committing themselves to fixed cultural settings as well. Perhaps these “spiritual but not religious” individuals do not eschew organized religiosity because of mysticism’s supposed inherent incompatibility with collective expressions of faith, but simply because few religious institutions in the US have yet been able and willing to “speak the language” that defines these consumers.

Christian theologian Marcus Borg, author of several popular books related to the growing number of unchurched Americans who are alienated by culturally-exclusive churches and orthodox, ontologically-dualistic theologies (2006; 2004; 1997; 1994) has observed that “people remain interested in God, at the same time that many are finding unconvincing the beliefs that were once taken for granted by almost everybody in

Western culture.” Similarly, in his book *The Dishonest Church* (2003), UCC minister Jack Good concluded: “the growing number of seekers to whom honest questions rather than rigid answers might appeal are left without a church home. . . Perhaps these silent people have concluded that asking for change in Christian churches is a hopeless project.” Former Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong (2001) has also described so-called “believers in exile” who are dissatisfied with the dominant religious options in America because of the conservative theologies and/or moral codes promoted in these churches that conflict with their own values and spiritual perceptions of Ultimate Reality. Such individuals represent a largely underserved segment of the religious marketplace.

III. Organizing Mysticism

While many spiritual seekers today remain detached from organized religious settings, some are exploring and participating in existing faith communities. Several have been slowly returning to mainline and liberal faith communities for years, usually after engaging in extensive spiritual exploration on their own that led to the adoption of mystical orientations (Roof, 1998). A study of 150 mainline Protestant churches in 1988, for example, found that nearly a third of participants affirmed the generally-mystical view that “all spiritual truth and wisdom is within me,” and a third also agreed with the liberal and mystical principles that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church” (Donahue, 1993). Currently, over two-thirds of self-described religious liberals nationwide utilize alternative descriptions of God such as “energy,” “force,” etc. (Davis and Smith, 2009), perhaps reflecting the influence and involvement of those displaying the “new religious consciousness” within many culturally-lenient churches today.

Conventionally-liberal faith communities probably offer many of these mystically-oriented churchgoers comfortable religious “homes” where their alternative and unorthodox perspectives are “tolerated.” However, as I observed at New Heights UCC, such individuals would tend to receive only minimal support or encouragement for their distinctly interspiritual, reflexive, and contemplative approaches to faith. If this pattern holds among congregants in other such faith communities, much of their devotion to organized religion would be due to social and/or cultural relations rather than to any profound feelings of “spirituality” evoked by traditional Christian worship.

St. Luke’s and Community UU, however, effectively attracted and maintained the enthusiastic devotion of distinctly *spiritual* seekers by openly encouraging them to utilize traditional Christian culture in ways that evoked unifying, transcendent experiences and ontological perspectives of mysticism. Although I found that the majority of churchgoers at each location continued to represent various styles of conventional and religious liberalism— unorthodox Christians at the Episcopal parish and skeptical humanists at the UU congregation who respectively affirmed or denied traditionally-dualistic notions of God—these individuals seemed to be under continuous, *progressive* pressure to adopt mysticism as the framework for interpreting both Ultimate Reality and the cultural elements of their religious environments.

In different ways, Tim Barnesworth and Rachel Corrigan fostered welcoming atmospheres where both seekers and more typical denominational supporters could together feel comfortable exploring narratives and experiences of a non-dualistic, universal, and unconditionally-accessible “Sacred Mystery.” According to Wade Clark Roof (1999), successfully serving these two segments of the liberal religious

marketplace would require a very delicate process:

Many churches are caught between two opposing pitfalls—if they close themselves off to seekers they lose potential members, as well as long-time members who may want a more self-engaging spirituality, yet if they lean too far trying to engage seekers and alienate more traditional believers, they risk losing their most solid supporters. Much depends on the relatively small vanguard who are deeply committed to religious practices as a means to spiritual growth. If they can find sufficient space to forge a vision combining spiritual resourcefulness and institutional commitment, there is some promise of revitalization.

I found that Barnesworth and Corrigan seemed to have developed effective styles that accomplished this task. Both were innovative, compelling leaders who sought to convey a sacred Ultimate Reality they had personally encountered through experiences of mysticism, allowing them to regularly display a charismatic confidence when discussing spirituality. During one sermon, for example, Barnesworth declared:

The energy of the Spirit is blowing in and out of what we imagine to be separate objects, separate people. The Spirit is what gives breath, form, intelligence, and harmony to all of life. I've come to the point where I don't just believe this to be true. . . *I know* that all of life is pulsing with the energy of the Spirit, in the winds of springtime, in every blade of grass, in every person, in every circumstance. (sermon, 5/11/08)

As both ministers spoke publicly on Sunday mornings and in private meetings with churchgoers about their own experiences of spiritual awareness and unity, they conveyed distinctive “visions” of Ultimate Reality and the non-dualism of “God” that proved to be attractive to multiple segments of the liberal religious marketplace.

Having such leaders with confident, spiritually-oriented messages was a key reason for the ongoing growth in members at St. Luke's and Community UU—a factor associated with the vitality of other liberal churches as well. After studying six dynamic mainline congregations, for example, sociologist James Wellman (2002) concluded that although the groups he observed with liberal dynamics and lenient member expectations

were “institutionally fragile,” they nonetheless were thriving organizations “because of strong leadership.” He wrote: “Leadership counts, and especially leadership that deals openly with conflict *and has a distinctive vision*. . . .Strong, lucent leadership sustains and maintains religious institutions, whether liberal or conservative.” Other research has also shown that all types of vital, growing churches tend to have compelling ministers who “are outspoken on issues and provide clear guidance on how to live out the faith’s moral values” (Jelen and Chandler, 1996).

Preaching the Sacred Mystery to Mixed Audiences

In developing their ministries and public narratives around the “Sacred Mystery” they had come to know, Corrigan and Barnesworth had to move somewhat beyond their respective religious traditions without alienating their traditional liberal constituencies. At Community UU, this meant working with and around the sort of skepticism displayed by religious humanists who historically rejected all expressions of spirituality within the denomination, while Barnesworth had to carefully innovate within a historical Christian tradition that affirmed ontological dualism and the separateness of God.

Corrigan’s strategy of bringing the Sacred Mystery into her congregation often involved stoking the defiant, countercultural spirit with which most Unitarian Universalists have come to identify. During one sermon, she declared:

It’s true that there are people who define the word god in ways that seem downright dysfunctional to me. And why should those people get to steal such a good word and lock it away with their foolish definitions? Why should I forbid myself from using it? No! Take back the language! I assert myself and my right—your right—to define all kinds of words in ways that are useful to you, to live with those definitions, to name your own experiences by them, tweak them when things change, even change your mind. Yes, indeed! In this church we appreciate flip-flops. That’s how we find truth! (sermon, 8/24/08)

I concluded that this message was designed to not only resonate with the spiritual seekers

at Community UU whose personal experiences of mysticism had already convinced them of alternative conceptions of God, but to encourage the skeptical humanists in attendance to “flip flop” and discover new ways to think about spirituality and acknowledge their own vague experiences of the Sacred. In another sermon, Corrigan was even more direct, saying:

The small, concrete definition of the word “God” as a “white bearded man who sits in the clouds” is one you probably gave up believing by the time you were 12 years old. So we can move on to the bigger definitions about the personal power and spirit at the heart of the universe, and then on to even bigger definitions of meaning, evolution, and organization at the heart of the universe, and on to the biggest definition of all; God is the whole kit ‘n caboodle. (sermon, 5/22/05)

Corrigan thus encouraged all her congregants to become increasingly comfortable exploring and recognizing their experiences of spirituality, and to consider utilizing traditional religious concepts such as “God” in new ways to express these diverse and mystical encounters of the sacred.

This was regularly her focus during Sunday morning sermons when she presented different faith traditions—including Christianity—as possessing positive resources for congregants to experience and make sense out of a mysterious, interconnected “Truth” of the universe. “As Unitarians, we don't really mention God,” noted one interspiritual seeker who recently joined the church and enjoyed Corrigan’s interfaith style of mysticism. “Usually the prayers are ended by saying ‘we offer these to the Universe, or to the Higher Power by which we call many names.’ That suits me just fine.” A skeptical, humanistic churchgoer also found Corrigan’s style of ministry appealing, explaining how such messages about “reclaiming” spiritual and religious concepts were influencing her own willingness to think anew about and to use words to describe the Sacred:

I don't believe there's a God up in Heaven who is controlling things here. I do believe in all of nature and creativity. I have a hard time calling that God. . . I almost consider myself atheistic because I don't believe in the God of the Bible at all. *But on the other hand*, maybe agnostic better describes me because *I might at some point* be able to put that word "God" on something.

The spiritually-themed messages presented by Corrigan, therefore, not only resonated with seekers who already had mystically-oriented perceptions of Ultimate Reality, but seemed to inspire religious humanists to explore the diverse, all-encompassing "Sacred Something" that they might one day be able to call "God."

While Corrigan primarily worked in an environment dominated by skeptics who had largely rejected dualistic notions of God, most of the liberal Episcopalians at St. Luke's continued to utilize a traditional Christian culture and liturgical language that formally conveyed the separateness of the divine. As I described in chapter two, however, Barnesworth encouraged his parishioners to develop alternative approaches to encountering God and thinking about the purpose of Jesus' life. During new member classes, sermons, private ministerial counseling and in his own published books and church brochures, he officially "authorized," trained, and encouraged churchgoers to minimize the traditional meanings of the Christian liturgy, and to "look at all of that—including doctrine, scripture, and liturgical language—as form. As only form."

Reflecting his own encounters with mysticism and personal commitment to interfaith approaches to the Sacred Mystery, he told me: "Ideally, doctrine, liturgical language, and scripture points to the Territory which can never be put into words. I take it seriously because it's saying something true about life and God, but it isn't the Thing itself." This message was regularly shared on Sunday mornings. During one sermon, he taught:

Fully occupied by such a tiny fraction of it all, we are blind to the Big Picture. But that's one of the reasons why we come to worship, isn't it? To glimpse the Big Picture once more. That's why we pray, especially when we pray in silence, in stillness. . . it has the effect of *dismantling many of our little conceptions about God* and life. This is difficult for some to deal with, and so they set about reconstructing their neat little world again and again, insisting that it can't be as wide open, as mysterious, as unknowable as it sometimes seems.

Continuing, he introduced the ontological perspectives derived through mysticism:

If our eyes are open, we will see what God is trying to show us. . . we're all children of the Holy One; we're all filled with divine light, whether we recognize it or not; we're all living together in a magical universe, all essential parts of one vast organism we call Life. . . Viewing it, we are connected with the divine energy that is waiting to be tapped. (sermon, 8/14/05)

Such messages resonated with mystically-oriented seekers at St. Luke's and challenged conventionally-liberal parishioners to consider revising their conception of God from a separate, supernatural Being to that of a Sacred Mystery. Explaining his ministerial approach, Barnesworth told me: "I try not to be condescending about those with the traditionalist view, and respect it. But at the same time, I challenge them so that hopefully they can question their literalism in a way that makes them think that maybe there are different ways of going about this."

I found that while Barnesworth occasionally spoke like Corrigan in an open, direct way about a mystical and monistic Ultimate Reality (as in the above example), he usually adopted subtler strategies that allowed both conventionally-liberal Christians and mystically-oriented seekers to find their own interpretations of "God" within his sermons. In this way, St. Luke's seemed to foster what I considered to be an underlying—or "Gnostic"—cultural dynamic whereby seekers received a hidden message from Barnesworth. This was possible for those who had been trained by him (during classes, counseling, or through his books and other written materials) on how to "use"

Christianity as a valuable, interspiritual form. He was committed to maintaining the historical Christian narratives and symbols, telling me: “I challenge [others] to respect and use the tradition because it does contain so much wisdom. So in a sense, I’m trying to lead both [mystics and liberals] towards the center.” His Sunday sermons often contained multi-layered meanings that could be interpreted either traditionally or progressive-mystically. For example, he once preached:

All of creation, including our very lives, is made up of the molecular energy of love and goodness. The Spirit infuses all, and so when we live in harmony with God, when we follow Jesus’ teachings, we live in harmony with all creation. The teachings of the Bible, the laws of God, the wisdom of all authentic religious traditions – they all offer us a vision of how to live in harmony with God, creation, and one another. They all show us the path of life, the way things are made to work. (sermon, 6/1/08)

Liberal Christians who heard this sort of message would have probably focused in on references to God’s “Spirit,” “Jesus’ teachings,” “the Bible,” and “the laws of God”—hearing familiar phrases rooted in their Christian cultural backgrounds. Seekers, though, would have appreciated the concepts of “love and goodness” within “all of creation,” the acknowledgement of “the wisdom of all authentic religious traditions,” and a call to simply “live in harmony with God, creation, and one another” rather than to be “saved.”

