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# Perspectives from the Pew: A Phenomenological Exploration of Congregants' Experiences of Change in Their Churches

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# A Phenomenological Exploration of Congregants' Experiences of Change in Their Churches

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## Dissertation Committee

- Jon F. Wergin, PhD, Committee Chair
- Donna Ladkin, PhD, Committee Member
- Matthew Lyons, PhD, Committee Member

## Acknowledgements

I recall being told at the outset of my PhD studies that the experience could be incredibly isolating. Hours spent alone in books or in front of a screen. Time with family and friends sacrificed. Activities and interests gradually winnowed. Knowledge of the minutiae of topics deepened in ways others could not relate to or had no interest in. In many ways, the PhD experience was indeed an isolating one. Yet even when I was most sequestered, whether physically, emotionally, or intellectually, I was surrounded by the love, prayers, encouragement, and good wishes of so many. And this, more than anything else, made the isolation bearable and life enjoyable in the midst of it. So I thank and give thanks for those who overwhelmed me with their support and made my PhD studies possible: Nate, my husband and my biggest fan, who kept the cupboard stocked with Cheetos, created the best-ever defense presentation slides, and always knew when I needed to laugh; my parents (Allen and Becky), my parents-in-law (David and Gail), and the rest of my family by birth and by marriage, who graciously made do with fewer visits over the past five years; Catherine, who shared the wisdom of her experience and the gift of her presence, frequently over ice cream; Melody, who made certain I still read novels and was always available to walk and talk (or stomp and talk, depending on how things were going); Toby, who ensured I went out for hikes in all seasons and brought me a supply of tea when I needed it most; Helen, who kept me on task and on schedule with our with Sunday night phone calls (and a little friendly competition); Cheryl, Dick, Roxane, Priscilla, Aaron, Rita, Kim, and David, who were and are the core of my and Nate's community of faith; the members of Cohort 15, with whom I am honored to have been in a learning community; the PhDLC faculty and staff, who are intimidating in their expertise and yet remarkably approachable; and the many

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# Abstract

Christian churches in the United States are notoriously resistant to change, whether in regard to leadership, worship style, church governance, positions on social issues, or myriad other aspects of congregational life. Yet the ability to navigate change successfully is vitally important to churches' continued survival and renewed relevance. A particular body of literature, consisting of both scholarly and practitioner-oriented works, has attempted to address the necessity and the challenges of change in a church context. However, the literature is largely silent when it comes to the perspectives of those who are most impacted by congregational change: namely, the congregants themselves. Therefore, this study sought to address both a problem in practice and a gap in the literature by exploring congregants' experiences of change in their churches. The study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology dedicated to exploring, in detail, significant lived experiences. Data were collected using semistructured, in-person, one-on-one interviews with eleven participants who had recently experienced change in their churches. These congregants represented six Protestant denominations, three geographic regions of the United States, and churches that had faced a wide variety of changes. Data were analyzed, first individually and then collectively, to identify the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. The five major themes characterizing the majority of the participants' experiences were the centrality of faith, the presence of conflict or discord, a predominance of negative emotions, an aspect of learning, and a sense of resolution. These findings were then interpreted through the lenses of Christian theology and adult development theory—specifically, the constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan and the faith development theory of James Fowler. By providing a much needed "perspective from the pew," this study contributes to a fuller understanding of congregational change and provides insights that can inform both

congregational change endeavors and church leadership practices, as well as future research. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and OhioLINK ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/.

*Keywords*: congregational change, churches, church leadership, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), adult development theory, experience

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# Chapter I - Introduction

According to the official narrative, Tenth Street Church of Christ[1] established an independent offshoot, Twelfth Street Church of Christ, as a way to more effectively minister to the neighborhoods in the vicinity of each location. The unofficial narrative, however, was far different and was much better known. A group of people from Tenth Street were so vehemently opposed to plans for redecorating the sanctuary that they chose to leave and start a church of their own a few blocks away, rather than be confronted with red carpet every week.

