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# The Nature of a Small-Town Church in Granville, Ohio

By: Portia Brackley

Woodyard Scholarship 2023

Religion/Civic Duty

## Acknowledgements

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This project lived within my imagination from the time I arrived at Denison, so Thank You for letting me see it come to fruition this summer.

## Abstract

This research project is about the contemporary gaze on Christianity, especially by the rising generation, labeled Gen-Z. Providing a counteractive “insider-perspective” on the current state of the four churches here in Granville, Ohio, a small town 35 miles east of Columbus. However, there is something unique about them. They sit on a corner facing one another, intersecting Main Street and Broadway. They are St. Luke's Episcopal, Centenary United Methodist, First-Presbyterian, and United Church Of Granville (formerly Baptist). The denominations are in the center of the town, on the same street as the primary entrance to Denison. You can even see the tips of the bell towers from the top of the hill, where campus is.

Hailing from New York City, I was intrigued. For Generation Z, religion in general is just not on the table. According to a study by Alex Lazo, this year this is the first year where the majority of Denison Students are not religious. Adding up the “Nothing in Particular”, “Atheist”, and “Agnostic” categories, they make up 57.7% of Denison Students.<sup>1</sup> As a non-religious religion student, my goal was to find out how the material I study in class is at play on the ground.

I conducted twelve interviews in the four corner-churches to understand their character, “what goes on.” To discuss the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Trump-era, but most importantly the data on religious-disconnect of young people. These conditions paint the social landscape of today. What does it take to run and operate these institutions? I spoke with each of the Pastors, Laypeople, and Youth Directors. To preserve confidentiality each interview is anonymously labeled with Church A, B, C, or D, and the particular position follows afterward.

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<sup>1</sup> Djupe, Paul A., and Alex Lazo. “Denison’s Relationship with Religion.” one twenty seven, May 11, 2023. <https://onetwentyseven.blog/2023/04/28/denisons-relationship-with-religion/>.

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## Part I: Modern Conceptualizations of the Church

### What is “The Church” ?

The Christian church: it exists as a physical building or as the community within the setting. The notion is that it's God's house-meaning this place of worship is where you can be in the closest possible proximity to the divine, or more commonly, “Him.” So what is it about churches that attract people to them, and what kinds of people are attracted? Whether you dedicate all of your being to this specific place of worship, or if it resides as a minor aspect of life, what does church “do for a person”? Especially in a time where the “religious nones” make up the largest and fastest-growing religious group in America-while the number of proclaimed Christians declines.<sup>2</sup>

Churches foster and nurture guidance, support, and most prominently, community. Is it the structured executive functioning, or the people which make up the church “family” ? It is the ability to rely on the brick and mortar building, expected maintenance and management, and all staff/faculty that allow connection with others in a primarily spiritual setting. It is all contingent on being able to speak directly with God in this place. Those who feel drawn to inquire about the

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<sup>2</sup> White, James Emery. *Meet generation Z: Understanding and reaching the new post-Christian world*. Baker Books, 2017, 3-5. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Meet\\_Generation\\_Z.html?id=bw\\_eDAAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Meet_Generation_Z.html?id=bw_eDAAAQBAJ).

spiritual parts of life which are seemingly inexplicable. For some people, religion provides a sense of security, a moral scaffolding on which you can literally build your life upon.

Despite this truth, the factor of declining religious attendance highlights the observed “decry” in communal flourishing.<sup>3</sup> Alwin explores the question of the clear generational divide as an effect of aging, or a characteristic of Gen-Z.<sup>4</sup> Values and opinions change with time, and events like September 11, 2001 had an effect on all of the U.S, not just a particular generation.<sup>5</sup> However, Gen Z uniquely interprets these specific events in a way that past generations did not. He quotes Erik Erikson,

"No longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life. . . it is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented by the old and presented to the young has meaning; and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them and, joining the issues, to renew and to regenerate or to reform and to rebel. "

There is a feeling of self-transcendence that comes from spending time with others, recognizing that the “self” is part of a much larger purpose. It can be found in communal affairs and in this case, religious sanctuaries. Younger people however are statistically not finding that inner sanctity in the institution of the church.

### **Does Religion Differ from Spirituality?**

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<sup>3</sup> Alwin, Duane f. “Generations x, y and z: Are They Changing America?” *Contexts* 1, no. 4 (2002): 42–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41800756>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



Spirituality is potentially in everyone, and it exists within all religions. Is there a difference between religion and spirituality, or are they two sides of the same coin? Obviously spirituality exists within religion. Spirits are mentioned in Christianity, such as the holy trinity, and in some churches the holy spirit allows them to be able to speak in tongues. The *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* provides an empirical explanation of how the two words have been polarized based on definition and conceptualization. Referring to a study that was done on 64 older adults living between three retirement communities, they were asked to define both religion and spirituality. They found that there was some overlap but the definitions differed, meaning the conceptualizations of these words contrasted. According to the study, “Participants were more likely to associate religion with personal beliefs, community affiliation, and organized practices. Moreover, spirituality appeared to be a more abstract concept than religion, and included nontheistic notions of a higher power.”<sup>6</sup> This quote is particularly relevant to the subject of Generation Z, because the word religion comes with the notion that it is structurally and institutionally organized.

Generation Z struggles with the institutional aspects of religion. There is a rising idea that religion can be felt and practiced outside of the guidelines of a church. Spirituality defined as “abstract” indicates that there is more freedom of practice, perhaps because a physical building is

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<sup>6</sup> Schlehofer, Michèle M., Allen M. Omoto, and Janice R. Adelman. “How Do ‘Religion’ and ‘Spirituality’ Differ? Lay Definitions among Older Adults.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008), 411–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20486932>.

not essential. A nontheistic view of a higher power suggests a more imminent God-entity, directly involved and seen in everything. This promotes a spirituality that seamlessly fits into an everyday life, dedicating time to worship can be done in things like a nature walk or a yoga class. Modern conceptualizations of spirituality overlap with that of religion, but the two are thought of as suitable to different lifestyles.

The definition of religion illustrates a lack of abstraction at its core-it is most often associated with strict regimes and rules. Religion has associations with dogmatic agendas, because there is often one truth and way of thinking that cannot be challenged. To do so would be to disobey God. In the experience of being human, we all make mistakes. People shouldn't feel guilty for doing things that are human, in fear of a brute punishing God-man. Another researcher point of view; Zinnebauer and colleagues (1999) is mentioned, using three categorical dimensions showing the polarized notions of religion and spirituality. They are “negative-positive, organized-personal, and substantive-functional.”<sup>7</sup> Religion was commonly associated with cult behavior and dogma. Spirituality again was positively seen as more personal, expanding knowledge of the self, with the consciousness we experience relating to that higher power. There is room for ponderance and growth within this framework, on a personal journey you can relate to others in a non-spiritual way, and mistakes of “sin” are not met with a

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<sup>7</sup> Schlehofer, Michèle M., Allen M. Omoto, and Janice R. Adelman, “Lay definitions among Older Adults”, 412.

guilt and shame punishment by authority leaders, and most of Generation Z seems to prefer the former. Furthermore, “Religion holds a substantive focus on its practices, beliefs, and emotions” but on the opposite side, “Spirituality is considered more functional, focusing on nature and being”, relating its beliefs and practices to the inexplicable circumstances of “death, suffering and injustice.”<sup>8</sup> In this definition there is the ability to have faith in higher powers, but without the attachment to something like a church, with an emphasis on “tradition.”

### **Architectural Design of the Church**

The certain character of the church's appearance is quite fascinating. The architecture can externally represent and exude holiness, inside a deep spiritual experience. Branches of Christianity such as Catholicism and Orthodoxy often symbolize their devotion as beautiful and aesthetically liturgical, both inside and out the physical location. Other branches of Christianity may have a more muted display of worship, in terms of the aesthetically pleasing liturgy. But the extravagant arches, details of gold and wood, and alluring stained glass windows become a representation of wealth and power. It can also represent the historical condition, a certain evolutionary visual culture and iconography within Christianity. The church then becomes a separate entity, presumably composed of the common identity within the members. As Oskar

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Verkaaik put it, “the soul of the building lies in its people, not in the material of which it is made.”<sup>9</sup>

The function of the church in a communal unity is the understanding of the true nature of Christianity, the right to human freedom. The importance of having a physical place to meet is essential for a functioning organization. The architectural style of a church then becomes important, as in the European Monarchies, where the church occupied a totally authoritarian presence. A superior royal establishment, uninterested in those “less-fortunate” except to exploit them. Ken Ricci, an Architect, states that the word “beauty” cannot be used anymore by architects. He was influenced by a jury comment, calling his juvenile detention center an “optimistic” design.<sup>10</sup> The necessity of a juvenile detention center is certainly debatable, but the important takeaway is that a building's design does produce a transformative effect. Ricci goes on to say, “giving a building a human attribute like optimism was something of a shock to me. On reflection, I realized that the building’s “optimism” is an expression of God’s love.”<sup>11</sup> Lastly Christopher Alexander is quoted as someone who aides this understanding;

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<sup>9</sup> Verkaaik, Oskar. “Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives.” In *Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Oskar Verkaaik, 7–24. Amsterdam University Press, 2013, 8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp6sx.3>.

<sup>10</sup> Ricci, Ken. “Architecture.” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, October 2022, 6. <https://search-ebscohost-com.denison.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=159249144&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*“The sacredness of the physical world—and the potential of the physical world for sacredness—provides a powerful and surprising path towards understanding the existence of God, whatever God may be, as a necessary part of the reality of the universe. . . . Can we find a way to mobilize, afresh, the force of what was once called God, as a way of helping us to recreate the beauty of the Earth?”<sup>12</sup>*

The entity of a church has great potential to diversify and unite society. When we congregate to focus on where we are, who we are, and what we are doing, we can begin to manifest a life of love. But does that have to do with “God’s Love”? It is not shocking that an increasing number are hesitant and skeptical about God, because they believe God is a watchful, punishing eye of shame. This transcendent view provides reason for the negative connotations, when the extreme power and existence of God is formulated in a fearful, unloving way.

Love is the alternative to fear, but loving kindness, guidance, and care cannot be conferred if they are masked by fear and terror. The feelings felt within a sacred place, can be a profound knowing of God’s love similarly to Ricci’s words about the juvenile center. The positive views seen with the word spirituality indicate that nobody wants to feel as if they are constantly judged by an all-seeing all-knowing entity, with the fear of being punished. A God-man precedence that dominates the Christian narrative will not allow people to see each other as humans, but as sibling-rivals and competitors for the love and benevolence of a mere distant father.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## **Royal History of Christianity**

It is not surprising however that religion has negative connotations. In many historical events and time periods, Christianity was used to justify conquest and power-hungry domination, and by which the process of attaining was not effected in a just manner. The ability to twist and turn things known as the sublime or vulgar in order to control. For example, “Jesus died for your sins”. To create entire narratives of the right ways to live, in order to authenticate oppression. Mark Taylor labels this as “shock and awe”<sup>13</sup>. This may relate to what I felt when I saw churches as a kid, in awe of the tall architecture which loomed over you and radiated authority and power. The usage of shock and awe techniques are used to instill terror into people who don't get to reap the benefits of society, so that they are comfortable staying in that position. The book deals with the state sanctioning and normalization of “carceral violence”, as opposed to love and togetherness, being directly resistant to imperial agendas. He draws interesting parallels to the Roman Empire and American usages of violence to rule. The technique of theatrics is to make the average person fear, and the oppressed person become numb, achieving liberation means the threat of death. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The executed god: The way of the cross in lockdown america*. Minneapolis Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2015, 53-64.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

This state sanctioning of murder led to the crucifixion of Jesus, the spectacle of murder that is dismissed as mere law and rule of the state. The image of the cross is one that has been very mythologized and is spiritual. It would appear as if the murder of the prophet has no actual meaning within this context. These guidelines of existence to avoid becoming a spectacle or an “example”, is of course to perpetuate the flourishing of the powerful empire. For who are the ones forced to build the beautiful Roman temples and other architectures if not those imposed by free slave labor, and boxed in a marginal existence. Taylor mentions Gramsci’s words about state power’s “hegemony”, meaning there is a “common sense” by the public to consent to domination, which is depended upon, also the belief that state power is benefitting them by submitting to it.<sup>15</sup> Ensuring that people will turn against each other and won't see the strength in numbers (community) when it comes to resistance and liberation.

### **Symbolism and Iconography**

Growing up I did not go to church, however the energy that it gave off was indescribable. I was astounded by the tall Catholic church of St. Francis which was in the center of my neighborhood. I played sports under the diocese, with this the public school kids interacted with the private catholic school kids. There was a clear division of status within the church, a social club that was very closed off. The parents were all friends, and the kids knew one another

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

well. Some public school kids were raised in CCD and went to church on Sundays with their families, therefore still part of that community. I understood a difference between people who were in that church community and people “like” me and my family: non church-goers, with different perspectives and lenses on the world. The church marked the physical split between the “good” irish-catholic people and the other side of town, which was racialized and impoverished. Albert Gelpi talks about Catholics being a cultural minority group, due to prejudices and classist degrading rhetoric, by the WASP (white anglo-saxon protestant) establishment of superiority<sup>16</sup> Referencing *American Catholics* by James Hennessy, it “recounts how a largely Irish hierarchy nurtured and consolidated the Catholic populace into a separate enclave in a sometimes openly hostile society, while at the same time encouraging it to assimilate.”<sup>17</sup> This pertains to the superiority, racism, and mob-mentality I encountered as a young child. The vibrant multicolored stained-glass, depicting (white) Jesus Christ who supposedly was the most important person ever, the savior of humanity and all. This was who they worshiped, a white savior who in retrospect, is like a symbol of white supremacist systems that infiltrate Christianity.