While this sort of dual-interpretation narrative at St. Luke’s proved to be frustrating to some mystically-oriented seekers—including one churchgoer at Community UU who described her previous attempts to participate in the Christian liturgy as “schizophrenic”—others found great value in the technique. Wendy Allen, for example, said: “I’m getting more open to using ‘God’ or substituting those words. I’m not radically opposed to the [traditional liturgical language].” Because mystical seekers at St. Luke’s like Allen had learned how Barnesworth *actually* interpreted and used the Anglican

liturgy, they were able to similarly find value in speaking the traditional religious narratives, despite the descriptions of God as a separate Being. “I find that Father Tim can express [the Sacred] in ways that are very clear and at the same time he's very clear that he doesn't have the words,” said another new parishioner who was drawn to Barnesworth’s unique ability to fuse Christian culture with mysticism. “Every once in a while I find someone who can say these things in a way that really speaks to me. Father Tim happens to be one of them.”

In explaining why he believed such seekers felt comfortable using what I called “Gnostic” techniques and participating in St. Luke’s liturgical orthopraxis each week, Barnesworth said: “I think the question is whether you're creating an overall atmosphere where that's valued—whether it's seen as a threat or a strength. If it's seen as a strength, then generally the kind of people attracted to that kind of atmosphere are fine with it.”

Interspirituality and Renewed Demand for Religious Practices

Just as important as the public messages about the Sacred Mystery emanating from the two progressive faith communities were the variety of interspiritual techniques offered to churchgoers that helped them foster their own personal experiences of mysticism. The availability of expressive cultural tools has been associated with thriving churches nationwide (Cimino and Lattin, 1998), as well as with mainline congregations undergoing revival (Roozen, 2006; Taussig, 2006; Bass, 2006, 2006a, 2005, 2004). Among the seekers I interviewed, finding a variety of religious approaches and spiritual “tools” in one location frequently made them more comfortable eventually committing themselves to and becoming identified with their fixed religious settings.

At St. Luke’s, the Kirtan Mass, contemplative prayer program, and high-church

worship served these functions for parishioners. Likewise, the routinized elements and predictable exposure to diverse faith traditions during Sunday services and many spiritual activities conducted in small groups during the week provided this structured, interspiritual variety at Community UU. In these ways, the progressive churches offered people stable forums for exploring emotionally-satisfying, personal encounters of mystical relations using diverse cultural tools.

There were four primary results from making such diverse, interfaith techniques available within the two progressive churches. First, the interspiritual resources attracted seekers who had already adopted mystical or pseudo-mystical perceptions of a monistic Ultimate Reality and valued interfaith religious approaches. One mystical Episcopalian who appreciated the multicultural dynamics at St. Luke's, for example, told me:

I look at spiritual leaders across faiths, whether it's Gandhi or whether it's Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama. . . I do find solace in some of the Sufi writings. . . some of the Dalai writings. I find it enriches my appreciation for what I'm here on earth to do by tapping into some of the eastern thoughts.

Such “spiritual but not religious” individuals valued the diverse cultural resources and interspiritual approaches continuously expressed at St. Luke's, including elements of Hinduism and Sufism in the Kirtan Mass, references to eastern religious concepts during sermons, and the Buddhist-like meditation techniques of the contemplative prayer program. Though not featured as prominently as at the Unitarian Universalist Church, these interfaith features were an important part of the Episcopal parish.

Progressive mysticism seemed to provide seekers a framework for focusing and enhancing their prior spiritual experiences, offering the sort of cultural resources that more traditional styles of religiosity offered to previous generations. According to one study (Byrd, Lear, and Schwenka, 2000), those who have mystical experiences without

an adequate interpretative framework are often less satisfied with their lives than those who have both mystical experiences and an interpretative framework. The scholars speculated that “perhaps ‘raw’ . . . experiences are more unsettling and dysphoric than enlightening” for such individuals. This likely explains why those churchgoers I met who had previously developed their vague interpretations of the Sacred through private mediation, encounters with nature, and/or a variety of other exploratory spiritual experiences on their own ultimately came to value the dependable, spiritually-oriented environments available within their new church homes. Several told me, for example, that they enjoyed meditation, but lacked the discipline required to sustain this practice for achieving mystical awareness. They therefore tended to appreciate the contemplative and ritualized programs available at Community UU and St. Luke’s, as well as the encouragement they derived from their ministers and other churchgoers who similarly gathered together each week and, as new Unitarian Universalist Olivia Baldwin told me, collectively “look for faith.” The two spiritually-oriented churches offered such individuals structured, safe cultural environments to pursue, interpret, and enjoy their experiences of mysticism.

Second, in addition to the distinctly mystical churchgoers who appreciated the interfaith dynamics in the religious settings, conventional liberals and even skeptics also tended to become more interested in and sensitive to their own perceptions of “spirituality” because of these activities. Simply participating in churches where rituals were valued and gradually being expanded rather than deconstructed—as seen in the decline of such elements at New Heights UCC—increased the likelihood that mystical perceptions might be evoked among participants, since such collective, “grounded”

routines provide the basic sociological structures for experiencing the Sacred (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]). “It doesn’t matter which reverent words you use, after all, or exactly what they mean to you,” Corrigan taught. “What matters is that you use some” [Confidential Author, 2009]. Although some skeptical humanists at Community UU resisted any type of spiritual practice and some liberal Christians at St. Luke’s continued to strictly affirm variously-orthodox and dualistic notions of God, it seemed to me that many of these individuals were at least open to exploring the interspiritual programs and approaches to mysticism at their churches which had evoked such passion in others.

A third effect of the interspiritual practices at the two churches was that these diverse contemplative routines tended to reinforce conceptions of Ultimate Reality as a Sacred Mystery beyond description. By learning to use a variety of interfaith approaches, practitioners often came to conceive of “God” as beyond the descriptions of any one religious tradition. For Barnesworth, the diversity of contemplative practices capable of fostering compelling experiences of the Sacred demonstrated the monism of Ultimate Reality:

Instead of thinking of ourselves as separate from God, needing to reach out to a God who is apart from us, we just open ourselves to the Spirit *who is already completely present within us, around us*. There's nothing complicated about this; it doesn't require great training; it doesn't even require a lot of time. It's *just a matter of quieting down*, softening our heart, and opening our mind to the energy of God. We don't have to ask or say anything. We can just be present, feeling alive in the moment. (sermon, 5/11/08)

Barnesworth promoted a God of mysticism that was available to everyone and experienced through a variety of “quieting” techniques. Similarly, Corrigan spoke about the implications for those who acknowledge the interfaith, universal-accessibility of the Sacred. “Knowing that there are many names for God changes your relationship to God

forever,” she explained (sermon, 10/2/05). “When we know that words like God and Allah are just words which different people have used to point to an ultimately unnamable Reality, we have intellectual tools that we didn't have before, and we are less likely to confuse ‘God’ with ‘God's name’.” Through the use of interspiritual techniques, churchgoers at both Community UU and St. Luke’s were encouraged to personally *experience* a Sacred Mystery that was “bigger” and fundamentally different than the dualistic notions of most religions that portray God as somehow separate and distant from everyday human existence.

Finally, interspiritual techniques that fostered mystical perceptions of the Sacred existing within everyone and everything tended to serve as a unifying emotional experience for many of the churchgoers in the culturally-lenient, ideologically-diverse faith communities. While a conventionally liberal church such as New Heights UCC encouraged congregants to make individual moral decisions to be “friendly” and tolerate one another’s differences (with uneven results), mystically-oriented churchgoers at St. Luke’s and Community UU tended to view their heterogeneity as a resource that helped them encounter and *feel* the complexity of the Sacred Mystery. Diversity was not merely tolerated, therefore, but cherished. “To look for God in everything,” wrote Leo Schneiderman (1967), “requires of the mystic that he learn to see objects in a loving way, searching out their inner secret which is their divinity, even in the midst of ugliness and depravity.” By interpreting the sacred Ultimate Reality they experienced as being an inherent part of each person, mystically-oriented individuals perceived an ontological connection to others that seemed to minimize the sort of individualistic dynamics which typically weaken liberal religious organizations. “We recognize that we may all have

different beliefs,” one UU churchgoer told me, “and yet we're there for a common purpose.”

Towards Self-Transcendence and Organizational Devotion

According to UU minister and author Tom Owen-Towle (1998): “Mystics proclaim two main convictions: our lives are embraced by a Mystery that is gracious and trustworthy, and our human fulfillment lies in surrendering to it.” For those churchgoers whose most compelling emotions were derived from mystical relations aroused by a Sacred Mystery and/or “vague” God, therefore, becoming “religious” was a gradual process of learning how to use and rely upon the cultural resources of their churches designed to help them surrender to this monistic Ultimate Reality. Over time, their enjoyable, compelling experiences of the Sacred in All became increasingly associated with the routinized cultural “forms” of their chosen religious communities, providing them a “grounded,” collectively-supported framework for pursuing their own spiritual journeys of self-discovery and transformation.

Explaining how his parish’s Christian culture encouraged this mystical, self-transcending process, Tim Barnesworth taught:

Forget whether you’re a sinner or a saint. Drop both your pride and your shame . . . *It’s not about you.* It’s about God. . . Our tradition says that we do it by means of a much-misunderstood thing called repentance. We think that repentance means that we grovel a bit, then try harder to be a better person. But the biblical word for repentance means to turn. To turn towards God, that’s all . . . If you *focus less on yourself* and turn more often towards God — *if you lose yourself* in worship, silence, gratitude, service, and surrender — your life will become less about your small failures and successes, and more about God’s infinite goodness. Your mind and your heart will open out to the wonderful mystery of God, and all will be well. (sermon, 9/18/05)

On another occasion, he said: “We are transformed because we say yes to God without knowing where that yes will take us” (sermon, 1/22/06). Barnesworth did not want his

churchgoers to get distracted by the moral and theological details of Christian culture (that might divide them), but to simply say “yes” to the Sacred Mystery evoked by the faith’s orthopraxis and self-transcending “surrender” to the God of mysticism.

While mystical Episcopalians pursued self-transcendence in a distinctly Christian environment where various interspiritual techniques were peripheral elements, mystical Unitarian Universalists did so in a primarily Interfaith-Interspiritual cultural setting where Christian and other focused religious subcultures were maintained by separate groups as secondary layers of the church. As in many other UU congregations nationwide, the cultural framework most frequently adopted by these spiritually-oriented practitioners was Paganism, which Corrigan once explained involved experiencing the Sacred “as an evocation, not an invocation, a calling forth of the divine from within ourselves rather than a calling down of the divine from above.” Similar to Barnesworth’s invitation to “say yes” to the Sacred Mystery evoked by Christian orthopraxis, she said Paganism offered a useful method for pursuing self-transcendence among those who commit themselves to the culture. Corrigan taught:

To understand it, one must participate. . . Although there are many ways of being a Pagan, at its deepest, Paganism asks adherents to take on and practice an attitude that all is sacred and valuable for itself, to do the hard work of trying out a new set of ideas, stories, and images of the divine and allowing those stories and images to grow slowly and attain power and rightness with practice and repetition. (sermon, 10/30/05)

This pantheistic culture, therefore, encouraged a self-transcending awareness among devotees that was not unlike the Christian cultural traditions utilized by parishioners at St. Luke’s. However, as I noted in chapter three, many UU congregants acknowledged that because Paganism was a new and developing style of religious culture, it did not possess the sort of inherent authority or “weight of history” associated with Christianity.

Another common approach widely adopted as a secondary cultural framework among congregants at Community UU and which evoked experiences of a Sacred Mystery was Transcendentalism. Corrigan described how the interfaith exploration supported by her denomination ultimately led her to select this specific cultural tradition as her personal spiritual style, saying:

I meditated with a Christian-Buddhist group for three years. . . I learned a good deal about the depths of both traditions and steeped myself for a while in Buddhist practices and Christian contemplative wisdom and scripture. It was a very rich time which, ironically, turned me back to the Transcendentalists of New England, with a sense of coming home. (sermon, 10/2/05)

By studying a variety of religions and spiritual techniques, Corrigan ultimately “came home” to the nature-oriented, self-transcending practices of Transcendentalism rooted in her own Unitarian Universalist heritage. Both this cultural style and Paganism offered contemplative tools and frameworks of meaning for mystically-oriented UU churchgoers to de-emphasize themselves and convey non-dualistic expressions of Ultimate Reality.