…

Grace Baptist Church took pride in being the only church on the east side of town that did not flee to the suburbs when the formerly white, middle-class neighborhood around it started to change. Yet when the makeup of the congregation began to more closely reflect the demographics of the neighborhood, the church's changing identity became a chief topic of conversation in business meetings and in the parking lot after church functions. One faction of the congregation insisted the new attendees conform to the church's established ways of doing things, another faction advocated for the church to adapt in response to the changing times and demographics, and still another faction questioned why the topic had to be discussed at all when the real problem was the type of music the new worship minister played.

…

First Presbyterian Church was a racially, ethnically, theologically, socioeconomically, and politically diverse congregation. Perhaps in an effort to maintain harmony, the church had a longstanding, unspoken rule that its diversity was to be celebrated, but difference was not to be

[1] Although these examples are drawn from actual events, all church names are pseudonyms.

directly engaged. However, circumstances arose within and beyond the congregation that challenged the unspoken nonengagement rule, and the church was forced to begin conversations around topics such as sexuality, the interpretation of scripture, the role of the pastor, and how to truly be a multicultural, diverse congregation. This disruption to the status quo was applauded by some and lamented by others, and it resulted in significant rifts within the congregation.

…

The congregation seemed to take little notice when the new pastor of Memorial United Methodist Church gradually implemented changes to the church's Sunday worship service. Not so with the changes to the Christmas Eve service. When the new pastor elected to give an original homily instead of reading the outdated manuscript used by every pastor since the 1950s and to engage volunteer musicians in place of the professionals first hired many years ago when the church was flourishing numerically and financially, the response was swift and strong. On the one hand, a number of people applauded the revised Christmas Eve service, saying how refreshing and meaningful it was, in addition to how well it fit the with congregation's present makeup and circumstance. On the other hand, the woman who retorted, "I don't know what that was, but it was *not* our church's Christmas Eve service," was probably not alone in her displeasure.

…

I have decades of firsthand experience with the challenges of congregational change such as those illustrated in these four vignettes. As a lifelong churchgoer and an ordained minister,[2]

[2] I am ordained in the American Baptist Churches USA, which describes itself as "one of the most diverse Christian denominations today, with approximately 5,000 local congregations comprised of 1.3 million members across the United States and Puerto Rico." American Baptist Churches USA, "Who We Are," accessed January 24, 2019, http://www.abc-usa.org/.

I have witnessed the powerful struggle between "the new and different" and "the way we've always done it." I have seen how even the idea of change can divide a congregation. And I have often found myself dissatisfied with the way congregations and their leaders, myself included, engage change. But why do churches have such difficulty with change? And how can congregations navigate change more successfully? These are questions in which I have more than a passing interest—not simply because my vocation is inextricably tied to churches, but because I am convinced that congregational health and vitality is dependent, at least in part, on the ability to navigate change. And I am further convinced that healthy, vital congregations have the potential, and the responsibility, to be agents of transformation in individual lives and in the wider world. These are the convictions and the "problem in practice" that prompted my doctoral studies and this dissertation research.

In an effort to better understand the difficulties surrounding congregational change and to gain insights into how change might be navigated more successfully, this research study explored change in Christian churches from the perspective of those who are affected by it most directly: the congregants. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the study and situates it in its broader contexts. The background of the study is presented and relevant literature is previewed. The study's methodology, delimitations, limitations, and significance are then described. Finally, key terms are defined and subsequent chapters are outlined.

## Background

Christian churches in the United States are notoriously resistant to change, whether in regard to leadership, worship style, church governance, positions on social issues, or myriad other aspects of congregational life. Nearly every congregation has experienced the tug-of-war

between "the new and different" and "the way we've always done it" as they have attempted, often unsuccessfully, to depart from established custom or the status quo. Yet the ability to navigate change successfully is vitally important to churches' continued survival and renewed relevance.