As I learned from my peers, Jesus was always watching, he could be in disguise anywhere, so you better “be good”. When I did go inside the church for various reasons I could not help but stare at the enormous crucifix in the center of the altar. The triangular room seats the

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<sup>16</sup> Gelpi, Albert. “The Catholic Presence in American Culture.” *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 196–212. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490084>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



audience in a way in which Jesus dying on the cross was at the central point for all to see. Lined with pews of which you knelt down to the cross there were bibles in every row. I wondered what it was about this symbolic crucifix that people dedicated their lives to, placed above the thresholds, and even wore around their necks. The iconography of the crucifixion is discussed by Harley-McGowan, “the appropriation of Roman victory iconography for the representation of Christ’s victory.”<sup>18</sup> Meaning, the imperial Roman value of barbarism overshadowed the murder of Jesus. There is little record from the ancient world depicting the iconography of the crucifixion almost 200 years after Jesus died.<sup>19</sup> This spectacle was necessarily transformed from “dehumanized, defeated, and held in contempt beneath the victory trophy”, to “humanized, victorious, and celebrated”, in order for Christian suffering to be visualized and become essential to the story.<sup>20</sup> The appropriation emerges when the symbol of an imperial murder tactic becomes one of universal salvation. The now glorified-Christ was shifted to have an ultimate power over death.

The huge organ pipes playing notes of the divine circulate within the arched ceilings, is part of that interesting inner feeling which is invoked. This at the core, is the way a spiritual setting can be extremely special for some people, whatever it may look like/not look like. The

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<sup>18</sup> Harley-McGowan, Felicity. “From Victim to Victor: Developing an Iconography of Suffering in Early Christian Art.” In *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context*, edited by Lee M. Jefferson and Robin M. Jensen, 115–58. 1517 Media, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt155j2k5.9>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

aspects of religion which intrinsically bring people together, the experience of being with one another and sharing the natural pleasures of music on the psyche. Yet again, does a physical institution of wealth need to exist to provide these feelings?

To honor your life to someone in the ancient world who apparently died *for* you, because your inherent sinful existence will be saved by “Him”. If the divine creator knows exactly where and when you are in church, you will be one of God’s favorites and go to heaven. That is why I had a disdain for going to church with friends, I pretended like I respected it and at the same time wanted so badly to be a part of it. How would I make it to heaven if I didn't “know God”? As my sister and I idly sat while others received communion, I felt the eyes of judgment and confusion surrounding us. The air of superiority felt like the eyes of God upon us watching intently. (With reference to the title of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes were Watching God*.) That is their God at length, almost like an ownership. But surely God has others to talk to, I thought, God has a very busy schedule. The Christian God may have been seen as one entity, but everyone saw it differently.

### **White Racism is Pervasive**

James Cone, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, discusses the church and the role it plays in society. Evils exist, but they are not in the form of the “thou shalt not”.<sup>21</sup> He discusses that

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<sup>21</sup> Cone, James H. *A black theology of liberation: 50th anniversary edition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020, 137-39.

Christianity means actively participating in whatever it takes to not let evil persist. They are systemic oppressions, mass genocides and warfare that is executed in the name of God. The church is often conceptualized as a purely spiritual place, where there is not much association with “fighting back” the evils of humankind. However, Cone says that is necessary for living out the Gospel. To be “heirs to the promises of God”, is to assemble and refuse to accept “the world for what it is”, when our loved ones, friends, and neighbors, can be murdered in cold blood.<sup>22</sup>

Taylor said that we have become conditioned and predisposed to the public display of bodies, for the purpose of humiliation and murder by the state. As a society we are extremely individualized, taught only to care for ourselves. The social fabric is banded together only when we remember the humanness which we inherently possess. It becomes impossible to not take care of those in need who surround us. Jesus was known for table fellowship, which went against socially constructed “barriers” of race, gender, sexuality, and religion. As Cone puts it; “To receive, ‘the power of God unto salvation’ places persons into a state of Christian existence, making it impossible for them to sit still as their neighbors are herded off to prison camps”.<sup>23</sup> This is not limited to a mere awareness of the evils around you, but refusing to remain stagnant or “neutral”, when it stares you directly in the face. We are supposed to preserve and nurture our communities, not comply with their division and destruction.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

To view God as a symbol of liberation instead of a dictator of suffering and evil. It is essential to reforming the Christianity that is not white nationalism. Religion cannot be remodified to enforce nationalistic ideals of conquering and total control. “Participation in the historical liberation spearheaded by God is the defining characteristic of the church”<sup>24</sup> Taylor and Cone present their ideas of Christianity being about resisting imperialism and state violence, and with that, going against the grain is exactly what Jesus did. Yet his murder being due to his minority personhood did not become so popular. Instead, the resurrection became a mythological event. Which is why the famous image of Jesus on the cross is presented as aesthetic. It serves as a reminder of the powers of the past, and that they still exist today in evolved forms. The empire wants you to remember this is how “the savior” died, or rather was willing to die, so that you as an individual today can “behave well” (or be complicit), not to take action towards injustice. This twisted image says it's noble to die for the state. In opposition we must utilize the sacred spaces we worship in as coming together to exist as a unit, a body of bodies that realize “to preach the gospel today means confronting the world with the reality of Christian freedom.”<sup>25</sup>

The history of this nationalism shows a trend of sorts where God is “used” as either motivation or authentication for conquest, war, and enslavement. The European conquest solidified the three G’s (God, Gold, and Glory). What they were after was this accumulation of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

power, because “spreading their religion”, was synonymous with the ability to wipe out entire civilizations who existed and thrived peacefully. It is important to understand that the concept of religious freedom was used to promote genocide that can be committed for the kingdom of God. This idea is extremely problematic in society because the complete religious domination reaches the lives of the everyday citizen, in issues such as abortion. If their God doesn't support autonomy of women, then everyone else is affected by these beliefs. Legislation is then supported by White Christian Nationalism.

Robert Miller discusses the Doctrine of Discovery, which was the “legal” right to take over lands that they discovered, of course under the guise that they were doing something holy. Racism is perpetuated by the Christian religious authority, because they labeled indigenous people in North America as “uncivilized”, and “pagan”.<sup>26</sup> This an ideology which colonialism needed, in order to prove that what they were doing was righteous, they believed they had a duty to accumulate power and glory through means of ethnic and cultural cleansing. On the issue of the God-given right, “Religion was a significant aspect of the Doctrine of Discovery. Under Discovery, non-Christian peoples were not deemed to have the same rights to land, sovereignty, and self-determination as Christians.”<sup>27</sup> The Christian religion in its contemporary existence

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<sup>26</sup> Miller, Robert J., Christianity, American Indians, and the Doctrine of Discovery. REMEMBERING JAMESTOWN: HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIAN MISSION, Amos Yong, Barbara Brown Zikmund, eds., Pickwick Publications, 2010, Lewis & Clark Law School Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2011-13, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1803674>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 60.

unfortunately cannot be separated from the history of genocide and enslavement. Present day the increasing wall of White Christian Nationalism is a major dividing factor within this country.

### **What is “White Christian-Nationalism” ?**

America is a place where a version of Christianity is seen to intensely dominate the social atmosphere as well as the political one. There is a kind of force which exists, a very in-your-face approach. Supposably, the most accurate and honest iteration. It is called White Christian Nationalism, and it prides itself on being the most “holy” way of life, by having the total priority of God. Carter Heyward talks about “Trumpism”, which is the modern day version of White Christian Nationalism. “White conservative evangelicals— are spiritually obligated to use their powers of persuasion, coercion, if necessary, to shape and eventually lead the government of the United States”<sup>28</sup> This cult-like behavior is evident by the event transpiring on January 6, 2021.

People stormed the Capitol building, on the urging of Donald Trump. To certain people he became a savior, believing he was going to bring salvation. He was idolized and glorified like Jesus, waiting on an ultimate saving promise which was to come any moment. Not too long ago in this country whites would not drink at the same watering fountains with black people, those with darker skin color, the “other” races which white supremacy deems as inferior. White supremacy affirms itself as original and all powerful, the nature of it is domination and conquest.

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<sup>28</sup> Heyward, Carter. *The seven deadly sins of white christian nationalism: A call to action*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, 20.

Christianity has become the religion of white supremacy, as seen with the KKK. But interestingly enough Jesus was someone whose personhood was defined by the violent ways of the Roman empire. The identity of the empire was characterized by brutal wars and reminders of authority. Jesus stood as a resistance to that power, that told people they were less than human—their enslavement was “law”.

So then there is a set of characteristics that become the basic logic of this Christianity, spreading the religion is a priority. They can use the authority of God to control the state and its people, stealing land so they can build what is also called Christendom. A kingdom of Christ where the state is tied to the church, biblical authority is stronger than anything else. The Puritans established power by claiming that God gave them permission to convert non-Christians, in order.<sup>29</sup> Christian nationalism is tied to whiteness because when the Europeans came to the Americas, what they “discovered” was people with brown skin. Throughout history and especially Colonialism, the ones who suffer egregiously have skin that is not pale white. These ideologies are created solely to authenticate Manifest Destiny, slavery, other genocides and murder, with the explicit support of God.

### **Christian Domination**

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<sup>29</sup> Miller, Robert J. “THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY: The International Law of Colonialism.” *The Indigenous Peoples’ Journal of Law, Culture, & Resistance* 5 (2019): 35–42. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671863>.

But what does it necessarily mean to be holy? Domination upon law and society, non-Christian or believing citizens are less worthy of the same love God. That “he” inevitably will always side with whatever his devoted followers do. Though White Christian Nationalism is seen most present in America today, it is not only here, but it may have been born here. Generation Z is the first “Post-Christian”<sup>30</sup> generation, but millennials had grown up in those environments. They no longer want to believe in the kind of faith that was founded on hatred and discrimination of those labeled as “other.” Comparing this to Colleen Batchelder’s words;

“Millennials chose to redefine their faith by deconstructing their evangelical beliefs—and many believed that they needed to lose a lot of their conservative baggage before they trekked the long journey of theological adaptation. Millennials might have removed many aspects of American evangelicalism, but they embraced the ideologies of inclusion, diversity, and equality, including gender equality, LGBT+ inclusion, and racial reconciliation.”<sup>31</sup>

Essentially, Evangelical involvement in the government is the same force that fostered the horrors of Nazism, and the Crusades. Under this theory, manifest destiny operates as a God given right to commit murder, burn crosses, and enslave people.

## **The American Divide**

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<sup>30</sup> McKnight, “Engaging Generation Z”, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Batchelder, Colleen. “Exvangelical: Why Millennials and Generation Z Are Leaving the Constraints of White Evangelicalism.” Digital Commons @ George Fox University, 2020. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1369&context=dmin>



Historically and presently, white supremacy exists as an entity, such as Jim Crow, a large mass system which inserts itself into every corner of life. Richard Wright details this in his novel *Black Boy*, which is from the point of view of a boy living and having to grow up in Jim-Crow south. He wrote on the creation of normalities within America; “Our too-young and too-new America, lusty because it is lonely, aggressive because it is afraid, insists upon seeing the world in terms of good and bad, the holy and the evil, the high and the low, the white and the black; our America is frightened of fact, of history, of processes, of necessity. It hugs the easy way of damning those whom it cannot understand, of excluding those who look different, and it salves its conscience with a self-draped cloak of righteousness”.<sup>32</sup> The title of the book, *Black boy* alludes to the fact that his existence is created and defined in terms of whiteness. By being a sort of rebel who will not mask himself, he is an abnormal deviant of whiteness. This is how the evils of white supremacy begin to permeate the way people can normally exist.

White Christian Nationalism as preached by Trump is frequently compared to the self imposed authority of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Hitler, like Trump, was someone who highlighted themselves as a being with divine-like power who was able to speak to a mass amount of people, telling them that their loyalty would fix a broken country. That if they believed in this God, (the timely created Christian White Nationalist God), they would be saved,

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<sup>32</sup> Wright, Richard. *Black boy seventy-fifth Anniversary edition*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2020, 23.

and they would be rewarded. “In his unpublished book manuscript from 1928, Hitler demonstrated he held the United States in a favorable light and paid tribute to it as a country that “felt itself to be a Nordic- German state and in no way an international mishmash of peoples.”<sup>33</sup>

This belief allowed for the Holocaust to persist as long as it did, because people want to do what they believe is good. Religion can be used as a very powerful tool to make people believe that fascist ideologies are tied to divinity and holiness, and makes people believe they are giving back, doing their duty for the state. However, “Nationalism flourishes when societies feel economically or culturally insecure.”<sup>34</sup> That is where the glory comes in, the empire will influence its subjects to be loyal and devoted. War is necessary and just, because they are benevolently serving the interest of the state.

### **The Dangers of Christendom**

White supremacy has an ability to twist the blame on the people that they attack and try to control. During the conquest of the Americas the indigenous people were labeled as “Indians”, but they were also “hostile”, and “dangerous” for defending their sacred land. To the colonists it was simply “territory”, because they don't see any value in the land itself other than the resources it provides. The importance of the indigenous religion was completely disregarded, because it

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<sup>33</sup> Miller, Robert J., Nazi Germany's Race Laws, the United States, and American Indians (February 19, 2020), 5. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3541009> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3541009>

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, Diane. “The Great-Granddaddy of White Nationalism.” *Southern Cultures* 25, no. 3 (2019): 133–55. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26778856>.

did not exist as an organized religion supported by hierarchical structure. This supports the perception of the divide between religion and spirituality. What was once genuine spiritual love and respect for the land was destroyed because it was negatively labeled as paganism.