There were participants at both St. Luke’s and Community UU, therefore, who utilized their church’s particular cultural resources in order to learn how to “surrender” to what they perceived as a Sacred Mystery within and around them. To the extent that they committed themselves to the practices and cultural tools provided by their faith communities for framing their experiences of mysticism, they came to display what has been called “intrinsically-motivated” religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967)—an all-encompassing, *lived* faith. Such devotional expressions also represented what theologian George A. Lindbeck (1984) described as a “cultural-linguistic” phenomenon, with individuals joining together and becoming “skilled in the language [and] symbol system of a given religion.” These mystically-oriented participants in lenient faith communities

did not adopt their styles of religiosity due to a desire to fulfill social or traditional obligations, to acquire interpersonal and/or culturally-related emotional rewards, or even to guarantee some afterlife salvation. Instead, they did so because their progressive faith communities provided them a satisfying, useful set of cultural resources for discovering, enhancing, and living in growing, self-transcending awareness of a Sacred Mystery they cherished.

IV. Reviving Liberal and Mainline Churches

The distinctions I observed between the more traditionally-mainline culture at New Heights and the progressive-mystical cultures at St. Luke's and Community seemed to be consistent with a growing body of research indicating that expressive and "practicing" styles of faith have emerged in recent years that differ in significant ways from both strict, orthodox Christianity and the various types of liberal Protestantism that have historically dominated the nation's religious landscape. In the Unitarian Universalist Association, a noticeable divide now exists between growing, spiritually-focused churches and declining, traditionally-humanist fellowships (Cooley, 2006; Cowtan, 2002). Likewise, researchers have identified a "new kind of Christianity" (Taussig, 2006) emerging among thriving mainline Protestant and liberal Christian churches, with religious cultures marked by the distinctive, ritualized use of spiritual practices (Bass, 2006, 2006a, 2005, 2004). that has been interpreted as a "return to tradition" (Finke, 2004).

The presence of such spiritual and mystically-oriented dynamics at Community UU and even more so at St. Luke's suggested that they represented the sort of reviving, "progressive" churches identified by others. Based on my observations, these types of

religious communities are likely being driven by the involvement of mystically-oriented leaders and seekers who are both reinterpreting *and* re-appropriating faith traditions in order to serve multiple segments of the liberal religious marketplace. By becoming relevant to many people who had been alienated from or only loosely attached to organized religiosity, these faith communities demonstrated “the fact that individuality and society are not opposites, but require each other”—fulfilling what sociologist Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985, p. 247-248) called the “great contribution” needed from churches today in an increasingly-fractured society.

Spiritual Enthusiasm for Socio-Political Liberalism

One the most important ways that mysticism invigorated the two progressive churches in this study was by fostering spiritual experiences that seemed to validate the open-minded, “inclusive” values of socio-political liberal participants. Conceiving of Ultimate Reality in monistic ways provided a “spiritual foundation” for mystically-oriented practitioners to support acts of compassion and social-justice. In his analysis of the “the new religious consciousness,” for example, Robert Bellah (1974) observed: “Much of the counter-cultural criticism of American society is related to the belief in non-dualism.”

This link between mysticism and social liberalism was frequently emphasized at Community UU, with Corrigan teaching that all spiritual practices and major religious traditions should ultimately inspire devotees to embrace and display a selfless moral imperative. She once said:

The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice was that it must lead directly to practical

compassion. . . Compassion was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, for the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, for Paul, and for Muhammad, not to mention Confucius, Lao-tzu, the Buddha, or the sages of the Upanishads. (sermon, 6/6/04)

This sort of message about self-transcending acts of compassion being at the “heart” of all religious cultures reflected the mystical perception that everyone and everything is interconnected. This mystically-derived emphasis upon compassionate activities had the effect of validating the denominational orthopraxis of social service outlined by Unitarian Universalism’s “Seven Principles” (as described in chapter 3). By experiencing the Sacred Mystery that united all UU churchgoers with one another (and all of existence) and emphasizing the mystical imperative to engage in the compassionate practices that was a defining characteristic of their religious culture, Corrigan indirectly encouraged greater devotion among churchgoers for their own distinctive denominational identity.

Barnesworth also sought to enhance his mystically-oriented parishioners’ loyalty to the Christian tradition by regularly challenging his listeners to adopt Jesus’ mystical and moral ways of living in unity with the Sacred. “Jesus invites us to live counter-culturally,” he taught one Sunday (sermon 12/24/05). For progressive Episcopalians like Barnesworth, Christianity’s useful spiritual practices and idealized human figure of Jesus provided an important framework for not only calling people into the sort of contemplative, meditative focus he had found so personally-fulfilling, but for *acting* upon this awareness of being mystically-connected to all of existence. One Sunday, he said:

Experiencing the Spirit this way in prayer, *it changes how we relate to the world* around us. Rather than imagining ourselves to be separate from other people, our nation as separate from other nations, and human life as separate from all other life forms, we can see humanity and all creation as one unified organism, animated by the Spirit. Seeing life this way, *how can we pollute the earth? How can we wage war* against our brothers and sisters instead of seeking understanding and reconciliation? *How can we ignore the needs of those who suffer* because they were born into bad circumstances? *How can we hold a grudge* and dismiss

others with resentment? We are, as St. Paul said, members of the same body. The Spirit therefore has two transformational effects: one is the transformation of our awareness and how we pray; the other is the transformation of how we relate to the world around us. (sermon, 5/11/08)

Experiencing God as a monistic, Sacred Mystery allowed Barnesworth to speak in passionate support of the liberal socio-political views that most of the people in his parish already embraced.

While conventional liberals often faced a tension between their faith and modern, “tolerant” values, though, mystically-oriented practitioners such as Barnesworth encountered Ultimate Reality in a way that seemed to *demand* support for socio-political liberalism. They did not merely exert their individual right to uphold inclusive, justice-oriented values (despite traditionally-exclusive moral teachings of Christianity); their compelling personal experiences of the Sacred Mystery had convinced them of the *necessity* of such values.

In 1985, sociologist Benton Johnson declared: “If the liberal churches are to recover their strength and cultural influence, they will have to make liberal Christianity more relevant and compelling to its own constituency.” At St. Luke’s and Community UU, I observed how mysticism was inspiring renewed interest and enthusiasm for Christian culture. Not only did mysticism encourage culturally-lenient churchgoers with inclusive values to feel more confident in rejecting the restrictive moral codes of Christianity and other religious traditions with which they disagreed, but drew spiritually-oriented practitioners into the sort of collective social justice work largely associated with mainline denominations in the US (Wuthnow and Evans, 2002). The progressive churches thus seemed to gradually unify their diverse members around both collective experiences of mysticism *and* the liberal socio-political values evoked by those spiritual

perceptions of a monistic Ultimate Reality. As a result, the “Golden Rule” traditions of mainline Protestantism became more relevant and compelling to religious liberals.

The Ease of the Christian Form

While both progressive-mystical churches I studied had developed successful cultural techniques to convey a Sacred Mystery, their differing approaches ultimately appealed to different types of spiritual seekers. Some UU interviewees told me that they were unable to find the Christian culture valuable—even if used in ways I described as “Gnostic.” Likewise, research has shown that only certain individuals may be able to appreciate the sort of radically-multicultural, “incoherent” style of religiosity promoted in UU churches like Community. Sociologists Marta Elliott and R. David Hayward (2007), for example, studied spirituality among Unitarian Universalists and found that although these churchgoers “tend to derive a fair amount of strength and comfort from their religion,” doing so generally depended on the individuals being “well-educated.” Such findings suggest that while a UU style of mystically-oriented culture can be a valuable approach for some consumers in the liberal religious marketplace, being able to understand and appreciate the diverse traditions, practices, symbols, and narratives utilized by this style of faith requires a level of intellectual flexibility and training that only a minority of people in society possess. Such a requirement would impose a clear limit on the number of spiritual seekers in America who might find a Unitarian Universalist style of progressive-mysticism to be useful for interpreting diffuse experiences of the sacred.

Indeed, during my own observations in the two progressive churches, I found that the single cultural “form” offered at St. Luke’s—Christianity—seemed to provide those

seekers who could adopt the tools of this tradition with a much more direct, less complicated process for fostering self-transcendence. The Christian cultural heritage offered a specific set of stories, symbols, and practices that could be more quickly “mastered” by mystical devotees than the range of interfaith styles promoted at Community UU. Because narratives “are a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experience” (Yamane, 2000), parishioners at St. Luke’s generally spent less time trying to learn about, understand and synthesize their church’s cultural tools, and instead were able to reliably *use* stable, liturgical elements that evoked their contemplative experiences and interpretations of a monistic Ultimate Reality.

Research has shown that having access to such stable, longstanding cultural resources—including human “models” exemplifying how to achieve desired self-transcendence (such as Jesus, Christian “saints,” etc.)—tends to “facilitate ecstatic experiences” (Yamane and Polzer, 1994). Each week at St. Luke’s, for example, parishioners celebrated a specific cultural repertoire that encouraged them to model the sort of intimacy with the Sacred and selfless morality displayed by Jesus. The worshipers’ shared focus on the “self-forgetting” liturgical patterns of Christianity provided a clear, consistent, and grounded foundation for pursuing spiritual awareness and moral development that seemed much simpler than the interfaith culture utilized at Community UU. When entering the church’s sanctuary each week, Episcopal parishioners didn’t necessarily need to “think” about what they were doing or even saying—and this “feel, but do not analyze” process was even encouraged by Barnesworth (as noted in chapter two). Progressive churchgoers at St. Luke’s used their chosen

religious culture to both evoke the sense of mysticism they cherished and offer them guidance on how to develop a moral response to this self-transcending state of awareness.

“Return to Tradition” or Retraditioning?

Although St. Luke’s more singular culture proved advantageous over Community’s primarily interfaith dynamics, both progressive churches were growing, strong organizations that attracted and served mystically-oriented, interspiritual individuals who enjoyed the process of “surrendering” themselves to a specific, chosen religious “form.” The mystical dynamics encouraged by Barnesworth and Corrigan, however, did not merely “return” their churches to religious traditions, but promoted a “progressive” cultural process of gradually transforming their denominational cultures and constructing entirely new styles of faith. Similar to “Emergent Christians” within Evangelicalism (as previously noted), these mystically-oriented leaders seemed to prioritize their own spiritual perceptions of Ultimate Reality over their religious traditions, giving them the charismatic authority to gradually introduce new words, new experiences, and new interpretations of old words in order to express their monistic perceptions of reality. Because such cultural innovation is so common among the mystically-oriented Baby Boomers returning to churches today, Wade Roof Clark (1998) concluded: “It is the seekers who are at the cutting edge of the contemporary spiritual question.”

Understandably, orthodox believers in firmly-established religions that define God in dualistic terms often view mysticism and the contemplative practices that evoke monistic awareness as heretical threats. In Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, Islamic clerics have officially banned Muslims from chanting while practicing yoga at home and

in gyms, “citing concerns it would corrupt their faith” (Karmini, 2009). Yoga is banned entirely for Muslims in Egypt, and some Christian fundamentalists in the US have even complained about the use of yoga in the physical education programs of public schools as being a violation of “church and state.” In acknowledging the seemingly-inherent tension between mysticism and such orthodox religious cultures, Rachel Corrigan said: “Mystics are looked at with some suspicion in traditions that value priests, scripture, and tradition. Mystics often find themselves accused of heresy...that is to say, choosing their beliefs on their own inner authority rather than relying on external authorities” (sermon, 12/4/05).

The infusion of mysticism and ontological monism into the Christian culture at St. Luke’s, therefore, seemed to be an especially significant phenomenon—overcoming both the inherent limitations of a religious tradition dominated by ontological dualism and more “orthodox” Episcopalians who embrace that worldview. The progressive-mystics parishioners I interviewed were subjecting Christianity to a process that Wade Clark Roof (1999) referred to as “retraditioning,” whereby religious symbols are infused “with new interpretations and contemporary uses.” This process was demonstrated primarily by self-described spiritual seekers who gradually transformed Christian culture in order to accommodate their own ongoing, powerful experiences of the Sacred Mystery within themselves and everything. Their personal encounters with the God of mysticism gave them the confidence to re-arrange and reformulate their chosen religion’s cultural tools, not only providing new interpretations and uses for older ideas and practices but occasionally giving rise to entirely new innovations that were believed to improve upon the experiential and ontological value of the faith system. Thus, while the religious

orthopraxis clearly displayed at St. Luke's might have appeared to merely be a "return to tradition" (Finke, 2004), parishioners' enthusiasm for Christian symbols, narratives, and practices was due to their specifically nontraditional celebration of a Sacred Mystery.