Since at least 2000, church attendance in the United States has declined across all denominations.[3] External factors, such as the cultural shifts associated with the collapse of Christendom,[4] a decrease in the percentage of the U.S. population who identify as Christian, and a dramatic increase in those who claim no religious affiliation,[5] have likely had a negative impact on churches. However, evidence suggests that churches may also be playing a role in their own demise. A large-scale survey of religious congregations in the United States found what many churchgoers and observers already suspected: most churches are impervious to change, and few congregations are willing to adapt to meet new challenges.[6] The same survey also found that numeric growth and increased vitality are tied to innovation[7] – that is, a willingness to depart from established custom and the status quo. It would seem, then, that if churches are to survive in the current American religious context, and certainly if they are to thrive, they must become more conversant with change.

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[3] David A. Roozen, "American Congregations 2010: A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000 – 2010," A *Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research): 2, 14. https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Decade-of-Change-in-American-Congregations.pdf.

[4] See, for example: Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 200–210.

[5] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," A Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study Report (May 12, 2015): 3-4. https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[6] David A. Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," A *Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2016): 9–12. http://hirr.hartsem.edu/American-Congregations-2015.pdf.

[7] Ibid., 14.

## The Literature

A particular body of literature, consisting of both scholarly and practitioner-oriented works, has attempted to address the necessity and the challenges of congregational change.[8] Resource books for pastors, church leaders, and other practitioners make up the largest portion of this literature. Written with the church in mind, these works provide guidelines for leading congregational change initiatives[9] or directly address issues pertinent to a congregational setting, such as preaching during times of transition[10] or the role of discernment and prayer in church planning endeavors.[11] The scholarly works on congregational change, which are far fewer in number than the practitioner-oriented resources, frequently provide explanations for congregational change[12] or describe the types of changes congregations are facing.[13] Although this body of literature provides valuable insights, it nevertheless has its limitations. Practitioner-oriented resources are often based only on anecdotal evidence, and empirical research on congregational change is limited, even among scholarly works. The literature tends to view change exclusively as a process while neglecting that change is also an experience. And across the congregational change literature, very little attention is given to the congregation. These are the gaps in the literature this study sought to address.

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[8] This literature will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter II.
[9] For example: David C. Laubach, *12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2006).
[10] For example: Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).
[11] For example: Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2003).
[12] For example: Kevin N. Flatt, D. Millard Haskell, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Secularization and Attribution: How Mainline Protestant Clergy and Congregants Explain Church Growth and Decline," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 79 (2018): 78–107.
[13] For example: Kevin D. Dougherty and Michael O. Emerson, "The Changing Complexion of American Congregations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 1 (2018), 24–38.

## The Study

The study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology "dedicated to the detailed explorations of personal meaning and lived experience,"[14] to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. While any number of qualitative methodologies could have been employed in this study, IPA was chosen specifically for its fit with the research topic. Three facets of this fit warrant mention here. First, phenomenological methodologies are useful for exploring a topic from a new perspective,[15] and IPA in particular is useful where novelty and complexity are involved.[16] By focusing on congregants' experiences, this study provided a new perspective on the complex issue of congregational change. Second, "the aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds."[17] This aligned well with the aim of this research study, which was to explore, in detail, how congregants make sense of change in their churches. Finally, IPA combines "an empathetic hermeneutics with a questioning hermeneutics."[18] This hermeneutical approach allowed me to seek both to understand participants' experiences and to ask critical questions of the data that might reveal a deeper level of insight than what the participants themselves could provide.

Data collection for the study began following approval of an application to Antioch University's Institutional Review Board. Drawing on my professional and personal contacts, I identified, through purposeful sampling, eleven study participants who represented six Protestant

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[14] Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods,* 3rd ed., ed. Jonathan A. Smith (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2015), 25. Note: IPA and the study's design will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III.
[15] Marlene Zichi Cohen, Richard H. Steeves, and David L. Kahn, *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research: A Practical Guide for Nurse Researchers* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2000), 3.
[16] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 28.
[17] Ibid., 25.
[18] Ibid., 26.