Carter Heyward says something similar to Miller about the roots of White Christian Nationalism, the way the Puritans acted toward the indigenous people in the seventeenth century. She says, “The Christian assumption that the Indians were 'heathens', unworthy of respect and undeserving of life or liberty on their own terms, was the first major white Christian nationalist assault on America.”<sup>35</sup> Colonialism produces ideologies of use, abuse, violation, and disrespect. Nothing is respected in this context, except the interest of the white male. Mary Daly said “If God is male, then male is God.”<sup>36</sup> Jesus has to be next to whiteness, because whatever the white male did became just, and even holy. Jesus supposedly looked just like them.

When citizens of a country become divided, as seen in the U.S Presidential election of 2016, they lose touch with what it means to actually be a human in the image of God. Cone says that the gospel preaches the refusal to be complicit in hatred and brutal oppression. Community, love and kindness are aspects of divine truth. Bipartisan politics and ideologies make us forget that we are all a people, not subjects of a kingdom. America as Christendom will make people hate others for their skin color, their sexuality and identities. When people hate their fellow

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<sup>35</sup> Heyward, “White Christian Nationalism”, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Daly Mary. 1973. *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.

citizens, there is a trust built upon the state, following its rules is like believing and praying to God. The blending of church and state is dangerous because people want to do what they believe is benevolent. In the holocaust people would rat out their neighbors for hiding the jewish victims. The brain is poisoned, people think that they are doing a governmental duty. It is however supporting the agenda to kill entire groups of people.

### **Religion and Unity**

What is needed is mobilization and energization, people realizing they do in fact exist as entities larger than themselves. To see that it is extremely important to nurture the conscious mind and have bodily autonomy, but engendering that within a communal setting is revolutionary. As humans we need each other, and we must have a common understanding of love, acceptance, and gratitude. We don't necessarily need a total agreement on the purpose of life and who/what God is. Diversity within religion is important because it helps us to see the multifaceted ways of life, there is not just one right way to go about it. There are many, and we learn greatly from the existence of the "other". The usages of fear, control, numbness, and division are the antithesis to divine love. We can only go about achieving it by refusing to participate in matters that will hurt our human spirits. But how can that be possible when half of the population, women, suffer from misogynistic rhetoric that they cannot be involved in formal ministry. This can be another factor of the new wave of spirituality, it is one that includes

women. Sarah Kornfield, in *Mutuality*, discusses the foremothers of preaching. She referenced Michael Casey's analysis of these women preachers before the year 1840.

“First, women claimed prophetic roles, arguing women had authority as speakers that they otherwise lacked without being ordained by a church. These preaching foremothers often cited Acts 2:17–18 to claim their prophetic role: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . . even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit.”

“Second, these women's sermons centered on Scriptures that depicted women leaders, like Deborah, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, and Junia. Third, these sermons identified patriarchy and racism as sins and argued that the church was guilty of these sins.”<sup>37</sup>

This point in time can be described as a “hinge-moment.”<sup>38</sup> White cites Doug Sosnik, and discusses this idea as actually being a “deeply biblical idea . . . that tandem-knowing the signs of the times and how to best live in light of them-is key.”<sup>39</sup> The church now stands in a position where rapid change has occurred, numbers are dwindling in attendance and money. White signifying and symbolizing this turning point in time which we find ourselves. “Few are unaware that economic uncertainty, global instability, technological advances, and demographic transitions that abound.”<sup>40</sup> As non-profit organizations, they seem to bear the heaviest burdens of social justice commitments and responsibilities. Women are now involved in the churches more

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<sup>37</sup> “What Holds Us Together” 27, no. 1 (Spring 2020), 18. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31880558>.

<sup>38</sup> White, “Meet Generation Z”, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

than ever, which is part of the reason change is occurring. “When women occupy the pulpit, they have historically faced a difficult choice.”<sup>41</sup>

Nowadays, where Generation Z is characterized by their disconnect and un involvement with religion or churchgoing, the state of the church is not what it once was. It has been tied with evangelicalism, and right-wing political beliefs. This brand of religion just does not seem to have the same attractiveness in younger people, perhaps because the state of the world has changed so drastically. What is it about these aspects which this generation has not carried on the same way?

It is not that these younger generations are opposed to religion, but that religion is not so prominent. In a time where social and personal commitments interfere with the traditional churchgoing style, the church must evolve with the times. This looks like the church holding events that are not essentially religious, but are opportunities for people to congregate and simply enjoy time together, a dinner, etc. Re-thinking and reworking the operations of the church is vital when giving and attendance is not as strong and guaranteed as it once was. The true function of the church is to involve itself in matters that might seem “radical”, because that is the realest form of kindness and compassion. Colleen Batchelder outlines a fascinating conversation:

“When one looks at the “biblical worldview” of a progressive Christian, they will find elements of social justice, equality, inclusion, and practicality as the basis of their foundational perspectives. This lends itself to a communal perspective and a soteriological theology that perpetuates a stance of personal salvation as well as systemic change, all of which the progressive Christian grounds in Scripture. However, if one were to question the Religious Right and ask them their interpretation of a “biblical worldview,” one

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<sup>41</sup> Kornfield, “Listening to Our Preaching Foremothers”, 20.

would be met with a strong stance against the LGBT community, a supportive position toward capitalism, and a skeptical perspective on gender equality. They would also find a strong defense regarding traditional marriage, hyper-masculinity, and antagonism towards interfaith tolerance. These views they also ground in the Bible. The majority of people, when asked to define a biblical worldview, will proclaim a view that elevates themselves and damns others, regardless of their political or denominational affiliation.”<sup>42</sup>

In my studies about the historical Jesus, he was constantly in trouble, engaging in fellowship with prostitutes and touching lepers. When thinking about this in the modern day context, who are the “underserved” today? They are those discriminated against based on skin color, and those categorized by their economic state or their gender and sexuality. However these factors are all tied together, they are not issues that stand alone from each other. The things which go into discriminating against other people are what the church has become known for. The modern lens on the church has magnified the prevalence of who is excluded rather than welcomed. When it is preached that “all are welcome”, and that “God loves everyone as they are”, where do those who are marginalized and outcasted fit into the equation? That is exactly the problem, there are people who are not seen as equally human because they have been casted into an undesirable category based on social norms of richness and whiteness.

*Black Boy* details the modern cultural circumstance of America, which was built off of slave labor, genocides and exploitations. White supremacy and its systemic endeavors reflect back on the responsibility of the church to respond to it and Christian nationalism. It is linked to

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<sup>42</sup> Batchelder, “Exvangelical”, 68-69.

this turmoil of division which society has become engulfed in. In order to feel the full effects of community, how special and important it is, is to embrace love and inclusion, not fear and avoidance. The voiceless and the excluded need to be seen and heard. Differences make us unique and special, there is never a reason to divide ourselves against one another.

### **A New Future**

The global language has always been peace, love, and living in harmony with one another on our shared wonderful planet. There is evidence of secularization, but the reasons why are not as clear.<sup>43</sup> There is a pronounced clash between the younger Millennials and Generation Z, in opposition to the ideals of Generation X and Baby Boomers. The fact that younger people aren't as connected to institutions like the church shows a change in the collective consciousness, the old ways are not fitting into the ebbs and flows of modern time and ultimately the future. What is seen as an opposition to religion by young people is really just a different way of conceptualizing spiritualities, without an organized regime. From the perspective of a young person, we have seen the damage that institutions and their large spheres of power have done to society. The rise of the technological age has made the younger generations more isolated, communities on the outside are lacking, meaning their interest in congregational communities is decreasing. The church has not had the same place in every person's life as a child, and so members of the older

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<sup>43</sup> White, "Meet Generation Z".



generations have the nostalgia of a different time to reflect on. Things seemed more organized because they were so tightly wound into the fabric of society.

Recognizing that the structures which have dominated society, such as Christian Nationalism, are rooted in white supremacy, advocates itself as a natural and “traditional” way to structure hierarchies, many have grown up in these systems where white privilege was normal. Regardless, to approve racism is to directly deny the gospel. Post Covid, citizen’s distrust in the government, provides yet another factor of division within society. During Covid the right-wing rhetoric was largely tied to a certain notion of evangelicalism, usually encouraging citizens not to wear masks or to get vaccinated.

As a result of this very recent time period, the idea of community as it once was is not relevant anymore, because we had to live in isolation from fear of contracting disease. Batchelder cites Tony Jones, saying that contemporary church leaders think “The theologians and the biblical scholars have lost all touch with reality and instead busy themselves with the latest technical innovations in ‘how to do church.’”<sup>44</sup> “If the emergent church has anything rare, or even unique, it’s the nexus of theory and praxis, or innovative theology and innovative practice. These twin impulses of rethinking theology and rethinking church are driving the nascent growth of emergent Christianity. And love it or hate it, it can’t be ignored.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Batchelder, “Exvangelical”, 63.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 63.

The younger generation is growing up in an environmental crisis, the earth is warming and disconnection to natural processes is becoming more evident. This change entails living in a way that de-centers dependence on corporations and institutionalized racism.

The prison system is a prime example of this. Taking advantage of the cycle of poverty that produces the certain archetype of humans as an inherent “criminal”. Those deemed invaluable and evil by the state, even so that they are worthy of death, or rotting to death in a cell. Diversity and inclusion are essential to the lifestyle that young people are creating. It is not a reality in which we are striving for, but bringing that reality into the now.<sup>46</sup> We have grown up in settings that showed diversity was important and normal. Globalization is necessary to dismantle these systems of oppression, and needing to identify with one Country.

Women make up half of the population yet they are expressly told that they do not have a place in ministry or delivering it, and therefore must reside in the shadows of men. Colleen Batchelder in her interviews; “Regardless of their faith affiliation, the majority viewed the term pro-life as encompassing all forms of life. However, many interviewees felt a generational disconnect, especially within the church. They could not fathom how their older counterparts could rally for the rights of the unborn while simultaneously lambasting the LGBT+ community, ignoring the cries of the immigrant, or making racial slurs from the pulpit”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 25.

The enduring conversation of diversity, to include all members of a community into itself. That is the way of the gospel. To love those unloved, forgive those unforgivable, and to value those invaluable. The idea of loving those different from yourself is a step in the path to weaving a strong fabric of society. When we have observed that the state and government approves legislation which discriminates and separates people, the community can not thrive. For what is one of the biggest ideas of Christianity? Loving thy neighbor. All are God's children and God loves all. A rhetoric that spews language of anti-inclusion, that some people cannot be welcomed in a church, does not fit with a God who loves all. "Today, conservative evangelicalism is more characterized by MAGA hats than the KKK; however, this ideology and evangelical perspective has still caused many to use the term as a weapon of fear."<sup>48</sup>

A study from Lifeway Resources found that 66 percent of people who were active in church in highschool remained active around ages 18-22.<sup>49</sup> The idea of a generation is how they are all born within a specific time frame, growing up with common experiences. It affects how they make sense of the world around them, forming their values and beliefs. "However, if pastors and leaders can create spaces of uncertainty; they will be able to engage Generation Z and their preference of theological fluidity".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>49</sup> McKnight, Tim. *Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry*. Kregel Publications, 2021, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Batchelder, "Exvangelical", 24.

If we have any chance at living a life of prosperity and unity, we cannot support or be involved in institutions which are overtly and covertly rooted in racism and thrive by hierarchical oppression. We have freedom to practice whatever religions we want, but when that religion is associated with abuse and oppression-the structure can no longer stand. It will no longer survive in a setting with the younger generations who realize speaking out is necessary. Silence is perpetuation, and complacency is sinning. In today's times, the idea of a troublesome radical like Jesus stands similarly today. However, there is a form of religious radicalism that functions off of support from the state and government, and isn't seen as a hindrance. The form of radicalism which seeks to dismantle the structures of oppression, are "against the law", highlighting the idea that the law was put in place to prevent its own dissolving. Jesus is an example of showing compassion to those who are "other" ; they are just as worthy of love and kindness.

In a church setting, one should not have to look or act a certain way to be in fact "welcomed"-for that very word in context of the church implies that there are those who are not welcomed. Consciousness is shifting with the times. What is fundamentally right is loving people and accepting people just as they are. Every individual can actually experience love in the context of a safe community. The question is how young people are best able relate to that in a church setting.

## Part II: A Series of Interviews with the Granville Churches' Pastors, Laypeople and Youth Directors

### **Church A Pastor**

“The God-Quad”, one of the nicknames for the four corner churches. But what are Denison students missing out on, by not coming down the hill to Main Street? The pastor responded, “community”. That a distinctive attribute is the “wide diversity of beliefs.” Describing some who are here every week, but say they are atheist, and then those who are “100% baptist and everything in between.” The shared values about justice “binds us.”

She recognizes an “appreciation and understanding” for why Gen Z is statistically less religious, with 45 percent of students choosing “None” for their religious affiliation. She is also “painfully aware of statistics that young people experience a trend of isolation and loneliness. To her, this community is an opportunity to, for a student in this case, “plug in” if they might be “interested in issues of justice and want to get involved...Boots on the ground, advocacy work.”

She was raised Catholic, and commented that she is now attending a Catholic university for her doctoral studies. But ordained as a pastor for this denomination. There was some “conversion”, when she was seventeen, she realized her sexual orientation was not accepted by that environment. What followed was “A decade long search for a spiritual home.” She always experienced a “connection to the transcendent”, and in the search for belonging visited all types of churches, such as reformed judaism, buddhism, sikhism, hinduism. Yet, the “Jesus thing would not leave me alone.”

She wanted to be in community with others, “with people who thought like I did, cared about the things I did, and embraced me.”

As the Pastor she has many responsibilities. Pastoral care, meaning things like meeting with people to talk and etc., being accessible. Preparing and planning worship and sermons every week. Oversight of Staff, noting that the church admin and she are the only full-time staff.