V. Progressive Christianity

Across the nation, "experimental," progressive reformulations of Christian worship and culture—such as at St. Luke's—have been gradually taking place across denominational boundaries, leading to an unknown array of interspiritual styles, practices, and alternative interpretations of Ultimate Reality evolving around the Christian "form" (Taussig, 2006; Schweitzer, 2006; Fischler, 2004; Jayoush, 2004; Murphy, 2002; Tagliaferro, 2001). In describing such dynamics at his California church, for example, UCC minister Jim Burklo (2000) wrote: "I have found it possible to create worship experiences that evoke the same sense of the holy that traditional ritual does, but without using traditional theology." His progressively-oriented congregation has begun sponsoring candlelit gatherings where seekers chant, sit in contemplative silence, listen to readings from the Bible, modern poetry or other religious traditions, and conclude by participating in an open Eucharist. Similarly, the Episcopal cathedral in Denver began an experimental program about a year ago called "The Wilderness" that combined contemplative, interfaith, and interspiritual dynamics, and which has since grown to become the second most-attended weekly service at the downtown church (Draper, 2009). Innovative, interfaith worship techniques were also central to the monthly Kirtan Mass at St. Luke's. Such similar efforts to develop new, interspiritual styles of religious expression seem to suggest that even while mystically-oriented reformers are contributing to the elimination of some elements of traditional Christian culture, they are also creating

new cultural resources designed to celebrate a Sacred Mystery.

From Panentheism to Universal Salvation

Perhaps the most important theological shift that many in this progressive Christian phenomenon are embracing is a fundamental redefinition of the Sacred from a patriarchal, separate “Being” to all of reality itself. This is demonstrated by progressive Christians who publicly support the concept of panentheism (Clayton and Peacocke, eds, 2004)—and to a lesser extent, Process Theology (Keller, 2008; Mesle, 1993). This theological view goes beyond the sort of pantheism expressed by most of the progressive-mystics I interviewed at Community UU who described all of the universe as Sacred, but did not typically relate to this Mystery in interpersonal ways. Literally meaning “All in God,” panentheism is unique, and makes sense of the mystic’s perception that the Sacred is everywhere while retaining the Abrahamic tradition of a monotheistic Deity. Panentheism claims that the Sacred is intrinsically connected to nature, but is also somehow more than just the “sum of these parts.”

This view was specifically promoted by Barnesworth in his published books, and was expressed in various ways by the progressive Christians I met at St. Luke’s who struggled to conceive of God as simultaneously interpersonal (an “Other” apart from people) and a monistic reality within everything in the universe (including themselves). Navigating this tension between their mystical, monistic experiences and a religious culture based upon human/divine interactions seemed to be at the heart of the “Mystery” for many of the seekers at St. Luke’s.

Panentheism asserts that God is not only close to humanity, but is forever connected to all people and things. Such a radical vision of the divine erases the historic

dualism separating the sacred and profane, and interprets all people regardless of cultural background or religious beliefs as being ontologically-intertwined by a unifying “God” within them all. Advocating this view in his book *The God We Never Knew* (1997), Episcopal theologian Marcus Borg wrote:

The varieties of religious experience suggests that the Sacred—God—is an element of experience, not simply an article of faith to be believed in. . . . These experiences suggest that reality is far more mysterious than any and all of our domestications—whether scientific or religious—make it out to be. . . . If God can be experienced, then God is right here, all around us. . . . These experiences point to. . . a Panentheistic model of God. . . . It is intellectually more adequate than supernatural theism’s concept of God as wholly transcendent; it does not have the difficulties associated with thinking of God as “out there”.

In place of the supernatural Deity that visits or acts on behalf of a ritualized moral community or faith tradition, the panentheistic God is perceived to already and forever be connected to everyone. “I have realized that one may be an atheist regarding the God of supernatural theism,” Borg concluded, “and yet be a believer in God conceptualized another way, namely in the way offered by panentheism.”

In the 1950’s, popular Episcopal theologian Paul Tillich promoted this radically-ecumenical and alternative vision of the Sacred by describing how the “God beyond God” defied all fixed theological definitions or dualistic characteristics, and was diffused throughout everything in reality. He referred to this panentheistic notion of the Sacred as the “Ground of all Being” (Tillich, 1952). This term was specifically embraced by new UU congregant and progressive Christian Frank Wolverton, who described God by saying:

I would have to go back to Tillich, . . . and say the thing that's meant most to me is the term “Ground of Being.” . . . It is something that's very fundamental about everything. It's the ground. It's the very beginning. It's the alpha and omega of all. I don't think that people can imagine what that Force is. . . . To me, the

Ground of Being is a kind of life force within the universe that is within every person and thing. It's available for anyone who wants to search for it.

Controversial author and former Episcopal Bishop of New Jersey John Shelby Spong

(2001a) also indirectly supported Tilich's panentheistic conception of God:

Ultimately, we discover that our God-experience is like swimming in an eternal ocean of love. . . . When I try to describe this reality, words fail me; so I simply utter the name *God*. That name, however, is no longer for me the name of a *being*—not even a supernatural being or the supreme being. . . . God is clearly *in* me, just as God is *before* me. God is part of who I am and part of who you are. . . . The God we once saw theistically as a being can also now be seen as a symbol of Being itself.

For such progressive Christian seekers—in Unitarian Universalist, Episcopal, and other churches—the “Ground of Being” and other panentheistic interpretations are apparently providing a useful framework for redefining the Christian culture's references to “God” in light of their own contemplative, interspiritual experiences of the Sacred as mysteriously-intertwined with all of reality.

Adopting panentheism as a model for God, though, ultimately places progressive cultural pressures upon the larger body of Christian theology. Theologian Val Webb (2006), for example, has written:

Our God-image determines how we respond to It and also how we define ourselves in light of It. If God is a wrathful judge, sizing us up to punish or reward, we live cowering before such scrutiny, constantly fearful we might be found wanting. If God is a powerful ruler, we, as subjects, obey that ruler's laws, whether just or arbitrary. If God is our lover, we feel loved in the reciprocal relationship of lovers. If God is the universal Life force within us and the world, we are interconnected co-creators with the internal, urging God. . . . we live differently, depending on how we imagine God.

By changing the way God is imagined—the cornerstone of most expressions of religious faith—progressive Christians are increasingly being led to re-evaluate, re-interpret, and even recreate their most fundamental beliefs.

Such ongoing theological speculation and innovation is largely being driven by personal experiences of mysticism. Describing how his own encounters with God during meditation forced him to radically re-interpret the traditional Christian understandings of salvation, prayer, and sin, Barnesworth explained:

Whether it is called panentheism or contemplation, it is seeing God not as a being who acts upon life, but as Being itself that is acting through life. If God is Being, then union with God is not something to be achieved; it is a fact of life. If God is Being, then our efforts in prayer are not directed toward having a dialogue between two beings; our efforts are to open ourselves to what is, and what can be realized in us, with awareness. If God is Being, then when we sin we have not offended a divine person; we have simply tried to act in a way that is contrary to Being, to the way things are. ([Author identity withheld to protect confidentiality], 2002).

Barnesworth's view was similar to that of John Shelby Spong (2001), who wrote:

There is a Reality we call God that is the Source of the life we live, the Power of the love we share, the Ground of Being that calls us to be all that we can be. I live today in the conviction that I am not separate from this God. I participate in that which is eternal, infinite, and beyond all boundaries. My being is expanded by this experience. . . . Do not confuse this God with the God we served in the childhood of our humanity. This God is not identified with doctrines, creeds, and traditions. The reality of this God is beyond all of that. This God can never be captured in words or made to serve our power-needs. The God beyond theism is beyond everything.

Several of the parishioners I interviewed at St. Luke's also shared this "re-traditioned" interpretation of God. This included those who, as previously described, pursued "self-transcendence" as their key spiritual and religious goal. By learning to "forget" the self, they believed, the sacred, mysterious "energy" already within them could be more fully experienced and expressed in their lives.

A panentheistic conception of God also erodes the authority of religious institutions to impose moral exclusivity and/or theological orthodoxy as conditions of "salvation," including Christianity's historical doctrines of "substitutionary atonement"

linked to Jesus' death. If everyone is already a part of God—as experienced and described by Borg, Spong, and Barnesworth—then an intermediating Church or supernatural Christ would be unnecessary for individuals to relate to the Sacred. Salvation would not involve a process of believers “crossing over” or being “rescued” from a profane realm to some reunion with God, but of people merely becoming mystically-aware that they are already within and forever intertwined with God. Catholic priest and contemplative seeker Richard Rohr (1999) reached this very conclusion, reinterpreting the traditional religious concept of salvation with the transformative discovery of God's presence in everything:

To really experience the Absolute—that Life is radically good, that Life courses through me, and that this Life is the presence of God—is to experience the essential pattern. When we are reconnected at our core. . .we call it salvation. . . God is so great, so bottomless, so empty, that God can absorb even the contraries, even the collision of opposites. Thus, salvation often feels like a kind of universal amnesty, a total forgiveness of ourselves and all other things. . .All spiritual disciplines exist to help you trust this personal experience of yourself, which is, not surprisingly, also an experience of God.

Barnesworth preached a similarly-universalistic message that dismissed the exclusivity of Christianity. Implicitly acknowledging that all people are already “saved” (due to his perceptions of mysticism, rather than the theological arguments historically associated with American-style Universalism), he once preached:

It's not as if God is somewhere other than right here. It's not as if we have to go somewhere to get to God. . .*We're already completely one with God*, just as we are one with all creation and with one another. This isn't so hard to understand. . . our own experience—here at this altar, in a hospital room of a loved one, in the quiet of the night when we're all alone – our own experience tells us that God is always right here, within and around us. (sermon, 5/20/07)

For mystically-oriented Christians who openly or silently embraced this understanding of God, churches and faith traditions lose all ability to regulate salvation. Instead, religious

institutions merely help seekers become *aware* of the interconnected Sacred Mystery within them by providing cultural tools for sustaining and living in ways that reflect this knowledge. A parishioner at St. Luke's demonstrated this alternative way of relating to religious culture, saying: "As I practice my faith and if I spend quiet time in meditation, I'm able to access that sense in me, that . . . gives me a spark or a connection to that Energy and that Ultimate Being. . . whatever that is." Progressive churches promote this style of mystical relations as a subjectively-enjoyable experience, rather than an objectively-necessary one.

Meeting Jesus Again

Because traditional Christian notions of salvation and substitutionary atonement do not make sense from a mystic's perspective of God (as described above), another progressive theological development I identified related to the retraditioning of Jesus. In general, the altered meanings expressed by mystically-oriented Christians about the leading figure in their faith tends to result in rejecting both orthodox doctrines about his unique divinity and secular perspectives that reduce him simply to a mortal figure of history. Instead, Jesus is most often described as a human who became fully "aware" of the Sacred within himself and everyone, and that his "Way" of living offers a framework for contemporary seekers to similarly progress towards ultimate spiritual enlightenment and intimacy with the God within. Barnesworth clearly articulated this progressive theology one Sunday morning, saying:

Jesus prayed for his disciples and all who would eventually come to believe; he prayed for you and for me. He asked that we may be one as he and the Father are one. . . I think he just knew that there was no separation between him and the Father, and he really expected you and me to know that, too. (sermon, 5/20/07)

A parishioner at St. Luke's also thought of Jesus as a model of Sacred Unity for all

people, telling me: “I believe that he was human. But that he had some special something, which he chose to accept. I think *we all* have the ability to accept that connection.” While conceiving of Jesus in such human terms is not necessarily outside the range of Christian orthodoxy, minimizing the uniqueness of his divinity and suggesting that all people can be as connected to God as Jesus would certainly defy the faith’s traditional doctrines. Such statements instead revealed how progressive Christians reinterpreted the meaning of Jesus’ life and his role as an inspiring, spiritually-enlightened ideal who demonstrated that *everyone* is able to “accept that connection” to the Sacred Mystery.

Barnesworth also often described how Jesus’ life—and the historical Christian focus on his death and resurrection—provided a useful cultural framework for spiritual seekers today who are pursuing their own self-transcending awareness of the Sacred. “Jesus talked about dying to self and being resurrected with God,” Barnesworth told me. “It’s really death of the ego. It’s living out of that place where we all ultimately are, which is in union with God, but really living out of that place where the ego’s not in the way.” Jesus was thus interpreted as an enlightened human who exemplified how to sustain an ongoing, self-transcending mystical awareness of the universal Sacred. Barnesworth said: “I think Jesus was all about letting go of certainty, and living with mystery and trusting God. Trusting in the Mystery, rather than finding the answers and nailing it down so that you can define them as true, and therefore be secure.” With this alternative interpretation of Jesus, Barnesworth was able to return to and find renewed value in the cultural framework of Christianity.

In one sermon, for example, he taught: “By your faith and by the help of the

Spirit, you *can* be born again, and again, and again. You *can* die to the old self and be re-made into the likeness of Christ. You *can* take on the mind of Christ” (sermon, 4/8/07).

This sort of adoption of the “born again” language most often associated with Evangelical Christians exemplified how the progressive retraditioning being carried out by mystics infused older cultural symbols and narratives with new, radically-different meanings. Barnesworth used the “born again” concept to encourage his parishioners to pursue the same sort of ongoing process of self-transcendence displayed by Jesus, and in so doing, be transformed into the “likeness of Christ.”

As I described in chapter 2, although Barnesworth viewed Jesus as originally human, he also believed that the fully-enlightened “Christ” is one of countless sacred “avatars” who continue on as supernatural beings today. His progressive theology, I discovered, was more complex than other seekers interviewed at St. Luke’s whose devotion was primarily directed to the God of mysticism that Jesus was believed to have also worshipped, but not necessarily *to* the figure of Jesus directly. Barnesworth fused his mystical experiences of Sacred unity and the dualistic expressions within his Christian culture (and profession) by adopting an eastern religious belief in both a God of All (such as the concept of Brahman) and a supernatural pantheon of demi-gods and avatars like Jesus who collectively express the single God. Describing the unique style of progressive theology he had privately developed, he told me:

The more I studied about the historical Jesus—the human Jesus as someone who was filled with God—what was sort of creeping back in was a high Christology. If this human being has become so realized that he is transparent to God and the distinction between human and the divine has sort of evaporated. . .then that means I can worship him. He’s not just a human teacher who was enlightened that I can follow. He is God, and therefore I can worship him. But at the same time, I realize he’s not the only one. There are other enlightened beings who people worship, and I think that’s fine.

Continuing, he said:

The way that Christianity has looked at Jesus traditionally has been that this divine visitor comes down from heaven, and I see Jesus as this human being who—however it happened—became so transparent to God that the distinction between him and the divine disappeared. . . . So the terms for Jesus—like Savior, Holy Son of God, all those names—are human attempts to express something very mysterious. So I don't get too hung up on doctrine. I simply say here's a human being. Here's God incarnate. I don't know how that happens. It seemed to have happened with him. It probably happens with other people from time to time, very rarely. I think Buddha was one of them. I think that maybe the Dalai Lama is one. I think there's some very holy people. There's something like the ego dies, and they're completely transparent to God. And they have great power because of that. They touch people and things happen. I think that does happen.

Barnesworth's fusion of Hindu and Christian theological concepts in order to incorporate his experiences of mysticism within his chosen religious culture demonstrated one possible result of progressive retraditioning.

Direct, Public Challenges to Traditional Doctrines

Although the mystically-oriented parishioners I interviewed at St. Luke's minimized, altered, or outright rejected the traditionally orthodox interpretations of their parish's Christian symbols and narratives—tending to express Unitarian and Universalist theologies involving a God of panentheism and interpretations of Jesus as a human mystic—most had not developed a comprehensive, internally-logical alternative theology for interpreting their experiences of mysticism through the Christian liturgy. A few, though, indicated their interest and support for various “radical” theologians, historians, and other scholars who have been publicly promoting mystical styles of Christian liturgical worship and directly challenging the faith's orthodox beliefs. Many of these influential and controversial authors were featured in the “Saving Jesus” DVD program that was presented at St. Luke's (as described in chapter 2).

In order to better understand the potential impact that progressive-mysticism

might have on the future of Christian churches like St. Luke's—as well as the Episcopal Church, other mainline denominations, and the nation's overall religious landscape—I researched some of the leading “reformers” who have openly challenged Christian orthodoxy in recent years and/or advocated specific theological alternatives derived from their own experiences of mysticism. These individuals, such as John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, Matthew Fox, Don Cupitt, Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and Bart Ehrman, authored a variety of mainstream books designed to introduce laypersons to modernist, academic perspectives about the Bible that seem to undermine the historical assumptions supporting orthodox Christian faith. Don Cupitt (2001), for example, wrote:

Modern Christianity. . .will not face up to something that theologians have been aware of for more than a century. . .The historical Jesus, the Jesus who actually lived, has been shown beyond doubt to have been a quite different figure from the Divine Saviour of the developed ecclesiastical faith. . .The Church claims to be founded upon Jesus Christ, but when we look into the matter we discover that its connection with him is very tenuous.

Similarly, Marcus Borg (1997) has asserted: “Over the last thirty to forty years, an older way of thinking about God (and the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity itself) has ceased to be compelling to many Christians, especially those who are the natural constituency of mainline churches.”

Many of the controversial authors, including Cupitt and Borg , are among the 150 theologians, historians, and other academics affiliated with *The Jesus Seminar*. This project, begun two decades ago and sponsored by the Westar Institute, is designed to present the general public with a unified message from modern scholars about how the Gospel narratives reveal a “historical Jesus” who was significantly different than the deified “Christ of faith” concept that believers came to worship (Jesus Seminar, 2000,

1999; Funk, 1997; Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, 1993). Demonstrating the radical implications of this group's work and ongoing public education efforts, *Jesus Seminar* participant and Biblical scholar Roy Hoover openly called for changing the beliefs associated with Christianity because of modern research: "The new data that historical scholarship has turned up on the historical Jesus and on Christian origins more generally has pointed to the need for a new theological paradigm and will make sense only from the perspective that a new paradigm will offer" (Hoover, 2001). More recently, Marcus Borg described how the search for this "new faith" has already begun in a number of churches across the country where Christians have either tacitly or openly rejected the validity of theological orthodoxy (such as Barnesworth at St. Luke's whose "high Christology" was based on nontraditional views of Jesus). Borg observed: "We live in a time of a deeply divided Christianity. . . The major division is between. . . an earlier Christian paradigm and an emerging Christian paradigm. . . between conservative and progressive Christians" (Borg, 2006). Efforts to facilitate the development of this "emerging" paradigm, I found, is being promoted through DVD programs such as "Saving Jesus," public presentations by Christian "reformers" (including some of the most outspoken members of *The Jesus Seminar*), and through numerous mainstream books available today that present critical, scholarly challenges to the historical assumptions of the Christian faith (Scott, 2008; Borg, 2006, 1994; Ehrman, 2005, 2003; Robinson, 2005; Hoover, 2002; Chilton, 2000; Funk, 1997).

Beyond supporting these efforts at deconstruction, however, a few progressive theologians have also advanced clear, alternative ways of finding spiritual meaning in Jesus and the Christian tradition (Spong, Funk, and Cupitt, 2007; Borg, 2004, 2001; Jesus

Seminar, 2000). Most striking in their work—and relevant to the current study—was how their own experiences of mysticism often provided the basis for their various reformations of Christianity. I found that their oft-similar testimonies about having discovered a God that is “bigger” than the traditional “Divine Being” of Christian theology are quite similar to the “vague” descriptions of the Sacred expressed during interviews by progressive parishioners at St. Luke’s, as well as in the mystically-oriented sermons presented by Tim Barnesworth.

Former Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey John Shelby Spong has likely become the most well-known “activist” Christian reformer (Burke, 2007; Laidlaw, 2007; Schulte, 2006; Jacobs, 2000), presenting over 200 lectures worldwide annually, writing countless online and print articles, and authoring eleven best-selling books, including recent texts with controversial titles such as *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1999), *A New Christianity for a New World* (2001), and *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2008). Spong’s most recent publications advance a progressive reinterpretation of Christian culture largely fueled by the sort of mystical experiences of Ultimate Reality also expressed by the progressive churchgoers I interviewed. Describing the challenge that faces progressive-mystics such as himself who choose to use the tools of Christian culture, he wrote:

The God I meet experientially, the God who cannot be described intellectually. . .that God I am convinced is real. So inside this tension of dismissing all the explanations of our faith history yet defending the reality of the experience which created those explanations, my theological task as a Christian is to separate surgically the experience from the explanation. (Spong, 2001)

Just as Barnesworth taught his parishioners to do, Spong dismissed the traditional meanings of Christianity even while continuing to affirm both the Sacred Mystery he

personally experienced and the religious rituals he had come to value and that “grounded” him in those mystical perceptions.

Spong is not the only nationally-recognized progressive-mystic calling for major changes to Christianity. Former Catholic priest and current Episcopal theologian Matthew Fox has also become known as an advocate of retraditioning the Christian faith (Fox, 2006, 2004, 2001), writing 28 books that deal in various ways with the subject. He has also explored such alternative expressions of faith by sponsoring radically-interfaith worship services called “Techno Cosmic Masses” (Lattin, 1997) and founding an interfaith seminary called Wisdom University. In apparent acknowledgement of Fox’s influence, a 2003 booklet published by the Vatican on the threats of the “New Age” included a specific rejection of Fox’s theology (Daughters of St. Paul, 2003; Owen, 2003). Such attention may be warranted, for the reformer has developed perhaps the most radical, extensive, and logically-coherent theological alternative to Christian orthodoxy (Neely, 2006; Harpur, 2001; Nartonis, 2000). “At this time in history, Protestantism, like Catholicism, needs a radical overhaul—a New Reformation and new transformation,” he wrote in his 2006 book, *A New Reformation*. “Both need to move from religion to spirituality.” In this text, Fox presented 95 original “theses” (in reference to Martin Luther’s historical rejection of traditional doctrines) that called for Christianity to be radically changed in order to clearly reflect the sort of mystical ontological reality that he and other spiritual seekers have experienced. Some of Fox’s theses, for example, included the mystically-oriented and interspiritual acknowledgements that: “God is both Mother and Father,” “All things are in God and God is in all things,” “Christians must distinguish between Jesus (a historical figure) and

Christ (the experience of God-in-all-things),” and “God speaks today, as in the past, through all religions and all cultures and all faith traditions, none of which is perfect and an exclusive avenue to truth, but all of which can learn from each other.” In putting forth these statements, Fox wrote: “I trust I am not alone in recognizing these truths. For me they represent a return to our origins, to the spirit and teachings of Jesus and his prophetic ancestors, and to the Christ unleashed by Jesus’ presence and teachings” (Fox, 2006). Indeed, the present research confirmed that many progressive churchgoers at the local level today express spiritual and theological convictions that are quite similar to Fox’s.

Some mystically-oriented Christians around the nation, I discovered, have also begun networking with one another and establishing nascent organizational structures around their emerging, progressive approaches to Christian faith. One such group is *The Center for Progressive Christianity* (www.tpc.org), an online community founded in 1994 that links together individuals and a handful of local groups around the country who “do not find a comfortable fit with traditional understandings of Christian faith.” The organization’s website serves as a free public forum for progressive theologies to be collectively developed and shared. Most of the online articles, for example, are written by mainline and liberal ministers who describe how they have been advancing progressive-mysticism practices and /or theologies within their local churches. The current TCPC Director, UCC minister Fred Plumer (2006), revealed his own desire to promote progressive changes within Christianity in order to accommodate the sort of beliefs associated with spiritual seekers and mysticism:

Maybe it is time for churches to find ways to reclaim, to repair and/or build a transformative spiritual path that provides an opportunity to experience the Ultimate Reality, the *Sacred Unity*, God, the Holy, Allah, . . . If Christianity, as we

understand it, has any future, we will have to create ways to reunite religion and spirituality again.

Like many of his group's members, Plumer hopes that Christian culture might be reformed so as to better convey the contemporary, interspiritual perceptions of "Sacred Unity" expressed by the sort of mystically-oriented seekers I met at St. Luke's. Some theologians affiliated with TCPC have even begun work on an alternative liturgy for Christian worship that clearly expresses their unique ways of relating to the Sacred.

The popularity of theologians such as Borg and Spong, the emergence of nascent, grassroots networks like *The Center for Progressive Christianity*, and the unknown number of experimental, interspiritual practices being developed in churches nationwide demonstrate that the sort of alternative and mystical views I heard expressed by progressive Christians at St. Luke's was not simply a local phenomenon. As Hal Taussig also observed (1999), a "new type of Christianity" indeed seems to be developing. This phenomenon is being driven by those who have not simply rejected the ontological dualism and historical narratives associated with Christian orthodoxy, but whose personal experiences of mysticism are fueling new uses and interpretations of Christian culture.