“Building relationships and connections in the community...others in the god-quad, ecumenical advocacy and justice work...the list goes on and on...resident theologian.”

This is her first time as a pastor, having only been here about a year. “I humbly submit to you that I am learning.. It's great I love what I do... it feels like spinning a lot of plates at once.”

She talked about this building having a history of being on “the front lines” and with “a progressive Christianity.” Some members marched together in the 80s at the Columbus pride parade. This church is “Unabashed in its witness to justice, human rights, dignity, continues to be so, that voice today.”

When I asked what kept members returning she responded that it was one another. “This is a place where people really love one another...genuinely there is a deep love, fondness and commitment to one another.” She noted that relationships can go beyond sundays, “which is just beautiful. There are a lot of really bright people here.... Thoughtful and engaged people who just want to do good in the world.” People “put their money where their mouth is”, in terms of social justice issues, etc. Adding that what is discussed on Sundays, “gets lived.” “We're rooted in this community and people know who we are. I understand we're not for everyone, and I respect that.”

She said that the ways that church has been done historically, are not sustainable. “There was a point in time in the history of our country where (the) church was more prominent in communal life.” Now, people have other ways to spend their time and energy, it is “diffused...the activities, tech, demands of modern living...the church occupies a different space. She noted how something formerly seen as normal like spending hours in a committee “does not work anymore.”

“For me it's all about joy. If something brings you joy, I want to encourage and empower you to do that thing...Joy is an act of resistance.” She talked extensively about taking requests from people, “we're a yes-and church.”

People come together over “different joys”, saying if i asked 15 people why they are churchgoers i'd get 15 different answers.” Like meals, shared study, and shared issue activism. Discussed again was the different types of people that exist in the congregation, but come once a week, or maybe a month, to be together. “Why is that? I don't know, I think it's different for everyone.”

The importance of faith and practice, “what faith is without practice, is it really faith?” Faith can be written off as a private affair, individualized pursuit, but she said that is worrisome because “Faith is healthiest when it's communal...ergo, includes practices.” She thought of Jesus

wandering off from disciples and going to pray, but it wasn't the only thing he did. "Part of a life of faith includes risk, and risk always comes in relationships."

A life of faith meant to be shared, and from the perspective of Christianity, looking to Jesus, "he was always in community, dining, healing in community, not private affairs with he and God...Jesus didn't even do it alone, so we shouldn't either."

How many might come to church about twice a month. "Between 80-100 a week." The numbers are lower due to the summer season and again discussing how the church occupies a different space than it once did, it's not the "central hub for community", so they may come once a month. "I'm not taking attendance...it's not up to me."

What is the God-language used in this space? The word God is used, "I also use the language of God of your understanding...There's 80 to 100 different Gods in here every sunday, who or what or how God is, good luck preaching to all of that."

"Traditional language is used" and pronoun wise, God can be she, he or they "because God isn't confined to gender."

She references Paul Tillich, "the ground of being, our ultimate concern, what is that thing, for some people it's God, other people could be family, nature, riding one's motorcycle, I don't know." It is up to the individual to figure it out.

How are the ways of the church expressed? Such as the display of flags for pride hung up. "Certainly our flags do say something, about who we are, what happens on the inside." contrasting the "hulking, gorgeous 1880s built facade", where inside lies a more casual type of setting. "I can see how that can be confusing to people.. The church is a symbol, it means something, and it means something different to different folks, and if you've been wounded by this symbol, the heck if you're ever gonna step in here."

She talked about not having "formal" methods of mission like a food pantry, but "We have people that find their joy, and we go out and do those things, come together and overlap." Adding that as a congregation they are everywhere, where justice is being done they are found.

"Nobody needs the church, people can do this on their own, or together, but they come back here and it's like home-base, where you are fed, and can go out again."

Is the function of the church social, political, spiritual, or all? If it's not then I don't think it's vital. Social relationships and connection are very important, we are in this day and age where "Christian Nationalism is surging", and that is a concern, "Jesus would bristle at us being

a political institution. Jesus was “so disinterested in the powers and principalities...often worked against them...not in spite of them but because he saw his mission to heal and teach and feed and clothe, and that stood in stark contrast to what the empire did.”

People have asked her if the church has become too political. “We are not a political institution, we are a church, our actions and practices may have political implications, but not inherent political nature.”

Has the data on religion and young people affected the ministry? “We find these ways to do ministry in these creative community sustaining ways ... .We're never gonna be a mega church, I don't want us to be.”

The same depth of relationships cannot be achieved that way.



### **Church B Pastor**

What are Denison students missing out on by not coming down to the ground? She responded that you can be part of a community that is “beyond its own pod... there is more diversity on campus than in town, but a different kind of diversity”, due to the differences of age, state and experience, and Granville being a demographically homogeneous town. It was described that having spiritual experiences which you share with other people consistently, “shapes people..in really beautiful ways.”

What was her church background? She had been very active in the church all throughout her life, but has “explored a lot of different spiritualities outside of Christianity and the mainstream religion.” Listed were 12 step programs, meditation groups, and worship with friends practicing other faiths. She explored evangelicalism, was re-baptized. “I learned that there is so much spirituality outside of my little slice and tried to bring some of it here.”

About her position at this church; she's been pastor here twenty-three years. When she started ministry she was studying biology which didn't feel right. She told me she prayed to know what to do and after “dead silence from God”, kept praying, ultimately deciding the church. “That's my home”, she noted, this is her fortieth year of ministry.

What is prominent about this church? She said it is very mission focused, having a particular staff person focused on it. She said the church community is to “support the outside world so it's not just about us.” Described was the sense of community, “what people have told me coming here is really blown away by how people support each other.”

About faith and practice, the participant said they go together even apart from a religious feel, that there is a sense of integrity and cohesion. The goal is that, “one's beliefs are coherent with one's actions...so we're actually living out what we say is important to us.” Interestingly she commented on the way a person can have “competing values”, and it leads to debating what matters most. “I really am concerned about climate change, very concerned, and I still fly down to Nashville to see my grandkids, so yeah they're both important.”

It was similarly estimated by this participant that about half the percentage of the congregation regularly show up twice a month. How do online services affect a Sunday morning? This church had livestreams of a small audience, pre-pandemic. Luckily this proved to be useful during lockdown because the services could be “launched quickly.” There were three

communities formed. First are the “shut in people”, elderly folks who learned to join live services to “stay connected, they can't leave home and are stuck so for them it's huge.” It was noted that this is a “good chunk” of the people. The second, “raging introverts who love worshiping from home in pajamas...they don't want to come but they still want to worship online.” The third, “out of towners, we probably have a dozen people around the country who worship with us on a regular basis.” Membership from people across state lines is particularly interesting because those people all have some connection of variation to granville, it is not random attendance.

About the theology and language here, “God as creator of everything...being breath and the spirit is breath of life...In Hebrew and Greek the words for spirit, wind and breath are the same word. That every breath is a connection to God.” She further described this perspective, “talking about Jesus who would be God entering our world... in a very tangible way...unity with God through Jesus because of this embodiment...God pushes us towards justice... to account, I've got files of sermons.”

An interesting anecdote, about a funeral which occurred the past weekend. The church “has a group of women who host funeral receptions...we've had 7 since January, and every time a group of those women show up...maybe one man... making food and holding the space for people.” Saying that the women show up in times of need for others, strengthening community.

About Ecumenical work, the pastors meet once a month at Denison. Another small-town event is the vacation bible school. Her and another pastor share the pulpit and lead worship together during the holiday season. When I asked about church and external responsibility, she said “absolutely...it affects how we spend money,hire staff...it's not a theory and it's not like setting up things for volunteers to do...if we only exist for our own self perpetuation then we are not Christian.”

More about mission work, there is a group of people who serve meals at salvation army, the point is to create relationships. The staff member who focuses on mission is training in a program called “bridges out of property...its to help people understand the culture of different classes, the unspoken rules that we operate by as upper middle class people that are very different from people in poverty or wealthy. We don't even see it, it's embedded...the goal is to do that training before we serve the community, so we don't do more harm than good.” As

church members with a socioeconomic advantage, it is important to understand that these systems function in the ignorance of their existence.

I asked about the function of the church. Is it spiritual, social, political, or all? She said one of the churches is the “most political...they were the first to be openly pro gay and lesbian...they've just been outspoken, our church is much more...yeah we'll absolutely do a wedding for people who are gay but we're not gonna put a rainbow sign outside our church. It's more committed to being a big umbrella church.”

Financial support has “dropped considerably”, that people who were active in the church in the mid nineteenth century, would give primarily if not fully to the church. Nowadays “people spread out their giving and were one among many.” She also said that people over 70 give 60-65% of the donations. “At the height of this congregation, probably in 2005, we had almost 800 members, and now were under 450.” I commented on the additional effect the pandemic had on church attendance, “We're just happy we have kids coming again and families, it's so exciting.”

What would be lost if the church disappeared? “Community based within something beyond ourselves...it's God-infused.” Noted the importance of intergenerational connections; other types of groups like rotary, kiwanis, or a high school soccer team, are for an “age and stage...this is forever.” When someone asked her what distinguishes the church from those organizations, she responded that it's important that, “God is part of it, keeping us accountable, we are part of something much bigger...and ironically it keeps us humble.”

### **Church C Pastor**

When I asked what Denison students were missing out on, he said community, one that is different from the secluded campus, it is of a larger context. Intergenerational levels, seeing how others experience their faith.

Ever since he could remember he was in the church, he had a very positive experience, which he said is why he is where is today as a pastor. “For me church was a second family, I felt very comfortable and accepted and loved and encouraged all growing up.” He commented that this experience with a church family was “powerful”, and led him to want to do the same in his career.

He talked about the church being a geographical center of a small town, everyone has it in common. In larger urban areas the ability to establish “localized commonalities” is harder to solidify. Small-town commonalities he said helped to form distinct relationships, and longer term memberships. In this church, the music is an important component, from children to adults, “on a regular basis, so there's always something special musically happening on any given sunday.” Also described was a very active youth community which they are grateful for this unique aspect of the church.

Outreach and mission was also a focus of this church, both in the community and internationally. This denomination is a “connectional system”, so they have a “much wider impact”, supporting the denomination as a whole monetarily, which goes to other projects, etc. Something that he likes about this church is the “dual focus on personal holiness, and social holiness.” In response to my question about individuality reflecting on the community, he said that the goal is that your personal transformation results in working for the transformation of the world around you.

To sum it up, the strengths lie in “music ministry, children's ministry, and mission.” However, there cannot be total unity in beliefs, in terms of things such as politics. “Although where we do find our unity is in Christ.” At the end of the day, disagreements and perhaps arguments happen, but they can all agree on their foundational beliefs. I asked if these might be necessary to keep unity, and he agreed, saying “that's how you grow, coming against something that makes you think.” Stagnance of thinking would be the opposite.

On the importance of faith and practice, “they have to go together, one without the other leaves you lacking.” He said it's not an individual ascent to a concept or belief system, it's more about living in a way that aligns with examples of Jesus, which involves practice.

He said once or twice a month is considered regular for most members, though he did not have an estimate on the percentage. “The connections are deep enough and strong enough even if they've only

been here for a month.” He described the significant portion of people who “worship from home”, still feel connected to the faith. Things are changing, with the existence of the internet, stagnance of thinking, especially about the ways of the church, is impossible.

What keeps people returning, especially after Covid? The sense of hope is an important factor of church life and faith. This keeps members coming back to church because the social support is there. “It’s not transactional, it’s relational.” Nothing is expected in return for favors.

Grace is an important word, “it’s the unconditional, unmerited, unlimited love of God, that is expressed perfectly in Jesus.” What he may have been expressing was the knowing that we can come to God through Christ, which is the “vertical, God connection. The horizontal, people–connection...kindness, generosity, patience, self control, the fruits of the spirit.” This polarized culture seeps into the church, so they’ve been intentional about encouraging kindness and respect, again despite disagreements, they can still work together to make a difference.

Is the function of the church social, spiritual, or political? “Your spiritual life ought to affect community life, social and political as well.” Faith may impact the way you vote, but in terms of politics it is a careful approach.

“I’m always learning and growing too”. He acknowledged that he is constantly growing and faith, and he never wants to preach because he has all the answers. Together we learn and grow, “but when I preach it coming from a genuine place, I always try to preach something I need to hear myself”.

There is certainly an awareness that younger people don’t seem to have the same connection, or desire it”. The practical difference that it makes in the ministry is that “it almost gives us permission to engage with people, and to be okay if that never translates into church involvement”. It’s a way that they are giving, planting seeds and hoping it is touching a spiritual never. It’s okay if people never come to church on Sunday, recruitment was always a goal, but “it’s almost an ulterior motive.” A rethinking of church vitality he said was necessary.

### **Church D Pastor**

What are Denison students missing out on being statistically less religious? To the pastor of this church, it is conceptualizing “a community that is not absolutely university centralized.” This participant is based in Columbus, commenting that she still lives there. “I am commuting, I am what they call a priest in charge... like rent to buy... see what the needs of the community are, see if it's a mutual good fit.” She has been here for about a year and fifteen months. She cannot afford to live in Granville due to the real estate being “through the roof.”

She wasn't raised in a super religious setting, but occasionally went to church on the holidays. When her mother unfortunately passed, there was a moment alone in a room with herself, a presence she felt, telling her “you are going to get through this.” Stemming from that in her ministry she ponders how we can embody that in each other. Her main idea of faith “we're meant to be in community.” Purpose and meaning is lost in isolation and hopelessness.

This pastor is involved in “intentional interim ministry.” The most recent pastor served for fifteen years and is retired, now the community has to “pause.” Focusing on the needs of itself and envisioning the future of their mission before someone else steps in. “We get a few skeletons out of the closet...are you willing to let go? Letting go is the hard part, if we don't hang onto this, then who are we?”