Beyond the Anglican Divide to a Shifting Religious Landscape

To the extent that the sort of progressive-mystical retraditioning I observed at St. Luke's continues to spread nationwide—supported by the public advocates, authors, and grassroots efforts mentioned above—institutional tensions and divisions are likely to mount in several of the nation's mainline denominations. With forty percent of mainline Christians now describing themselves specifically as "evangelical" (Boorstein, 2009)—perhaps demonstrating the influence of conservative "revival" movements within the historically "liberal" Protestant organizations in recent years (McKinney & Finke,

2002)—a future clash seems unavoidable between orthodox believers and the sort of spiritually-motivated, progressive Christians who are thriving at growing parishes like St. Luke's.

Barnesworth, for example, once described attending a local diocesan meeting with other Episcopal leaders where the facilitator asked participants to spend a few minutes seated in silence with their eyes closed and to reflect on what was inherently good within themselves. After the exercise concluded, each individual was invited to share their reactions to the experience. Barnesworth recalled that the Episcopalians were clearly split in two. Half enjoyed the reflective practice and said they felt closer to God by engaging in it. Those who were more theologically-conservative, though, said that the activity seemed either confusing or blasphemous, and that there was nothing inherently good within themselves or any human being. God, they declared, was separate from them, and He alone was good and deserving of their attention. This event effectively illustrated the divide between traditionalists and mystics in the Episcopal Church today over how Ultimate Reality is experienced and should be interpreted.

Such fundamental differences have fueled the conflicts that have erupted throughout the denomination in recent years, with some individual believers, parishes, and entire dioceses opting to abandon the organization. The US branch of Anglicanism is also facing sanctions or outright expulsion from the worldwide Anglican Communion because of differing interpretations of theology and morality (Boyer, 2006). While much of this fracturing is linked most directly to the Episcopal Church's 2003 ordination of openly-gay Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, the event simply exposed the much deeper, broader theological divisions separating members of the organization. In

the wake of the Robinson ordination, for example, retired Episcopal Bishop C.

Fitzsimons Allison (2006) publicly asserted: “The troubles facing the Episcopal Church and other denominations have to do with being divided between two faiths.”

Indeed, the current research suggests that although there are several diverse expressions of Christian faith currently being practiced within the Episcopal Church, underlying that diversity are two fundamentally different ways of interpreting God and Ultimate Reality. While members of traditional Christian parishes nationwide presumably continue to affirm exclusive moral standards and historical orthodoxies around the ontological dualism of God, progressive Christians like those at St. Luke’s are openly encouraged to explore alternative theologies and moral principles derived from their experiences of a Sacred Mystery.

A 2003 study based on interviews with over 2,500 Episcopalians across the country called *Restoring the Ties that Bind* found that the mystical dynamics associated with seekers have come to dominate numerous parishes, and that these grassroots developments are gradually changing the overall character of the national denomination. “Congregations are being transformed by an influx of new members quite distinct from lifelong Episcopalians,” wrote researchers William Sachs and Thomas Holland (2003).

The study revealed:

These adults saw themselves as embarked on spiritual journeys, . . . Unlike the stereotypical New Age religious seekers, however, they wanted to make these journeys within a community, and they were drawn to the historic Anglican tradition of both Eucharistic worship and room for individual questioning (Steinfels, 2003).

Just as “New Age” seekers expressing the “new religious consciousness” have likely helped fuel the Unitarian Universalist denomination’s growth over the past two decades

(Cowtan, 2002), such individuals are also now finding a place within—and reviving—many Episcopal parishes. The denomination’s “historic Anglican tradition” of tolerating member diversity has apparently provided numerous fertile settings for mystically-oriented leaders like Barnesworth and the seekers attracted to his parish to practice and develop their progressive styles of re-traditioned Christian faith.

Should the successful niche-straddling “coalition” between conventional liberals and mystical seekers I observed at St. Luke’s emerge more broadly across the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations, institutional tensions and conflict will mount. The Episcopalians I interviewed, for example, not only supported the ordination of Gene Robinson personally, but often described how their spiritual perceptions had convinced them of the moral appropriateness of this institutional change. It was upon this basis that they also passionately hoped for other progressive developments to occur throughout their national organization. Barnesworth told me:

One of the greatest things that happened for the Episcopal Church was the controversy over Gene Robinson. We had the best publicity in the world saying that we are not literalists about the Bible, and we're Christian. And we think gay people are okay. . . That was enormous. *Hopefully, there will be more of that.* Hopefully, what will emerge is a growing consciousness that there is a different way of being Christian besides Jerry Falwell. And that will grow in our culture.

Such dismissal of the complaints of conservative Episcopalians suggested to me that the alliance between liberal Christians and mystics within the denomination may become increasingly assertive in the years ahead, especially if orthodox believers continue leaving the organization.

Rather than destroying the institution, however, such developments might set the stage for many mystically-oriented, unchurched seekers who are familiar with the Christian tradition to feel comfortable exploring church settings like St. Luke’s where

interspiritual practices and progressive retraditioning reflects their own experiences of a Sacred Mystery. Such individuals may then conclude, just like many of the enthusiastic, new members I met during this study had, that they finally found a religious organization that is worthy of their time and devotion.

Speculating on the possible effects of incorporating the “new religious consciousness” into “established biblical religions,” Robert Bellah (1976) predicted that a major transformation may then spread across American society. Calling such a possible development “revolutionary,” he theorized that: “the quest for ultimate reality. . . would shift away from endless accumulation of wealth and power to a greater concern for harmony with nature and between human beings. . . Indeed, many of the present activities of such [counterculture] groups could be seen as experiments leading to the possibility of such a new alternative.”

Clearly, mysticism has yet to play the pivotal role that Bellah envisioned. In the two decades since his 1976 statement, American politics was dominated by conservative trends and mainline, culturally-liberal denominations generally continued to decline. Yet the sort of progressive cultural developments I observed at St. Luke’s—and which seem to be tied to a broader phenomenon occurring in strong liberal churches nationwide—may be laying the groundwork for Bellah’s vision to one day be realized.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion

Liberal and Devout:
The Sources of Enthusiasm and Organizational Commitment
Within the Liberal Religious Niche

Although those engaged in liberal styles of faith compose only a small segment of America's religious marketplace (and almost certainly always will), they tend to exhibit a level of social influence that far exceeds their numbers. This has been demonstrated by the political impact of socially-active Unitarian Universalist and liberal Christian ministers over the years (Green, 2003; Wuthnow, 2002), as well as by the significant charitable contributions of mainline churches in local communities (Ammerman, 2002, 1997). Also, the *potential* power of religious institutions that continue to be supported primarily by the nation's social and cultural elites should not be underestimated. Tracking the trends and possible future direction of the liberal religious niche, therefore, likely holds much broader social implications than simply for the minority of people in the US who specifically identify with and devote themselves to culturally-lenient styles of faith. This is especially likely to be true if liberal churches are able to stabilize themselves institutionally, as the successful groups studied here have done.

The current study's descriptions and analyses of why people participate in liberal churches and what sustains their commitment to these religious organizations fills an important gap in sociological literature. Too often, it seems, mainline institutions that display loose membership standards have come to be narrowly defined by what researchers have identified as their inherent "weaknesses." Indeed, my four-year study of individuals participating at three "welcoming" churches generally confirmed that the association patterns of religious liberals are often quite fragile. I observed how their relaxed, voluntary approaches to matters of faith and church involvement tended to contribute more to doubts and heterodoxy than clear, unified statements of belief, to an emphasis upon personal autonomy and tolerance for social diversity over cultural

conformity, and to ambiguous, marginally-embraced religious identities. Such characteristics are probably intrinsic to all forms of religious liberalism (Rasor, 2005).

But along with these displays of presumably marginal or “weak” faith, I also encountered liberal churchgoers who expressed surprisingly-strong devotion. This dedication was exhibited in the monastic discipline of spiritual seekers who gathered to sit together silently each week in Christian or Buddhist meditation, in the enthusiasm of laypersons who actively-supported church-based charitable services, small group activities, educational classes, and social action programs, and in the contributions of voluntary lay leaders who donated their time and resources to support their religious organizations. Most of all, enthusiasm for liberal religiosity was demonstrated by people I met who were drawn back week after week to Sunday morning services in culturally-lenient churches—not because they felt compelled to do so by any societal or “divine” normative expectations, but because they found religious involvement to be a personally-enjoyable and worthwhile endeavor. In documenting such rarely studied expressions of devotion, my research revealed the *strengths* of liberal faith and analyzed the dynamics behind those strengths. I discovered that even what many theorists have tended to label as “weak” religious approaches are capable of producing strong devotion.

In addition to developing these detailed portraits of how and why people find culturally-lenient faith communities compelling, my study also explored how the postmodern demands of the middle and upper classes are infusing many mainline and liberal churches with renewed social relevance. With millions of people now defining the “sacred” for themselves according to various peak emotional experiences that add value to their lives, religious institutions are able to grow and thrive by providing existentialist

consumers with desirable feelings that aid in the construction of subjective meaning. Instead of offering adherents a comprehensive “sacred canopy” of exclusive moral codes and universal theological “truths,” liberal churches sustain member loyalty by supplying a range of validating, peaceful experiences and notions of interdependency that are often rare commodities in contemporary society. Such feelings of connection are valued because—although the hyper division of labor has objectively pulled those in advanced nations into ever tighter, organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1973 [1893])—the lived experiences of people in this diverse environment often feels fractured and even lonely.

As described in previous chapters, liberal churchgoers were therefore dedicated to their structured religious organizations because these social settings allowed them to sustain a mix of social, cultural, and/or mystical *relationships* they perceived as rare, precious, and sacred. While some people attached greatest value to social interactions with demographically-similarly “friends” and family members in the faith communities, others appreciated their church’s particular cultural elements and how familiar religious symbols, narratives, and practices seemed to unite them to a broader, idealized social network. Still others returned to church services each week because the activity enhanced their cherished sense of spiritual awareness and of being “grounded” in a mystical Ultimate Reality. By steadily and unconditionally supplying such rewarding and sacred experiences to postmodern consumers, the churches attracted and sustained a loyal following of supporters.

A third contribution of the present study was in explaining how mysticism is reviving and gradually transforming so-called “progressive” churches. Two of the religious organizations I observed displayed the spiritually-oriented atmospheres and

expressive use of religious rituals that researchers have recently come to recognize in other thriving liberal and mainline churches nationwide. This enthusiasm for spirituality, ancient cultures, and contemplative practices has been widely interpreted as demonstrating a “return to tradition” in these religious groups (Bass, 2006; Finke, 2004; Davidmann, 1993). I found, though, that despite the outward appearance of traditionalism, the growth and vitality of progressive churches is largely due to the participation of “spiritual seekers” who hold distinctly non-traditional religious views. These individuals—who often self-identify as “spiritual but not religious”—have been a largely underserved segment of the liberal religious marketplace. Rather than affirming conventional notions of God as a separate, supernatural Being, the seekers I interviewed conveyed similarly-monistic conceptions of Ultimate Reality that they variously described as a “Sacred Mystery.” The strength of progressive churches, therefore, was shown to depend on innovative ministers capable of engaging in ongoing “cultural work” (Hart, 2001), and bending their denominational traditions in ways that attracted mystically-oriented, motivated individuals. In doing so, however, they also encouraged these participants to pursue their own methods of “retraditioning” the religious cultures, and thus contributed to the ongoing development of new styles of faith based on mysticism.

A Revised View of the Religious Marketplace

The current study also calls into question the way that rational choice theories typically categorize consumers in the religious marketplace along a continuum ranging from those who “strictly” affirm religious worldviews to those whose outlooks are more modernist, secular, and supposedly “less religious” (Stark and Finke, 2000; Iannaccone,

1994). This theoretical framing is based on the assumption that liberal, contemporary ideals are fundamentally incompatible with “real religion,” and that individualists who cherish modernist perspectives are attracted to “lenient” churches only because they themselves are not wholeheartedly committed to matters of faith.

As I found, though, not only *are* liberal churchgoers enthusiastically participating in religious organizations, but some voluntarily engage in demanding spiritual practices that blur the distinctions between religious labels such as “strict” and “lenient.” Also, all of the religious liberals I observed were committed to their churches because of the rare, sacred experiences they encountered in these faith communities—experiences which Emile Durkheim (2001 [1912]) identified as *the* defining characteristic of religiosity. In these ways, liberals proved themselves capable of being just as “religious” as more traditionalist believers, despite their modernist values and priorities.