Part of her position is helping the community through the process to a long term priest. She noted she may take that path, but “it has to be mutual, I'm having a great time, but I also know that they may need someone else.”

What is prominent about this church? In a small town and church, everyone knows what's going on, but they “love and accept people as they are.” As for the parishioners, there is a natural tendency to check in with one another, and speak up with their ideas. “It's like in any relationship, you've got to communicate your needs.”

What is the importance of faith and practice? Dealing with life's biggest questions of purpose and meaning, from a “non-christocentric perspective.” She said people need a space and place to “wrestle”, with those questions. People have different faiths and backgrounds, but “using the Christian faith to pull down other people, that's wrong.” Saying people are absolutely welcome to this place if their faith resonates with this particular way of religious belief.

The core of bible stories she said is a “loving God that wants far more good for us than we even know exists.” Talking about this loving God who created the cosmos in which we exist, “Whatever created this divine beautiful endless space, that was the energy (love). Don't use hate.”

“Fear is the opposite of all of that. Take a little risk, find your common ground, that is what makes a holy community.” Building back from the devastating effects of Covid, there is a weekly average of about 37 people. About 40 percent she said come to church twice a week. There used to be a children's program about 6-7 years ago. She spoke about the membership communicating their needs. “If you want this, your energy is needed, it's not just the priest saying we are going to have one” (children's program).

What theological language is used? “Yes, you will hear traditional language of father, son, and holy spirit, though I'm trying to get a little bit away from that gendered language... it's still very traditional.” Instead using “creator, redeemer, sustainer”(holy spirit). Also named were God is love , Holy spirit as surprise, and the word grace. “God does not want shame.” There is a ministry where the church delivers groceries to Newar, “an area where the need is greatest.” A member owns the particular building, people give to stock the pantry.” Making sure people eat nutritiously is dignity.” Saying every person deserves respect and dignity.

We don't want people to come “just so it looks like a growing church...we get to do deeper work in a time where people are divided and alone.” Covid isolation means restoring joy to the community. “God's language is love and joy... and we want you to have that too.” There is a reformation going on, “we're good students of history, but what if we're in it.”

What responsibilities does the church have with things outside themselves? “Jesus did not say worship me, he said follow me”, and so she described examples, ie. feeding people..there aren't poor people in Granville.”

How has the data on young people's disconnect with religion affected the ministry? “We're listening right now”, adopting different types of programs due to having to remove programs and positions. Asking, “what do denison students need from us...when a new opportunity comes up and it's an opportunity for partnership, we look at it through the lens of the gospel...this is making community.”

She said that there is a reason why “AA and NA are found in churches (often basements), those are restoration, those are hopeful..Jesus would use the basement door more often than the front door.” In terms of twelve step programs.

What is the function of the church? “During the Trump era there was so much despair, things that appeared to follow gospel, fairness...People needed to be reminded to work for hope.”

She spoke about “being good stewards” of the community and their resources due to the pandemic, politics and leadership. They have a space being rented that will, if not entirely, “knock a big chunk out of the debt over three years”, which is also seen as good stewardship. What would be lost if the churches were to disappear and perhaps replaced, “a sense of mission”, she replied. Also adding that Granville exists in a perfect world with expensive rent and a private campus. There are lots of hospitality, gatherings and events to be had, “crazy fun.” “You would lose an answer to Christian nationalism...that's where I draw the line, that's nazism for the century.” She said that this is not the reason why God put us here.

“This is where we say no, you don't wrap an ak-47 and trump and the american flag and call it Jesus.” What would also be lost is a “highly educated bubble in a county that has astonishing need.” She gestures to a narcan kit that she has in the office, and one she keeps in the car. When someone says they are going to do ministry in a particular area, she encourages them to keep it with them. “That always reminds me that we are part of a bigger world.” A world where things are very unpredictable, you just don't know what could happen. “We have to speak truth to power, especially when power is abused.”



### **Pastors Analysis**

After conducting the interviews with all of the pastors, I found many things to compare and contrast. Firstly, three out of the four of them are women, and besides the pastor of Church B, they are fairly new, only having been here from a range of 1 to 10 years between them. The pastors all find themselves at a standpoint in the trajectories of their churches, post Covid, and with dwindling numbers in attendance and funds. They must deal with the declining faith and trust in the church, and how it is not regarded to be as prominent in life as it was.

As the pastor of church A discussed with me, there was a point in the history of our country where people just went to church, it was the central place for community affairs. In Granville today, you might be friends, coworkers, or colleagues with fellow churchgoers, the difference may be that a good majority of those attend online worship services.

These pastors are focused on how, with their words and leadership, they can attract an audience who feels connected and passionate to the work that the churches do. What I have found about all the pastors is that they genuinely enjoy and are passionate about what they do, but they have been tasked with handling the technological age and all of its demands. How do you speak in a way that convinces people that they shouldn't sleep in on Sundays, and want to get up on Sunday to hear those words? Do they have more of an effect on attendance than they think? Do smaller numbers make them appreciate a smaller community? I think yes. All of them

commented on how they are focusing on the people who already show up, the focus is not so much on the fact that attendance is quite low.

The churches all say they are focused on mission, but they do not all mean the same thing to each one. Concerns of social justice, talking about issues of poverty and hunger, are difficult in this setting because God should handle it. Getting to the root of those concerns in society means humans have a certain responsibility to get involved. It is important to talk about the fact that not everyone is given a fair chance, the existence of “the underserved”, means that people have responsibility to serve those who are denied human rights. It is not boiled down to sin and sinner, because the world we live in is far too complex for a black and white mentality. This was rarely discussed in 3 out of the 4 churches. Though they’re all aware of the conceptions of Christianity as a dogmatic and hypocritical religion, this should be discussed more in church in order to progress further.

I would say most of them feel that taking the safe route when it comes to preaching about any issues saves their attendance. It is entirely plausible that people will remove themselves when the conversations become far too “political.” There is a crippling social and communal divide due to the political landscape, and that was relayed to me in the conversations. There is a massive generational divide as well. How are older people supposed to stay in touch, and connected to young people, when they do not discuss issues in church that young people are

talking about? Generation Z is experiencing that the world they have grown up in is filled with hate, exclusion and inequality. Young people here in America are in support of bodily autonomy and fighting for the human rights of all those who are denied them. The reality is, Millennials are more educated than any other generation, and they are spearheading the movement on new age spirituality. As Batchelder said, Generation Z is not straying away from religion, they are forming their own.<sup>51</sup>

Pastors have a role of mobilizing an entire congregation, they are the leaders and the one who they all look to for guidance. The pastors may have to change their style or their church as a whole if it means having Gen-Z and Alpha involved. It is also up to the members to figure out what they want from this community, then try to invite people along with them who may like it. About half of the pastors were focused on taking suggestions and requests from members. This strategy is helpful because members see that their money is going towards somewhere or something that they themselves had a part in. The church really does mean a lot to some people, but what are they doing to help sustain it? The Pastors know that for some, this is all they have and that's important. When people are isolated and the community has seemingly disappeared post-Covid, the church can absolutely be a safe space for all kinds of people. However, they just need to figure out how they are going to make that happen.

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<sup>51</sup> Batchelder, "Exvangelical", 71.

### **Church A Youth Director**

What might Denison students be missing out on? Her response; “faith is belief in God, religion is man’s response to faith.” Adding that people who say they are not religious, means “not involved in an organized structure of responding to the spiritual questions in the universe.” A sense of community would be missed out on, small communities exist in college classes, sports, etc. “We don't have those as adults, unless we go looking for them.” The church, for her, has been that source of community for about 20 years.

She grew up going to church every Sunday, saying a prayer before dinner and bed. “I've always been comfortable in a church setting...looked for it as a part of my world that made sense...the church has always been there as a constant.” She was part of an evangelical Christian fellowship in college. “I was really kind of over the top, once I graduated I backed off from that...became more realistic about how I treat others...it's been an evolution.”

There are people who have a diverse type and level of faith “couple people who are devout atheists, who enjoy the community and social justice issues that we work on. There are good, kind people here...but they don't necessarily have a belief in God.” She identified that there are people with different Christian denominational backgrounds and faiths, “but they all come together.”

She was formerly the youth director, but now there is no one person for that. Instead there is a “team effort”, and she defined herself as a “youth leader.”

The Youth group here is regrowing, because “Covid was the end of everything we were doing...church is constant, but the style of church is not constant.”

Now they focus on “building continuity”, and group bonding. She mentioned a plant sale fundraiser this past April to support their coming summer camp experience. The camp was created in collaboration with other congregations from around the country. “Churches that have been unhappy with other prepackaged Christian camps, so we just decided (to have) our own.” For the last fifteen years they’ve rented out a space in North Carolina, and they are their own camp leaders. She stated a big part of the youth ministry is this experience, being a “focal point...an important place for these kids to have to do the growing we're talking about.”

In the past, this church joined an association for churches of this denomination who welcomed and accepted LGBTQ members etc. However, they were then kicked out of their local denominational organization. Explaining the perceptual notion of “You're not like us, you're bad, so we don't want you here.” That kind of thing happened to other churches in the camp.

In this camp every child is welcome, LGBTQ kids feel comfortable and safe. “People might throw you out at home, people might bully or criticize you but that won't happen here. Every kid, no matter what their status, needs to experience that kind of environment. If you want to have purple hair and wear spikes... anything that's different is okay, be who you are, and we will love you just the same.”

Do the kids in the group share similar ideas about church, etc.? They are “each as unique as they are, they each come from a different family experience, only two kids actually grew up in this church. She said she hasn't yet had the opportunity to be with them in a spiritual setting, but they've done “fun things together,” but with this group they haven't had any deeper conversations yet. “I don't have a good feel for what questions they have.”

Her experience growing up in church was that each grade had their own Sunday school class. “Here it's middle school and high school kids, on a good day we'll have 6 or 7 kids, all the grades.” They have recently established a room for the kids to host their discussions, a room where they were able to design and arrange the furniture, the way that they wanted.

What is the theological language/vocabulary used, and she described a past work to define new hymnals that didn't use the word “lord.” Adding that lord isn't “a biblical interpretation but a cultural one... the same word used for royalty, master-over-servant.” Explaining the undesired need to have “that male, power-structural word, to be the one you're using to fill your soul.”

Using neutral language and , “what God did for man... really means humankind, but man means male.” She elaborated that the bible was in Greek and Hebrew, and translated to english. “The bible has been run through a cultural mill.” She said that for the teenagers this can be a good exercise to interpret meaning, and words we don't use anymore, referencing the “thee and the thou” of the King James bible version. Also, alternating between Father and Mother God, “If you grew up with two mothers, father doesn't mean the same thing to you.”

How does the church express themselves to the community? She said they're on the “cusp” of figuring out how to reach into the community. They have a homeless outreach to

”provide food and basic needs to anyone who comes along.” anywhere the community “has a need”, they try to reach it.

When she first joined this church, they and other congregations raised money to buy supplies for a school in Nicaragua they had connected with. They rented a used bus, assembled a team, filled the bus, and drove down. It was headquartered at this church; they were the dropoff point for the various things needed, hospital and school supplies etc.

“It builds community as we are doing the job...that really grabbed my imagination, it grabbed my faith...it was a practice, this is what church should be doing, getting our hands dirty with good works.”

More about the internal community reaching the external one, they put signs on the lawn rotating the messages, however, “we need more than just a sign, we need to be interacting with the community and show them who we are.”

There is a rainbow flag which is hung high outside the church. She described it as “a nonverbal message to the community that everyone is welcome here...it has taken on a lot of meaning, people have associations with it...we have taken criticism for it, there are people who think we should take it down. We refuse because we are not apologizing for who they are.” She used to be the wedding coordinator, and she experienced people asking for the flag to be taken down for the wedding day. They acknowledge that it can be a dealbreaker for some, but ultimately refuse to do that. “We’re serious about this...We don’t want to apologize for who we are or make concessions. We feel like for the gay community it is an important piece.”

Is the function of the church social, spiritual, political, or can it be all?

“Politics is something the church has been instructed to stay out of.” However, “If the legislature is working on something that affects social justice, and somebody’s rights are being taken, as Christians we need to pay attention and fight that.” Things like protesting and going to city hall, “that’s political, isn’t it?...The church should not be political, but the church needs to be political.”

What would be lost in Granville if the church were to disappear?

In terms of equality and returning hate with kindness, she first told a story about a person who calls every so often to unsolicitedly give her opinion about taking the flags down. The church has a particular member who responds, asking her to elaborate on her feelings and tell her they are not going to remove it. Who would answer to that if not for this church’s existence? Rather than

“proselytizing...you should believe in Jesus because he'll save your soul. I went through that phase and all I did was alienate people.”

“We’re the weird church...people have a perception of us that we’re the outlaws...dont go over there because it's so weird. We've tried to fight that perception, if this church in particular were gone...Granville would lose a particular voice, that is speaking out and saying no, we're not gonna give into the oppression and the judgment..we try to be an alternate voice in the community.”

### **Church B Youth Director**

Religion, to her, is about being able to feel like there is something bigger than what meets the eye. “That more than with other people, I feel closest to the creator when I am in community with others.”

Her father became a pastor when she was in high school, his first call being at this church. She was in the youth group and he was the associate pastor. She said, “church has always been a part of who I am, this church in particular has supported me in numerous ways.” She is the senior high youth and communications director of the church. Sunday night youth worship service “the fellowship, that includes dinner, discussion, and play.” Multiple times during the week, she takes the kids out to coffee, visits them at the highschool, attends their games, music concerts, plays, and etc.

“Our church has the best people, people care about each other in a way that is unreal.” She commented how this church is “skewing older”, yet they are interested in the lives of the young people in the church. She told me that here it feels like home, and her group will tell her it's the place they “get to be real”. Having known one another since birth, they show up in pajamas, “they don't care.”

What is the importance of faith and practice? To her, growing up with a faith background gives you a “solid footing” to build upon. She said this background is “not a safety net, but a value system to fall back on”, especially in the confusing time of adolescence.

What is the youth attendance on Sunday morning? About 20% of the kids attend, but their youth group she estimated about 80%. Does the attendance have an effect? No, saying she structures sessions toward “meeting kids where they are.” They meet as a group and the kids bring topics they'd like to discuss, therefore that is what they converse about. Even if they don't attend, they can “communicate multiple times a week on snapchat”, a social media app, where they can keep in touch, “So if they miss a session it's not a big deal.”

She has been here for two years. During this time, what kinds of connections form? “All of them will go away for college.” She showed me pictures on the wall of her, 20 some years ago, with her youth group here, “I still talk to almost all of them.”



What is the kind of language used? Due to the nature of this denomination, “we talk about Jesus alot”, but recently, “if you replace Jesus in the bible with the word love, it would mean the same thing to us.” Discussed often is how “God is love”.

“The bible still speaks today”, and in her lessons she said it is fun when “these kids are ready to debate me, until we die, and i love that, because we all learn”.

The coming Sunday the group has a weekend mission trip coming up, to which she told me this church is very “mission focused.” They are going to Kentucky to do flood relief, rebuilding houses. This is her first time doing a mission trip with this group. Some of these kids' parents were her youth leaders, so she can “give back” to this church and the people that she said kept her alive.

There is an event where they spend the night at the church, mostly playing hide and seek in the dark, a game they call “murder.” She said that mental health is an uprising crisis, that giving them a space to play and be authentically themselves is important to the work she does.

Discussed was how the kids think about what it means to be a member of this church. “If you are supposed to be a reflection of love out in the world... how does that translate to how you treat people, what you do after prom...”

“The Church as we know it is growing and changing.” When she grew up, everyone went to church. “You just did...everything revolved around the church. That's not true anymore.” Nowadays they are questioning the future of the church. “Now what, if people aren't coming on Sunday mornings then how do we reach the people? That looks like sharing the harvest, the blessing box, all these things we do outside the walls.”

About their involvement in the outside world. “We created the fifteen-hundred tree group that's focused on earth care.” This group plans to plant that number of trees by the year 2030. A member here founded the coalition of care, which helps people in housing and financial trouble. They are partners with an organization, fostering further and starting strong that takes care of foster kids that age out at eighteen years old and having nothing. Paying the rent for those young adults to live in and maintain an apartment. “They have a place to start.”

What is the function of the church, (social spiritual political). At the heart of the church, she believes it is a spiritual place, but I can be all. “Jesus had twelve friends that he hung out with all of the time...it's hard to call yourself a Christian if you don't do justice, love mercy and

walk humbly. If you see the least and the lost and don't take care of them, it's hard to reconcile that. I think that's a bit political...love is love.”

Every Sunday they talk about where they “saw God”, such as in sunsets, singing your favorite song on the radio. She told a story of a pastor they heard speak about a mission trip, “a sanitation worker in New York City that stopped traffic to let a lady cross the street. He said, “I saw God today, and he is a beautiful black man in a sanitation suit.”

How has the ministry been affected by data about young people’s disinterest in religion? The Numbers are “scary”, but she spends her “time and energy on the ones that are coming, and how do you make it contagious.”

“My kids are really good about it, it's not a shameful thing, not like, “you're going to hell because you believe this. Nobody here thinks that.” She said the “institution killed” her parents' generation, but her generation (millennial) is finding the “missing piece.”

It's important to her that the kids know “there's nothing you can do that will separate you from God's love.” She said this year they discussed a lot about premarital sex. “At the end of the day your choices are yours... but sex is a big commitment, it's an expression of love that cannot be taken back... God created sex, but you need to be doing it for the right reasons.”

“People on the outside see more restrictions than freedom, that Christians give Christians a bad name. Fighting through those stereotypes, we don't believe in a God that says he doesn't love you because you're gay, or you can't get divorced. We believe in a God that loves everyone.”

Financial giving has changed drastically, and she has reached a thinking point where “the cornerstone churches aren't going to survive, but that doesn't mean religion died. It means God is moving in the world in different ways...I believe God is so present in everything we do and who we are as humans, that he doesn't need a building to make that happen.”

### **Church C Youth Director**

What are Denison students missing out on? This youth director replied personally “my relationship with Christ is my first priority, with that comes a sense of peace, comfort, love and understanding.” She described that college students are understanding their identity, and that we all have a longing to find peace that can only “be filled by God...I don't think they are gonna find that in a textbook...or a sports team.”

After starting a family, “When I fully accepted Christ into my life, that's when I noticed a huge change in who I was, how I felt, and how I went about my life.”

As the youth director here, she works in young adult ministries in middle school and high school.

She said to make sure they are “being fed spiritually...even the most faithful of disciples will go off to school and they get so busy that they forget to invest in their spiritual health, so I try to feed them while they are there.”

There is Sunday school worship and youth group once a week, having “service projects and study projects...we pray and hold each other accountable for our faith.”

There is a summer mission trip, a work mission doing labor, or vacation bible school, to “comprise corporate worship and bible study...everyone loves the mission trips.”

There is no mission trip this summer, but the church every 4 years has a conference inviting the denomination's youth from all over to come in, so that is taking place instead. She described a mission trip in Alaska last year. Experiencing “a different culture and community...if you want to shake things up and get closer to God you have a change of place and pace. Change of faces, see people you normally don't see.” She described what is a profound experience, “seeing the hand of God in things.”

She wants to create a “safe space” that grows in them from childhood. In her 20 year experience, “you have a finite amount of time to plant those seeds when they're young, once they get to about second semester sophomore year...start to drive, that's when you see a significant dropoff from their church participation.” Also saying that kids get busy with

boyfriends/girlfriends and jobs, that from birth until sixteen years, that's the time when the "ground is fertile...hope and pray that they take root."

She talked about getting creative to further their faith growth, she does "one minute sermons", sending a video of her talking about scripture, and scripture text messages throughout the week. "I know they all have their phones right here so if nothing else, it'll stop that thought process and they'll see something about God."

Of all the kids that are in the church, about one-third of them attend service twice a month. But lots of families are still online, "so you just don't know."

Describing that the perks of churchgoing cannot be fully felt in an online presence. In the sanctuary, there are people singing and musical instruments vibrating, etc. The online services are a "blessing", and were during Covid but the full experience isn't there.

"It's all about God, he is the one wooing them and pulling them in and giving them a thirst to know more. My job is to direct everyone to him...he is big enough to handle that beyond me." As for the youth, the goal is to perpetuate the safe space as aforementioned to further spirituality.

"Create a fun environment, make activities that they want to do...you give them the faith element and hope that the holy spirit takes hold of them and they want to do more." It is a struggle getting kids to invite friends in, "that's the evangelical part, I think has been tough in this group."

She talked about applying scripture to everyday life. Using modern day language, and when the group asks theological questions, she likes to challenge and ask them what they think. She takes pop culture and relates it to faith. At Sunday school they share a "blessing and a bummer", to read where they are emotionally and mentally. "An up and a down."

"Fearing God is not being afraid of God, but respecting and reveling in him." Applying their faith to real life means being able to share things that will stay in that space, in a small town where things spread fast, these things can hurt people. "If you can't adhere to that, you might wanna go down and worship." Supporting one another is key.

"In the last 5 years, the social justice issues have had political agendas attached to them. We do as scripture tells us...helping the widow, the poor, the underserved." She described it as interesting that during prayer vigils held "during the George Floyd thing... who shows up to actually pray, because of the political attachment."

She also spoke about differing points of view within the group, “kids will hear their parents talk and take their parents' view”, not being old enough to discern. “When Roe v Wade was overturned, we've had to have hard conversations, this is what an abortion is, where do you stand? You get to decide that.” Also the LGBTQ community, “where is their place in the church, that sort of thing.”

She describes that the community in Granville is homogenous. As “diverse” as the kids see here “is taking pies into the women's shelter in Newark. They don't know better, and when you know better you do better.” That they only know things in theory and haven't experienced any economic instability, or racial for that matter.

The “focus is to make disciples of all nations. It becomes political when you talk about loving the refugees, the people from other countries, the poor and the wretched. Those who have sinned, is it okay to forgive them if they are in prison for this or that.”

There is a program this church hosts where elementary, middle, and soon highschoolers are picked up from school because their parents can sign to have them opted out one day a week, and do a bible study instead of a special activity offered in school.

About the disconnect of young people from religion, She said when people are about 18-25, it is the goal that they get involved in a church. “Through social media, or personal experience, this age group says Christians are hypocritical or not accepting.”

What would be lost if the church in Granville disappeared. “I don't wanna be in a world where there's not church...where people don't believe in God...The church should play a role in benevolence and character...if the devil can't get you he'll get you busy...distract you from your calling to Christ...It's all good stuff but it's not God...People would get busier and busier.”

## **Youth Director Analysis**

I found Youth Ministry to be a particularly interesting field, because children are often ignored and put aside, silenced. They are disregarded as full human beings with questions, passions, thoughts, and etc. However the children are the future, and it is important that the next generation be raised to have empathy and strength, holding values of love, compassion and grit close to them.

Firstly, Church D does not have a youth program. The participants had said that this was a result of Covid. Families just do not come any more, and therefore no children do. Not only that, but the amount of children who have actually grown up in each particular church varies greatly from church to church. Some of the groups are still working to grow closer together and become more established. Others already may have a stronger youth presence, but they are all building back from the destruction of church attendance. Money issues can be a harsh reality, but the reality of declining attendance is more so.

The groups are led by people who had a much different youth group experience, and want that for the children they work with. It was described to me as a richer, more vibrant experience across the four. They all want to find ways to ensure the children are supported through life by

their faith on the path to adulthood, and the teen-age is very difficult to begin with. How do they connect with the younger age group, when these kids most likely have more peers who are non-churchgoers than are? If the parents are not religious, then the kids don't go. Can children want to go to church even if their parents don't?

Church A's youth leader is still getting to know them spiritually, so all of the activities they do are leading up to their up-and-coming summer camp experience. There is a space next-door where their new youth group room resides, making it easier for them to develop community with each other, in the context of that spiritual setting.

Church B has a youth leader who was in the youth group, in the same very church not too many years ago. When I attended the service of Church B, they happened to be announcing the sendoff of the teens to their mission trip in Kentucky, they were wearing rainbow tie-dye shirts. The announcement was at the beginning of the service, then they immediately left. I then remembered that the pastor noted in her interview that the church will marry a gay couple, but they won't fly a rainbow flag. Whatever the implications of that may be, I found it to be interesting that was the choice made, rainbow being a universal pattern of love, and peace. The vibrant and varying colors are a method of expression, and of the church.

Church C has a youth leader who will send her students self-recorded videos and texts of scripture, as a way to connect. She is focused on planting seeds in the children, in hopes that they would be taken up by the holy spirit.

Both the leaders of Church A and C are a bit older than that of Church B, and as aforementioned, there was a difference in the way they are able to relate to the children, which obviously has to do with age. They were all raised in the “traditional”, church style, but they all work with kids who were not. Maybe the older leaders cannot relate as much to the children, but are more in the place of a leader, head of the group. The leader for Church B is able to be more of a “friend”, because young people associate friends with those who are closest to their age. I think children could benefit from a younger person being their leader, but it's not necessarily “better.” When someone older is with the youth, that offers a mentorship from someone with more wisdom and experience. They are just different strategies of leadership, not one being more effective than they other

I found similarities in their personal faith backgrounds, and the style in which they approached youth ministry. I think that the environment a child grows up in is extremely important to how they come into the world, and they should be confident in their identities.



### Church A Layperson

What are Denison students missing out on? Mentioned was an intergenerational community, including children, saying how students can have relationships with faculty of various ages and so the same can happen in church. “An opportunity to provide service to needy people and to the community in the context of spiritual motivations. To be moved by their faith to do something in community with other people.”

This participant moved to Granville as a child, and has been here 50 out of the last 60 years. “The membership was much larger, included a lot of denison faculty, and I was part of a youth group that had fifteen people my age in it routinely.” He also said that growing up the church had a director of Christian education, and a music director, “even then was known for...making a very biblical interpretation of things that were going on in the world.” He was the choir director of a quaker church in the same place where he went to quaker college, but he received a call to be a choir director in this church which he was raised in, and has been here ever since.

Why is faith and practice important? He understands that they might as well be one word, “you don't have faith if you don't act on it. Practice leads you to a faithful understanding of the world.” He described an “empowered community” to do the “work that is consistent with the call of the gospel.”

He estimated that about 60 to 80 people come to church about twice a month. Does attendance affect the communal aspect of church? He noted that some days when there are 30 to 40 people in the pews, he wonders if anything is going on. However, “the attendance of people who are part of this congregation is consistent enough that it's not particularly remarkable, other than the pews seem a little more empty or more full.”

What keeps members coming back to church? The connection people feel with each other, and an opportunity for parents to raise children “where the things they value are taught as part of faithful life.”

About God's language, at this church the focus is more mainly on Jesus, “a christological interpretation of the world and one's action.” Though he added he avoids God-language, because God is often “anthropomorphized and personified”, and “the use of God in history has been very destructive.”