What best distinguishes consumers in the religious marketplace, therefore, is not varying degrees of devotion to religion (strict or lenient), but the particular ideals they cherish and want to build sacred, collective experiences around. While religious conservatives attach sacred significance to social conformity, hierarchical authority, supernaturalism, and moral exclusivity, religious liberals assign ultimate value to social diversity, individual freedom, worldly-orientations, and moral inclusivity/interdependency. Both types of consumers are able to relate sacred experiences to their unique ontological convictions—perhaps best exemplified by the “spiritual atheists” at Community UU—and are drawn to different types of faith communities that celebrate their particular ideals.

Liberals, though, are at a major disadvantage in the religious marketplace, since

few suppliers are apparently available to meet their needs. Not only do most churches promote styles of faith preferred by conservative traditionalists rather than liberal-modernists, but the few groups that do explicitly affirm liberal ideals are often ineffective at consistently arousing the sort of sacred emotions among members needed to maintain organizational solidarity and growth. Within this conservative-dominated marketplace, it is perhaps no surprise that those who hold liberal social values and/or alternative theological beliefs are frequently casual, “weak” religious participants, or that they dominate the ever-growing ranks of “unchurched” Americans who identify with no official faith whatsoever (Barna, 2004; Hout and Fischer, 2002).

The challenges facing religious liberals was clearly evident at New Heights UCC where congregants—perhaps like many other liberal Protestants in the nation’s mainline denominations (Newport, 2006; McKinney, 1998; Wuthnow, 1988)—faced varying degrees of ongoing tension with their faith tradition. Although participants there nominally-identified as Christians, they minimized or rejected most of Christianity’s cultural elements and theology so as to accommodate the liberal principles and modernist perspectives they ultimately valued. Unfortunately, this style of faith resulted in an ongoing process of cultural erosion that left few rituals or contemplative practices able to evoke shared experiences of “spirituality” around *any* ideals at all. While congregants did enjoy experiences of the sacred linked to social relations, these positive emotions were usually associated just with family members and others “like them” in the church. Without sacred experiences that could reliably allow *all* members to feel connected to one another and to some fixed “sacred ideal” beyond the local community, the diversity fostered by the inclusive congregation became a liability that resulted in rising,

unregulated tensions between members. Although the conflicts in this church revolved primarily around socio-political differences, any inclusive, inevitably-diverse faith community that lacked collective experiences of “spirituality” might descend into internal divisions and arguments over a multitude of possible issues.

The other two inclusive churches I studied, though, demonstrated the Durkheimian principle that evoking sacred experiences around distinctive cultural and/or mystical dynamics is perhaps the most effective way for *any* faith community to maintain member loyalty and organizational unity. By refocusing participants’ collective attention away from one another and onto the enjoyable cultural and/or mystical relations that affirmed their shared liberal ideals, the inclusive churches developed styles of faith that members found compelling. Rather than being defined by a preference for “lenient” religious cultures, therefore, these religious consumers were characterized primarily by their desire to have their particular, cherished ideals validated by sacred experiences. This is ultimately what distinguishes the liberal niche—and all niches—within the religious marketplace.

Research Implications

The theoretical insights that emerged from this qualitative study reveal a number of possible directions for future research. Of course, the validity of the interpretations presented here should be tested in other Unitarian Universalist, Episcopalian, and UCC faith communities, as well as in other culturally-lenient religious groups. Mile Hi Church in Denver, Colorado, for example, would probably serve as a valuable additional research setting, since this 8,000 member inclusive megachurch has demonstrated a marked ability to attract and sustain the devotion of liberally-oriented participants. Organizations

affiliated with Quakerism, Baha'i and the Unity Church would probably also offer valuable insights regarding the devotional patterns of religious liberals.

Such settings would allow the three “sacred” relationships I described to be further explored, demonstrating how social, cultural, and mystical dynamics are supplied to postmodern consumers in other liberal religious organizations. For instance, although social relations were primarily enjoyed by the middle age and older churchgoers in this study’s three churches, some liberal congregations around the country may have developed innovative methods for attracting and building social bonds among younger adults as well. Also, faith communities undoubtedly employ a variety of techniques designed to evoke experiences of cultural and/or mystical relations among participants, and it might be valuable to document the diversity of these “emotional products.” The demand for each of these particular enjoyable experiences may also vary among liberal consumers in different denominations or regions of the country. Longitudinal studies could also examine which of these particular types of devotional experiences prove most effective at holding the interest of liberal churchgoers over time.

Perhaps most deserving of future attention, though, is the cultural phenomenon I labeled as “progressive-mysticism.” This particularly-compelling style of inclusive religiosity is likely responsible for the growth and vitality observed in many culturally-lenient churches in recent years. With many “spiritual but not religious” seekers who embrace interspiritual practices and mysticism (especially aging Baby Boomers) now returning to liberal and mainline institutions in growing numbers, their influence within these denominations will undoubtedly grow in the decades ahead. The current extent of progressive-mysticism in mainline organizations serving such participants should

therefore be determined, and the expected growth of these dynamics tracked over time.

Should progressive cultural dynamics spread and become a more widely acknowledged element of liberal and mainline institutions, mysticism may increasingly serve as a universal source of cultural unity for churchgoers across denominations. Such a developing religious identity has already prompted progressive groups and individuals to establish nascent, internet-based networks, and fostered the sort of “reflexive” linguistic patterns widely and informally expressed by spiritual seekers. Even as more progressive-mystics likely come to affiliate with churches specifically associated with Christian, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, or other faith traditions (like those in this study), their common support for interfaith syncretism, use of meditative and interspiritual practices, and similar perceptions of a monistic Ultimate Reality will ultimately make their broad, similar style of liberal faith based on mysticism more apparent. Perhaps these individuals with shared experiences will then come to recognize and identify with one another more often, and in ways that are not unlike those who unite under the universal, nondenominational umbrella of “evangelical Christianity.”

While drawing more unchurched and “spiritual but not religious” seekers into progressive churches will probably contribute to greater enthusiasm and mystically-oriented unity among many liberal religious consumers, more traditional Christians in mainline denominations may become increasingly resistant to the growing influence of these participants. As I briefly noted in the last chapter during my discussion of the current divisions in the Episcopal Church, some mainline institutions seem poised to undergo growing internal tensions or even outright schism over the radically-different ways that traditional Christians and progressive-mystics experience God and interpret

moral imperatives. Researchers will undoubtedly track these developments.

In addition to studying the influence of mysticism within religious organizations, researchers should also examine how political and social movements are shaped by this emerging style of faith. The monistic perceptions associated with mysticism may reinvigorate many socio-political liberal churchgoers, providing them an alternative ontological perspective that offers a more compelling spiritual basis for the social interdependencies they already cherish. Freeing supporters from the need to constantly challenge the traditional, morally-exclusive dynamics of their own religious cultures, progressive-mysticism may unleash new and powerful enthusiasm for those advocating on behalf of social justice. This would therefore be one more broad area for researchers to examine, prompted by the findings of the current study.

A Personal Journey

Classical theorist Max Weber long ago acknowledged that social studies are inevitably influenced by the subjective perspectives and biases of researchers. People investigating social phenomenon, though, can also be profoundly shaped by their work. I discovered this to be true for myself.

In my first chapter, I declared my religious background and identity as a Unitarian Universalist. My desire to understand the sources of enthusiasm and organizational commitment among members of the liberal religious niche, therefore, was prompted both by professional and personal interests. I had already witnessed congregants actively participating in my own culturally-lenient denomination for years, and wanted to document and analyze how such devotion is evoked in these and other liberal churchgoers.

What I could not have predicted was how conducting this research would transform me in the process, and renew my enthusiasm for spiritual questions, practices, and experiences. As I became immersed in countless small groups, religious classes, contemplative gatherings, and other programs being offered by the liberal churches I observed, I not only came to better understand why others are drawn to liberal faith, but expanded the reasons why I continue to be as well.

Five years ago, I was an agnostic humanist like almost half of all Unitarian Universalists nationwide, and was dedicated to my denomination primarily for the cultural relations I enjoy with fellow socio-political liberals there. My critical approach to the Bible and empirical worldview had long ago forced me to abandon supernatural concepts and traditional notions of God. Still, I fondly recalled the Evangelical Christian experiences of my youth, and especially a style of mystical relations that led me to feel the profound sense of being unconditionally loved.

It was perhaps due to this background that participating in the contemplative prayer at St. Luke's Episcopal Church awoke feelings in me that had long been dormant. Without expecting it, the monistic perceptions evoked by mysticism touched me deeply. In the silence, I came to know a "God" I could feel and rationally-conceive within me and everything; a "Sacred Mystery" that many of the liberal churchgoers I had been interviewing had struggled to describe. My discovery eventually led me to find camaraderie with spiritual seekers in my own denomination, and to become an even more devoted participant. I also came to understand how and why mystically-oriented participants are fueling the growth of progressive churches across the country.

Practical Applications

In closing, I want to offer some suggestions on how culturally-lenient and mainline organizations might benefit from my study. Admittedly, offering advice on how to better serve—and earn the devotion of—liberal religious consumers is not only intended to help these churches, but ultimately to promote an overall style of religiosity that I have and continue to find so personally rewarding.

My five recommendations are directed primarily to the leaders of inclusive, liberal faith communities, and include the following:

1. Emphasize your church's postmodern value

While some ministers will undoubtedly find it uncomfortable or even distasteful to view their churches as competitors in a religious marketplace, this is exactly how many middle and upper class Americans approach organized religiosity today. I found this to be especially true among religious liberals. Attracting and sustaining the interest of these postmodern consumers depends upon a faith community's ability to supply them with "sacred," relational experiences that promote existentialist meaning in life.

To succeed in this contemporary environment, therefore, religious leaders should identify, maximize, and promote the dynamic, enjoyable elements of their culturally-lenient organizations, since these serve as the basis of liberal devotion. The cultural conditions of postmodernity seem to have resulted in feelings and experiences becoming the key "products" desired in a liberal religious marketplace. Churches unable to offer a range of social, cultural, and mystical goods that evoke positive emotions among consumer-driven participants will not endure.

2. Base your organizational identity upon cultural and mystical dynamics rather than social relations

Because liberal churches do not require members to adhere to strict, defined statements of belief, they are usually characterized by high levels of theological diversity and unstable social solidarity (Tamney, 2005; Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, 1995). Historically, these groups dealt with this organizational challenge by de-emphasizing potentially-divisive cultural traditions and instead promoting the moral orthopraxis of “friendliness” among participants. Researchers have shown, however, that this approach is ultimately a weak basis for institutional unity and even restricts new people from joining (Olson, 1989). The “Golden Rule,” Protestant church I observed, for example, built its identity primarily around such positive social relations among members, and encouraged them to “tolerate” one another’s differing views and socio-political values. But without a distinctive, culturally-defined orthopraxis or collective spiritual experience, the group ultimately faced ongoing internal tensions and conflicts that left some people feeling alienated and only loosely-committed to the organization. Thus, while social relations can and does serve as an important source of devotion for many liberal religious consumers (and may be the only one desired by some—especially the most skeptical and independent-minded), churches should not rely too heavily upon this unstable emotional product when constructing their postmodern identities.

I found that religious liberals maintain greater organizational enthusiasm and unity when their most enjoyable experiences in churches are derived from various cultural and/or mystical relations encountered there. Not only do such dynamics prove

much more dependable in evoking positive emotional states among churchgoers than the ever-shifting and often disappointing nature of direct human interactions, but these also allow participants to feel as though their involvement in a local faith community somehow connects them to a much broader, more stable, and powerful sacred ideal.

3. Encourage the use of contemplative practices and collective, religious rituals

Fostering cultural and mystical relations among religious liberals requires churches to maintain distinctive, ritualized expressions that infuse idealized concepts with sacred value. Unfortunately, many culturally-lenient faith communities have and continue to reduce such elements in order to minimize the risk that a particular religious symbol, narrative, or practice might divide members. This culturally-erosive process, though, ultimately leaves a church with few resources for supporting the emotional and “spiritual” ideals of participants (as the history of many Unitarian and Universalist churches demonstrates).

Today, many liberal faith communities are rediscovering the importance of both collective rituals that “ground” participants together in a common experience and various contemplative practices that promote silence as a basis for group unity. As I found at the UU and Episcopal churches in this study, even the most unorthodox and skeptical of participants can learn to appreciate and cherish the comforting feelings of “peace” derived from such activities. Contemplative cultural routines are thus proving to be critical elements within successful liberal churches.