When the church expresses itself externally, what connections can be formed? He said they sponsor concerts, with performers “whose music is focused on social justice issues and spiritual development”, appealing to people who like the message. Connecting with people who are of the same mind but maybe don't belong to a church or “think of their beliefs as being spiritual beliefs.” There are events for children that the community can be involved in, social events taking place outside, which he said was for the purpose of fun and for allowing and encourage people who aren't associated to “take a taste, see what they think about what's going on.” he described it as a “low key kind of evangelism.”

He said they “work steadily” on relationships with other congregations that share the “spiritual mindset and Christian motivations to work in the world.”

Does the church have a responsibility with matters outside itself. To him, absolutely, the two main responsibilities of the church is to foster community and respond to the needs of the world. “speaking up for marginalized people and supporting physical, social, or emotional needs” that are not met, or are “not valued as part of a community...Jesus certainly wasn't a hermit.”

Is the function of the church social, spiritual, political, or all? To him, it is all. The effort to grow spiritually, “understand our relationship to the word... and to the world...and to each other.” Speaking for the church, “A church that doesn't engage in the world doesn't engage with politics and social issues is not living out the gospel.”

Does the data on Gen Z being less religious have an effect on the ministry? He replied “less than you think”, and commented that in the last 15 years there were times where survival was a concern. Membership was low and so was the spirit of the community. “It's not recruiting people but reaching out to those who might be interested.”

He said that people who have come in the last 2 years or so, have said “I felt so welcome here.”

The structure of the services may be unfamiliar to some, and may be unsure as to what is going on but “enjoy” it. He also said they are “friendlier than some people are comfortable with...we're a little disorganized, but we know what we're talking about and people here are really friendly.”

Has there been any change in financial support in the last ten years? He said “No”, that people are not really giving more or less, but “nowadays we get sizable donations, on behalf of

some particular project”, a generation of people are aging out, and a new generation is establishing itself. Those who are older are leaving money, and “folks with resources in the community and someone offered to pay for it.” That work is valued by people who are part of the community. “That says something”

More about Generation Z and a common disinterest in church, what would be lost if the church were to disappear? He replied, not much of anything would happen. People who have “spiritual needs”, will find a way to get those met, without a church even.

What invites people, is the nature of it, this community in particular. “The community as a tree, the loss of the church would mean the root system was not as robust.”

Character of the community could drift to be “more self centered, or less focused on community growth...and health.” Functionally he said not much would be lost. The question is not why they are gone, but what will happen with all of the church buildings.

### Church B Layperson

What are Denison students missing out on by staying on the hill, instead of coming down? He said that religion has structure, the various religions and denominations within it. Within this structure, is where spirituality “sits inside.” He said that it was a benefit that there is communion-not the eucharist, but with others of course. He said that he loves being around people, and it reminds him of what he believes and feels. The church community offers him an opportunity to hear and experience his faith. He said that sure, he can get it in nature, watching it in the acts of others, or things he reads. He said he is not a liturgical or theological person, but he has basic beliefs, therefore the intellectual part does not appeal to him.

Then I asked him about his background, if he grew up in the church? He grew up as a Lutheran in “the old LCA.” As a family he had one very involved with the church, over-involved he said. About his position in the church, how he is involved. He told me from right to left. Right now he is in session governing the church, he is chair of the finance committee. He commented that he had been on it before, then had a break and “did some other things” He dealt with properties, tech, finance, the behind the scenes, etc. Meanwhile, the pastor could “deal with all of the souls of the members.”

What's most important, to him, is all the things you can do if you want to do them. You are doing them for a community of others, with a community of others, which “seems more motivating”, to him. Also, that he actually knows the “others”, establishing yet again a sense of communion. “If you want to make quilts you can do that if you wanna sing, if you wanna play bells, teach Sunday school for children, vacation bible school.”

“You love the fact that the organization even has bells, and maybe you just want to listen to them...If a wonderful Wednesday is not for you, you love that it exists.” On these Wednesday nights, it is one hour to have a simple meal, families can come, there is music involved, with a short connection to faith. This event is not liturgical, he said sometimes it can be brought up to sanctuary but usually it is not connected to religion. With the presence of young families it becomes a multi-generational event, an important aspect of community.

When I asked about the importance of having faith and practice, he said he was not sure you can have one without the other. “In order to develop my faith, the practice had to be there. Would I still have faith if I didn't practice, probably, but I don't think it would grow any, I don't think, I don't know.”

I then asked about attendance estimations, how many members come to church about twice a week? About 432 members are enrolled. "Sitting in the pews, and this is post-Covid difference, about 140 people. Online, there are another hundred people." Numbers are probably high for his estimation, but attendance is pretty regular because most of them are old. About 50 percent of members are sitting in the pews twice a month, which is variable. He described how things come up, and so every Sunday is not attainable. Now, 75 percent are there twice a month online, 25 percent is a variable.

What kinds of struggles arise with this new and large online presence? With two services going on at the same time, there are two different congregations. He said again "never the twain shall meet kind of thing."

They study the data of attendance and time spent on the online meetings. Members usually join late according to the date, due to mistakes of joining these meetings. They measure the number of people who are there for at least 10 minutes. What they have found is that there is an adaptability needed for these online members. People come in and see the sermon, but then thereafter is a "cliff dropoff." Acting accordingly, they now don't give announcements after sermons otherwise people might miss those important details.

He referred me to a book entitled, *Not your parents offering plate*. "It talks about what it's like today to give and what impacts that kinda giving." What the book said about churches is that the givers show up in the pews, where in any other non for profit, that can't be, unless at the local theater, "but you can't pass the plate."

"Why don't you like the line "God bless you"? He told me a story for this one, where he went into a particular establishment where he held the door for someone holding a big stack of things. "The person said 'God bless you', and I thought, for opening the door? I don't know what struck me about that... but that's all it takes? To open the door and Gods blessing me?" He said there was just something about "throwing out statements like that, which feel hollow, or intrusive in respects. Why not Allah bless you, Mohammed bless you." What is it about these statements that feel hollow and rote, when it is something perhaps generally seen as polite and necessary?

The following question was about what keeps members coming back to church, to which he again said, 'connection,' Adding, "Wednesdays are not for everyone and some people just want that rote tradition, this is how it happens."

This church is more about the tri-union of the father, son, and holy spirit. “Thinking about how the trio impacts us, then from there this is not a fire and brimstone, hell and damnation, kind of congregation.” He said it's not about “If you don't, what gonna happen”, but more about “why wouldn't we treat each other in a way of openness and respect.”

The pastor's idea is about how we behave and interact with each other. “How do we give voice to our own pain, discomfort or happiness?” He talked about hope and finding it through faith.

In the past decades, twenty-five percent of giving went to mission work. He noted how they struggled with budgets while writing checks, because they “used to write checks to whoever.” Mission work is an act of membership he noted. There is not a high percentage of hands-on mission yet but, “We're investing in a full time position doing that. As finance chair and having been president of a business, my motive is the attraction to that (mission work). For people looking for a church family, who are really moved by the community and what we do in the world.”

“We're not very good evangelists”, and I asked in what sense. He said in the sense of door-knocking, God bless you, of gathering outside of the church socially that becomes very spiritual or religious. “Debate yes, we are a group of debaters, questioning things, but working from the same general belief while we do that.”

How has the data on religion being seen as less prominent in society affected the ministry? He said that it has, “Will we be here as a presbyterian church 50 years from now? It certainly has caused people to see it's not a one size fits all offer.”

I wanted to know more about what he thinks is important for people to hear about in this conversation of religion vs. spirituality. “If I was in a room of people who said they were spiritual but not religious, my question would be okay, is it not important to understand the basis of your spirituality?”

“We continue to be a pretty welcoming church.” However, “we would struggle when the demographic (of that new person) does not match ours.”

### **Intergenerationally?**

“I think if we had an outwardly transgender person come into church, we'd struggle.”

### **How come?**

“I think we're a congregation that can get very uncomfortable because it's so different.”

### **So this is a “new” person?**

“People don't really know how to interact. We're in a bubble world here in Granville, you know that. We haven't lived in places where you experience lots of different things.”

“Openly means to me... someone who came into church wearing a dress, with a beard, they hadn't made the transition outwardly or behaviorally which was a bit challenging and scary to some degree to those of us inexperienced...I wasn't warm and welcoming. I didn't take the step to introduce myself, so it impacts me. I think generally we would struggle, generally in Granville. Does that make any sense at all?”

“I never had a religious issue to it, but an ingrained experience within me...If people want to lead their lives in that way or how they feel, why not? I guess I became far more open to that.”

I then asked about a significant change in financial support. He said that he is doing a study now on the impact of pledge giving. Fewer people pledge donations, specifically the younger generations which show an interest to give, but decreasing will to pledge. Most of the members are of age 70 and up, which keeps growing every year as a portion of the congregation. “We see a decline, so we need more members or we won't be able to afford the things we can today”.

What would be lost if the churches in Granville were to disappear?

If there was a “cascade of failures” of these churches, there would be a “Psychological change in community” Meaning, the church is a necessary core part of this town's identity, it is important to the notion they have of “small town U.S.A.” He said he was going to get absurd for effect, asking if a strip club opened up in Granville, it would “change the vibe” in terms of the people that it would attract. That it changes the image of “small town U.S.A.”

### Church C Layperson

Firstly I asked about what Denison students might be missing out on by staying up on the hill. She responded with the idea of a “unique sense of community”, one that is always there regardless of background, ethnicity, and origin. The opportunity for people to be “accepted as they are, into a very diverse community,” She also mentioned that the environment of support and love is available when you are going through tough times, because everyone does.

I asked about how her position today might have been shaped by a religious upbringing. She had what she described as a rich religious upbringing within a “very strict Catholic family”, however they were “open to all religions.” She talked about going to services with friends of different religions. Her parents encouraged the valuable inputs of others, because a spiritual life was important. She believes in that vibrant openness, the building doesn't matter, and “they are all trying to do the same thing.”

When I asked about the highlights of the church, she described a oneness and unity that is built within the church family. When her family was grieving a loved one passing, “the church came together and loved us.” She said there is an understanding within religious settings of a commitment to outreach, the church's responsibility to give back. In effect is “great satisfaction to us as human beings”, also speaking about the positive effects spirituality has on mental health.

About her position, it is to look out for the welfare of the church, its members, the pastor and staff. During council meetings which happen eight months out of the year, they address all of the reports within the different sections of business, labeled “church strategy.” They discuss, “are we on track, are we doing good important work, are we following the example of Jesus Christ.”

What they are aiming towards is a “loving community, the shared passion for following Christ”, and doing international outreach to “the less fortunate.” Twenty years ago, she and her husband listened to a presentation about a mission trip in Honduras, which would be their first. This was a Christian Orphanage which takes care of kids with HIV. “I thought we need to do this”, and she said it was something they never thought they'd be conscious or aware of without the church connection.

I asked about these shared ideas of the congregation, and she told me the mission is to help attract people to spiritual development, and impact the community and the world. “By helping folks physically and economically which by example, develops spirituality.”



What is the importance of faith and practice? To her, people can have faith and practice in different ways, you don't have to be totally involved in order to be a "Good Christian." She said spirituality is like working out, the more you do it the better you get, the deeper it grows. "Our church through formal bible studies, educational spiritual activities, is engendering good in the world and spiritual growth in the world."

What percentage of the congregation attend church twice a month? Of 384 members, about 40-50% do. She added that being a member takes effort, her official membership was established after a while even though she was involved, "the catholic upbringing was tough to get past."

What keeps members coming back? Connection, belief and need for fulfillment of spirituality was her response. When people know they are "welcomed, not judged." People can form connections that are personal in addition to the community, in context of spirituality. The programs they offer and outreach is how people can resonate with them. "The more you come the more you feel connected, and grow individually." She described the priest acknowledging that "we're human, none of us is perfect, because we're not God."

The services provided through outreach and programming are not limited to members, there is responsibility to help the important roles of the community such as teachers, who support their own kids. "Beyond church, beyond religion, to do good work while we're on this earth." She told me that the town and churches working in togetherness, and ecumenical things they do and work as a church are her favorite. On the fourth of July one thing they do is give lunch to carnival workers, "we are trying to spread the word in a comfortable way", as a way of outreach and gratitude. "I love that about this town, it feels very accepting and a shared responsibility to work for the community."

Is the function of the church spiritual, social, political, or can it be all? She said we are spiritual, and social, not political, though they "have empathy for those in political situations", such as Ukraine. "We will constantly pray for the people in countries under attack." The pastor doesn't tell people how to vote, and to her politicians should be evaluated based on their works, "the same way we evaluate ourselves on the work we're doing." Identifying people as a political party is not a good fit in a church, she noted, the "overall mission is supporting mankind."

She described a "worry" that she has about young people having to make a choice between committing to church and other activities. Speaking about her granddaughter having to

choose church or being #1 pitcher on her softball team. Sundays used to be for “church and rest, now they are fair game for all schedules.” She recognizes sports, music, etc. are healthy for the youth, but they are “hurt”, because with those decisions their church upbringing is hindered.

In the last ten years has there been any change in financial support?

“Reality is we have to pay the pastor.” She has experienced some uncomfortability talking about finances with others, noting she is comfortable, having been a business person for 35 years. “It’s not just about spirituality, our finances enable spiritual growth and mission work.” She said as of now they are “financially healthy”, they are growing and adapting in numbers.

She told me sometimes the council has “difficult decisions” to make, ie. allowance of LGBTQ pastors and marriage ceremonies. This church as a denomination has voted yes on doing that next year, a decision “that I’m very happy with.” Adaptability being essential, and necessary, “there are times when a church does have to take a stand that might not be accepted by all members and that is difficult.”

What would be lost if the church in Granville disappeared? “There is longevity in this community”, when life’s various networks of connection cannot be anymore (elderly, kids in college), the church family can.