4. Creatively utilize your denominational traditions in ways that attract both conventional liberals and spiritual seekers

The key to utilizing rituals effectively in culturally-lenient churches is to actively

encourage participants to detach the practices from any fixed or “orthodox” interpretations, and to instead discover their own meaning in the existential experiences evoked by these religious “forms.” Faith communities adopting this approach are able to re-appropriate and reaffirm distinctive traditions from within their particular denominations without abandoning their inclusive values. The churches described in this study revealed different strategies on how this process can be facilitated among both “unorthodox” Christians and skeptical humanists.

By emphasizing that there is no “right way” to define the cultural tools available within their religious settings, inclusive churches position themselves to reach beyond typical supporters and appeal to the sort of “spiritual but not religious” seekers who remain a largely underserved segment of the liberal marketplace. Serving these highly-motivated and mystically-oriented individuals was a key reason that the two progressive churches I observed were growing and able to maintain their institutional vitality. Understanding the unique spiritual needs and perspectives of this particular group of liberal consumers, therefore, should be a top priority in the development strategies of inclusive faith communities.

5. Pursue your own interspiritual practices and experiences of mysticism

Perhaps the most effective way for culturally-lenient churches to serve spiritual seekers is for ministers themselves to actively pursue their own ongoing “journeys” towards spiritual enlightenment. The progressive leaders in this study, for example, had each been separately influenced by compelling experiences of mysticism encountered during a variety of contemplative practices, leading to their similar perceptions of a “Sacred Mystery” or “God” that united them with all of existence.

Their mystical awareness not only allowed them to personally understand the monistic conception of Ultimate Reality that almost all spiritual seekers strongly affirm, but to find in this ontological worldview powerful support for their inclusive moral values and social justice priorities.

Almost all thriving churches nationwide are led by these types of confident leaders with clear spiritual visions and strong moral convictions (Wellman, 2002; Jelen and Chandler, 1996). As described in this study, mysticism's ability to evoke bold, innovative leadership in liberal and mainline ministers suggests that this particular style of inclusive faith may one day serve an increasingly important role in the devotional experiences of those within the liberal religious niche.

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APPENDICES

RELIGION INTERVIEW GUIDE

Subject Code: _____ - _____ **Date:** ____/____/____

Respondent: _____ **Position:** _____

- “This is a sociological study of people who participate in liberal religious congregations—why they go to church and how they describe their religious experiences. I will be interviewing up to 40 people over the next two months from United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and Unitarian Universalist churches.
- I will keep the identities of everyone I interview confidential, and will not include any names or key identifying information in the final written study. So please free to speak openly and honestly, knowing that your identity will not be revealed. The University of New Mexico requires that I ensure that everyone I interview is a consenting participant in this research, and that you sign a consent form in order to participate in the study and have the interview recorded.”

[Hand consent form, explain, and ask to sign and date]

“In this interview, I’ll ask you questions that cover several broad areas related to your life and personal beliefs. If you feel uncomfortable with any of these questions, please feel free to simply say you don’t want to answer.

Do you have questions before we get started?”

[Turn on tape recorder]

“This is Kevin LaPoint. Today is ____ [date] _____. I’m here interviewing ____ [subject’s name] _____. Before we begin, do you give your consent to be tape recorded?”

Counterculture and Baby Boomer (IF APPLICABLE)

Thinking back to the late 1960’s and early 1970’s . . . it was a very tumultuous time in this country. I’d like for you to describe who you were back then, what was important to you, and how you viewed the changes going on in the nation.

Follow-up → That was over 30 years ago. Compared to that time, what is different about you today—your life and what’s important to you

Follow-up → Compared to that time, what is the same or similar about you today?

Views of Religion

Could you describe the different stages you went through during your life in regards to religion? (childhood to present)?

Follow-up → People in this country have very different opinions about religion and its value for individuals and society. For you, what is religion and what does it mean to be religious?

Follow-up → Compared to how most other people in society view religion, what is unique or different about how you see religion and being religious?

Views of Church

What purposes and roles does your church play in your personal life today—what needs are fulfilled?

Follow-up → What similarities do you share in common with other people at church?

Follow-up → What are some things about people at church that make you uncomfortable (such as their beliefs and interactions with them), and how do you deal with this discomfort?

If this particular congregation wasn't here in this community, is there another church you would attend?

Theological/Ontological Beliefs

What do you believe about God?

Follow-up → Do you believe there is a purpose to human life, and if so, what is it?

Follow-up → What do you believe about Jesus?

Follow-up → Who are some of the important historical figures you look to for spiritual direction?

Views of Spirituality

What does it mean to experience spirituality?

Follow-up → What do you do specifically to encourage spirituality in your life?

Follow-up → How does your congregation help you experience spirituality?

Political Views

What political issues and social problems are most important to you today?

Follow-up → Are your religious and political beliefs connected in any way?

Follow-up → How does your congregation support your political beliefs?

Social Network

Thinking about a typical week in your life. . .tell me about the people with whom you come into contact—both professional and personal relationships—and their value to you.

Follow-up → Tell me about the relationships you have with others at church.

Stigma

Almost everyone has something about themselves or their life that they regret, are ashamed of, or just don't feel comfortable revealing to others. Reflecting on your own life, what decisions or personal characteristics have been difficult for you to deal with or reconcile and feel good about?

Follow-up → How has attending church changed your thoughts and feelings about these difficult personal experiences?

Return to Reality Question:

What are some aspects of your life today about which you are most happy, and which provide you with the greatest fulfillment?

Closing:

We've covered a lot of ground. But is there anything else about your religious experience and thoughts about religion that you'd like to include?

DEMOGRAPHICS AND PERSONAL OPINION QUESTIONNAIRE

Please place an "X" in the box next to the most appropriate response.
If you **don't know** or **don't want to answer**, then leave blank.

How often do you attend your church's Sunday service?	<input type="checkbox"/> Few times a year <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month <input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 times per month <input type="checkbox"/> Every week
How often do you participate in <i>other activities</i> sponsored by your congregation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Few times a year <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month <input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 times per month <input type="checkbox"/> Every week
How many people at church would you feel comfortable calling upon for help during a personal emergency?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 or more
How often do you get together with people from your congregation outside of the church setting (homes, restaurants, etc.)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Few times a year <input type="checkbox"/> Once a month <input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 times per month <input type="checkbox"/> Every week
How long have you been attending this congregation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months <input type="checkbox"/> 6 months – 1 year <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 5 years <input type="checkbox"/> 6 – 10 years <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 years
How long have you been a member of this congregation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months <input type="checkbox"/> 6 months – 1 year <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 5 years <input type="checkbox"/> 6 – 10 years <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 years
How long have you been a member of your church's national denomination?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 2 years <input type="checkbox"/> 2 - 10 years <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 years
Do you regularly participate with any religious activities or services at congregations <i>other than</i> your primary church?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Approximately how many hours each month do you volunteer to provide services or leadership support for your church?	_____
Approximately how many hours each month do you volunteer to provide services or leadership support for nonprofit, charitable organizations (other than church)?	_____
How much, if any, financial support do you provide each year to your church?	\$ _____

How much, if any, financial support do you provide each year to nonprofit, charitable organizations *other than your church*? \$ _____

Do you believe that the government should place any *additional* restrictions on a woman's access to abortion? Yes
 No

Do you believe that homosexuality is immoral? Yes
 No

Do you believe that same-sex couples should be able to receive the same legal rights and responsibilities as heterosexual couples? Yes
 No

Do you believe it is moral for single persons to have sex outside of marriage? Yes
 No

Would you be willing to pay more in taxes in order to provide health care to all uninsured, low-income Americans? Yes
 No

Does the federal government spend too much, too little, or just enough on social welfare programs for the poor and disadvantaged? Too much money
 Too little
 Just enough

Does the federal government spend too much, too little, or just enough on the military and national defense? Too much money
 Too little
 Just enough

When you think about Southern Baptist churches, do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

When you think about Episcopal churches, do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

When you think about United Church of Christ churches, do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

When you think about Unitarian Universalist churches, do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

When you think about Roman Catholic churches, do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

When you think about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), do you have a mostly positive and favorable view or negative and unfavorable view of their beliefs and practices? Positive
 Negative
 Don't Know / Unsure

On average, approximately how many hours each week do you spend watching television?	<input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 5 – 20 hours <input type="checkbox"/> More than 20 hours
On average, approximately how many hours each week do you spend reading for pleasure and personal enjoyment?	<input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 5 – 20 hours <input type="checkbox"/> More than 20 hours
On average, approximately how many hours each week do you spend using the Internet (including email and Web “surfing”) for pleasure and personal enjoyment?	<input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> 5 – 20 hours <input type="checkbox"/> More than 20 hours
What is your highest level of education?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school <input type="checkbox"/> High school <input type="checkbox"/> AA <input type="checkbox"/> AS <input type="checkbox"/> BA <input type="checkbox"/> BS <input type="checkbox"/> Technical Certificate <input type="checkbox"/> MA <input type="checkbox"/> MS <input type="checkbox"/> MBA <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Degree (MD, DVM, DDS) <input type="checkbox"/> PhD
What is your occupation?	_____
How long have you been at your current job?	_____
How much income did you receive last year before taxes?	\$ _____
On average, approximately how many work-related meetings do you attend each month (paid time)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 4 meetings <input type="checkbox"/> 4-10 meetings <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 meetings
On average, approximately how many NON-work-related meetings do you attend each month (volunteer time)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 4 meetings <input type="checkbox"/> 4-10 meetings <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 meetings
What is your marital status?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never married <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced, Single <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed, Single <input type="checkbox"/> Legally married <input type="checkbox"/> Long-term relationship

What is your sexual orientation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual / Straight <input type="checkbox"/> Homosexual / Gay <input type="checkbox"/> Bi-sexual <input type="checkbox"/> Other
How do you describe your race or ethnicity?	_____
Is there a member of your family who is gay or lesbian?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you ever been divorced?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, once <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, more than once
What year were you born?	_____
How many children do you have?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> More than 2
Would you describe your political outlook as more liberal or conservative?	<input type="checkbox"/> Liberal <input type="checkbox"/> Conservative
What is your political party affiliation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Democrat <input type="checkbox"/> Green <input type="checkbox"/> Independent <input type="checkbox"/> Republican <input type="checkbox"/> Other 3 rd Party
Who did you vote for in the recent 2004 Presidential election?	<input type="checkbox"/> George Bush <input type="checkbox"/> John Kerry <input type="checkbox"/> Ralph Nader <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Won't / Didn't Vote
Who did you vote for in the Presidential election in 2000?	<input type="checkbox"/> George Bush <input type="checkbox"/> Al Gore <input type="checkbox"/> Ralph Nader <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't Vote

Table 1. Relational Products Mentioned by Subjects (Theoretical Sample)

			Social Relations		Cultural Relations	Mystical Relations	
			Friends	Family		Dualist	Mystic
Community UU Church (A)	101	Minister	X	X	X		X
	201	Lay Leader #1: President			X		X
	202	Lay Leader #2: President-elect	X	X	X		
	203	Lay Leader #3: Social Action Committee or equivalent	X				X
	204	Lay leader #4: Worship Committee or Prayer Guild		X	X		
	205	Lay Leader #5: Advertising Committee or equivalent			X		
	301	New Member #1		X			
	302	New Member #2				X	X
	303	New Member #3		X		X	X
	304	New Member #4		X			X
	305	New Member #5		X	X		
	306	New Member #6			X		X
St. Luke's Parish (B)	101	Rector			X		X
	201	Lay Leader #1: Vestry Warden		X	X		X
	202	Lay Leader #2: Rector's warden			X	X	X
	203	Lay Leader #3: Social Action Committee or equivalent		X	X	X	
	204	Lay leader #4: Worship Committee or Prayer Guild	X		X	X	X
	205	Lay Leader #5: Advertising Committee or equivalent		X			X
	301	New Member #1		X			X
	302	New Member #2			X	X	X
	303	New Member #3	X			X	
	304	New Member #4		X	X	X	
	305	New Member #5					X
	306	New Member #6	X	X		X	
New Heights UCC Church (C)	101	Pastor	X		X		X
	201	Lay Leader #1: Moderator	X	X			X
	202	Lay Leader #2: Vice Moderator		X	X	X	
	203	Lay Leader #3: Social Action Committee or equivalent			X		X
	204	Lay leader #4: Worship Committee or Prayer Guild	X	X	X	X	
	205	Lay Leader #5: Advertising Committee or equivalent			X		X
	301	New Member #1		X		X	
	302	New Member #2	X	X		X	
	303	New Member #3		X		X	
	304	New Member #4		X		X	
	305	New Member #5		X			X
	306	New Member #6	X		X		X