“For some folks God puts a spark in them’. Her role is to ensure the church is meeting its vision, the building and facility is a way to help create that spark. She said that “people cannot live without hope and love...and then there's water and food.”

Different kinds of satiation.

### Church D Layperson, 1

What are Denison students missing out on? This participant describes a “combination of experiences”, involving an intergenerational communal setting, an opportunity to step aside from the college setting, and “be with themselves in a spiritual place.” She says a spiritual place is anywhere including on the hill, “but it's an intentional place and time set aside for that moment.”

What is prominent about the church? “We are a very inquiring church”, speaking for the church, she said there is no forcing belief in a doctrine, “we have a very wide open set of beliefs, we're welcoming to the queer community...and have an intellectual capacity.” She described how many members are professors, priests (woman or man), or formerly so.

“It's a place to explore, not only a place to be present and have an intentional moment in your week”, and have a group of people to discuss inquiries with, and who want to listen.

She grew up in a small church community, and moved here raising her kids in this church, having a Sunday school experience like she did. “I had a faith then, but I always had a question about it...personally my faith is more nature inspired than liturgically”, She is a ‘spiritual seeker’, fascinated by different ways of spirituality, “I don't believe there's just one right way.” Her theological perspective is a “God of nature, our creator... We have the nicene creed... I'm always changing the pronouns...there is no gender assigned to God.”

At this church she is the chair of the board, a position called the “senior warden” on the vestry. Dealing with administrative duties, she is a “fiscal agent”, and a “cheerleader at large.”

How are faith and practice important nowadays? “Faith comes through practice”, meaning again an intentional effort to set time aside, and “be in that place.” The ability to look beyond, see we are part of something bigger than us especially when we get caught in day-to-day business.

Before Covid, the congregation was perhaps two or three times bigger than now. Every week there are about 35 people regularly. Switching out with each other, about 50% attend bi-monthly. A larger church has more possibilities “now we're a family size church, describing that the community and faith is still intact”, but we can't sustain things...we don't have a children's program right now, and we did before.” Also there is now one service when there was once three.

There is a need for people to perceive themselves in this space, young families can't come because there is no Sunday school program at the moment. She said churches that are more

conservative tend to retain congregations better, there is a “black and white, yes or no” mindset, which better “aligns with churchgoing values.” Rather than flexibility, not so much that notion.

A question she recently discussed with the pastor, “what do we have to offer?” Again, a caring community that has people of different backgrounds and experience. Conversing “allows you to feel love and affection with people who don’t agree with you...personalize and humanize some political issues that divide our country.” She detailed that it is not only volunteering, but voting for the best policies which align with “the work”, like helping fellow human beings. The agreement on what is best is not always there, but the community is. “We exist together, grow and love together.” She mentioned again this is intentional, a way to build and strengthen community. Post Covid society struggled with and lacked “natural spaces” to volunteer and work together in a communal, loving setting.

What kind of language and vocabulary is used for God? Described to me the more “traditional”, Jesus, Christ the lord, the lord, our creator, our father, etc. “I refer to God as our mother.” She said people can have their own ways of identifying with God. “There have been women I know that have been abused... they never want to talk about God the Father, because they’ve been abused by their dads.” Each week the language changes, offering new perspectives about the conceptualizations of God.

“We go out into the world a lot.” This church established a k-12 private school, starting in the basement, licking county recycling programs, the granville turkey trot, granville garage sale, and a food pantry in Newark for 10 years. “Anybody can volunteer there... we try to move beyond so anyone in the community can volunteer.”

She described partnering with the other churches for services, but not so much the work. “We invite each other into things.” The events tend to be seen belonging to that particular church, but all are able to volunteer.

Is the function of the church social, spiritual or political, or all? She says all, commenting about the town pride celebration. She doesn’t consider it as a political event though some do. “I think Jesus was definitely a radical reformer, in that sense the church is a political animal.” Meaning, the responsibility to follow out this work, “the ethos with which you approach the belief system.”

The data on young people not being as connected points to real circumstances, “theres not alot of encouraging growth patterns in the church.”The former pastor of 15 years had a

church thriving in numbers. “I don't know if we'll ever have a full time priest any longer... and I think that's okay.” The responsibility to do work within the community, values of expressing love will still be there. Fewer numbers mean “less of an energy”, but “you do with what you have.”

During Covid the conservative membership dropped, with Trump's presidency, the membership was politically divided, “then Covid came and exasperated it.” There is a recognition of things just not being the same, a mindset of moving forward. “We've lost some of the diversity of opinion and thought”, which she says is critical to learning from others. “There are people who just don't feel welcome.” Also people falling out of the Sunday morning routine, especially with the online services. Looking to the future, “what do we have that is really valuable, how do we present that to the community?...I think we have it, but we're not doing a very good job of saying it.”

Her job is holding things together, saying “there is no loss of hope or of important things we can be doing together. The love is there, we have to remember that we are all still connected.” They are working on ways to formally reach out to people who visit the church, and “more proactive ways of advertising.” To be “loud and proud about what we're doing...that marketing edge”, which is not a regular aspect of the church. “We're still doing a lot. We can exist without more people, but boy would we have so much more fun if we were together.” Prior to the 2016 election, she said the budget with the former full time priest used to be 450k per year, but has now been halved to about 250k.

What would be lost without the church? The aspect of spiritual transcendence, which is improved within community and conversation. “A way of enriching that whole opportunity, I think we learn from each other so much.”

## Church D Layperson, 2

What are Denison Students missing out on?

“Sometimes students get a little anxious, not scared but just anxiety...I think the churches will provide some kind of contact, some kind of base of familiarity.” She made a comparison to the international students who are “hooked up” with families in town, so if they have any issues or problems they are there. The church can be a sense of comfort for students.

In her experience of 21 years, “we don't poach. Meaning, if you come here and it's just not a right fit for you...if you're more liberal or conservative or whatever, try that church.” She said the churches in Granville don't “ram that religion down your throats. We're all very open and welcoming and want people to feel comfortable and safe, and then spiritual.” Growing up her mother took her and her siblings to all different churches, told them about buddhism, went to bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs for their Jewish friends. “She really kind of opened our minds up.” They were encouraged to find their personal spiritual direction.

When she was forty-one, she was diagnosed with cancer, there was a “spiritual guidance” she felt she was in need of. “I heard from a lot of my friends, people that always get sick they always turn to religion-and I said well, there's a reason for it, you know...you find comfort in it.”

After she moved here she decided to attend this church, wanting her daughter to be raised the way she knew, “here it is, this is a good structure, these are good people, we have good causes, we're huge advocates of, inclusion, civil rights, social justice...it's a very open church...that's one thing I liked about it.” Out of her siblings she was the only one who stayed in the church because she “liked it.”

What is prominent about this church? She responded, “We're very inclusive, especially with the LBGTQ community, we are very very open to that...(this denomination) would bless-same sex couples before they were allowed to get married. We are huge advocates of social justice.” She said that this denomination could be described as; “light catholic. We like all that pomp and circumstance...but we have a different thinking pattern, we're more liberal on that.”

I asked what it was like to be in her position, basically running the church. “I wear about twenty different hats, so I'm a landlord now. I create all the bulletins. I'm the priest's confidant, they're people too, they need to talk and a lot of the time if they are comfortable with the administrator, you usually have a really good bond.”

She takes care of some of the finances, “I know what people pledge. So there’s a confidentiality that I have to stick to. Sometimes that’s a little hard going to church where I want to get my spiritual connection...” and people tell her, “hey did you know that there’s a light out, or hey do you know how much my pledge is...no I’m here to worship.”

“I don’t want to say it’s a demanding job, but there’s a lot of parts and pieces that most people wouldn’t understand. But because I’ve been in the church I know the liturgy, I know what happens, I know the flow of things, it’s a lot easier for me.”

What is the importance of having faith and practice?

“Probably, being happy. Being comfortable with yourself. To me it’s a very comforting feeling knowing my faith, believing in my faith, and trying to be a good person. If you look at scripture, and you really start thinking about it, it’s basically pretty easy...for me it’s comforting, it makes me feel good inside. Then to me the other big part was, okay you feel really good, and you’re in a good space, look at that guy down the street, he’s homeless. What can we do to make his life better?”

An estimation of people who attend church about twice a month. She said every week it is between 30 and 40. And of that congregation she said 10. Since Covid, relying on video, we broadcasted, people got very comfortable, and so people stopped coming, the attendance dropped severely...when you stop coming, you start to detach yourself.” Pre Covid, she said there were 350 members, “that’s husband, wife, and three kids above the age of eighteen.” Now it’s probably 60. That’s a huge drop off (sitting in the pews).” There were formerly three Sunday services, an 8 a.m. service “called Rite 1, very proper.” The next 9:30 service was “For children. Very simple base, not all the readings, not everything, it was geared toward children”. Then at 11 a.m. she called the “Full Monte. Not high church, but we had the choir. So within those three services, every week, that would be close to 100+ (people), and now we have one service...with 30 or 40 people. And we have no kids.”

Any financial changes? “We have to adapt if we want to survive. And there’s a group of us that says what do we have to do. We unfortunately lost our priest, and that was a big hit. When you lose your priest, you lose your followers, (who) become attached or accustomed.” They had to have service done “blindly, without a priest...it was a shitshow.” There were upset and angry feelings from a lot of the people, “but if we want to survive, (they asked themselves) what do we gotta cut, what do we gotta do, and we regrouped.” They worked with the diocese in order to

sustain their community; “We applied for every single grant that we could get our hands on. So we could get some money coming in for food insecurity or to get better air conditioning.” A struggle was communicating this to the parishioners.

“Any congregation knows they are aging out. Most of our people are over 60. Probably 60% are over the age of 70. And you got no kids, no young families coming in, that's scary. We are happy to see a lot of denison kids...I've seen more kids from denison in the last year, than I have in many years, which is nice.”

Has the ministry of the congregation been affected by the data on Gen-Z?

“There's a lot of LBGTQ in the community who were raised in a faith based, or want to have that spiritual connection, but they've been either pushed out, and there's no place for them to worship...it's changed and it's not gonna go back. We're not going back to three services. We can't do a Rite one service. I hate to say it, but it is what it is.

What would be lost if all the churches in Granville were to disappear?

“I think the churches provide a lot of civility, and governance, but security, comfort. I think you'd have a lot more people on Xanax and Zoloft...It would be a cold day. It would be sad to see that people are steering away from something that can be so giving, and so fulfilling, and so wonderful. The churches here, you worship the way you want to worship. You are getting your spirituality, you're getting your taste, and we all are ecumenical. We all have this good community, and if that was gone, it would be huge...chaotic. But who knows, maybe it's all under one church, that could happen.”



## **Laypeople Analysis**

As non-ordained members of the church congregations, I was curious about the role of a Layperson. I found that it is a role just as important as any, and it can sometimes be ministry focused. Nowadays the Laypeople are having to balance multiple responsibilities by themselves, that in the past were divided into a faculty. Due to the effects of the Covid pandemic, church environments are drastically different, and more so in the financial security of the churches. Membership in the churches was larger prior to Covid, therefore attendance and finances were not a primary issue. The option of livestream worship services steal the majority of those who were formerly present.

The Church B Layperson said that the givers are in the pews, so how can they receive donations when people don't always show up in person? With the existence of online services, you don't have to donate, but the reality is that the church functions off of donations in order to maintain a non-profit status. In a world where profit is necessary and praised, how does the church fit in? They need to act as a profit based business, though that is not supposed to be church's nature. Money doesn't seem like something that is essential to the continuity and longevity of a church, but the pastor needs to be paid, the lights to stay on, and the water to run. The church is a spiritual setting, a place where some go to pray for things to be better. But now, the church itself must explain to its members that it is also struggling too.

In the interviews I discussed the need to pursue marketing due to the dwindling numbers, with all of the lay people. An unusual aspect of churches, they have never had to focus on that before. Attendance has dropped, and now the church has to figure out how to reach people into the community who may be interested, because they might fit in at one of the four. They care about their church communities and want to be with people who feel the same. Social conflict about the church having unaccepting and unwelcoming actions toward minority and marginalized groups—means people and especially Generation Z feel they don't belong.

I feel that the Laypeople are actually the ones who need to listen to and become in touch with younger people just as the Youth Directors do. They as administrators have a key role in strategizing the systems and programs of the church. Survival is not particularly guaranteed this day in age, the new focal point is how they can get people to show up to in-person services when what I call “pajama worship”, is more popular than ever. They must focus on what they have to offer, why people should want to regard church as a way for them to grow themselves and flourish together with their communities.

## **Conclusion**

The collective “gaze” of Generation Z is a modern-day Renaissance. Are younger people against religion, or are they formulating a different religion that aligns with their perspective on the world? It’s the latter. The new wave of Christianity is on the horizon. Covid was the catalyst for the change we see happening, it exposed the rotten aspects of society that will no longer survive. Societal justice and love will always prevail over systemic hate and degradation. In Post-Covid society, particularly churches-saw changes in community experiences, dwindling numbers, and lack of unity. More importantly than the aspects of destruction, lies an opportunity to rethink and rework the societal fabric. Simply put, out with the old and in with the new. Change is good and necessary, not scary.

Religion will always be something that unites people. Yet, most do not see the potential of unity, due to the overwhelming presence of intolerances, hate crimes, and discriminatory laws. The most recent wave of Christian “MAGA” Evangelicalism became known for which kind of humans are excluded—destined for eternal damnation, rather than the love-thy-neighbor attitude advertised. It is certainly obvious who will be welcomed into a homogenous community.

The survival of the church is debatable, and it is up to Gen Z to decide. Ultimately, they are concerned with love, inclusion, diversity, and compassion. To dismantle hateful factors which only divide us, Gen Z is choosing peace and unity over fear of God.

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