denominations, three geographic regions of the United States, and churches that had faced a wide variety of changes. Participant selection criteria included: adult congregants who were regular attendees of midsize Protestant[19] churches in which change recently took place, and the willingness to talk openly and honestly about their experiences. Data were collected using semistructured, in-person, one-on-one interviews that focused on the participant's experience of congregational change and how the participant made sense of that experience. Toward that end, participants were invited to describe their church and the change that recently took place, their reactions to and attitude toward the change, what the change was like for them, and how, if at all, their faith came into play during the change. Although a list of questions were drawn up to facilitate the interviews, the direction of each interview was largely determined by the participant's responses.[20] In keeping with IPA guidelines, data analysis was fluid and iterative as it moved between representing the participants' experience and interpreting the participants' experience,[21] and between focusing on the data as a whole and on discrete portions of an interview.[22] Data were analyzed, first individually and then collectively, to identify the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. The five major themes characterizing the majority of the participants' experiences were the centrality of faith, the presence of conflict or discord, a predominance of negative emotions, an aspect of learning, and a sense of resolution. The study's findings were then interpreted through the lenses of Christian theology and adult

[19] The majority of participants were affiliated with mainline Protestant churches, specifically.
[20] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 35.
[21] Virginia Eatough and Jonathan A. Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, ed. Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2011), 17.
[22] Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2009), 104–106.

development theory in order to make sense of the findings themselves and their implications for both practice and future research.[23]

The boundaries, or delimitations, of the study were intentionally wide. Participants were not drawn from only one congregation, one denomination, or one geographic region. Nor was the type of change under investigation pre-determined. Rather, change was broadly defined as "any departure from established custom or the status quo." This was intentional, as churches in the United States are facing many different types of changes, and it allowed participants to define change more specifically as it related to their own contexts. The limitations of the study were related primarily to characteristics of the chosen methodology. A qualitative study is not generalizable to a larger population. An IPA study is not explanatory, but is instead exploratory. The study was also limited by my own assumptions. Chief among these is my belief that churches must be conversant with change if they are to survive, and certainly if they are to thrive. I further believe that congregants' perspectives, which have been overlooked in the literature, can provide valuable insights into both the challenges of congregational change and ways to overcome those challenges.

This emphasis on congregants' experiences is one aspect of the study's significance. As previously noted, very little attention is given in the literature to congregants' perspectives on change. This is especially true in practitioner-oriented resources, in which the congregation is often portrayed simply as the passive recipient of the pastor's leadership and as the object of change. By focusing on congregants, this study addressed a gap in the literature and provided a much needed "perspective from the pew" that contributes to a fuller understanding of congregational change. Practical implications are another aspect of the study's significance.

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[23] The themes and subthemes that emerged from the participants' experiences and the interpretation of the study's findings will be presented in Chapters IV and V, respectively.

Insights from the study have the potential to inform congregational change endeavors, the practice of ministry, and Christian education/spiritual formation efforts, as well as future research studies.

## Key Terms

This work contains several key terms that warrant definition. For the purpose of this dissertation:

- ***Change*** refers to any departure from established custom or the status quo. This definition is intentionally broad and, as noted in the study's delimitations, the type of change experienced by the study's participants was not pre-determined.
- ***Church*** and ***congregation*** are used interchangeably to refer to a community of people organized in the Christian faith tradition for the purposes of worship, fellowship, and outreach. Although the term "church" can also be used to refer to an institution or a building, the emphasis in this context is on the people, the community, and the social system.
- ***Church leader*** refers to anyone who holds a leadership position or undertakes a leadership role in a congregation, whether congregant or clergy.
- ***Clergy***, ***pastor***, and ***minister*** are all used to refer to ordained professionals who are entrusted with the spiritual care and overall leadership of a church.
- ***Congregant*** refers to someone who is part of a church or congregation, and who is not clergy and/or staff.
- ***Mainline Protestant*** refers collectively to Christian denominations that tend to have similar core beliefs, be theologically moderate to liberal, and be socially engaged.

Mainline Protestant can also refer to churches that are affiliated with these denominations.

- ***Midsize church*** refers to congregations with an average Sunday attendance of 50–150.
- ***Regular attendee*** refers to someone who attends a church's worship service a minimum of two times per month and has no affiliation with another congregation.
- ***Theology*** is classically defined as "faith seeking understanding" and refers to both a process and an outcome.[24] As a process, theology is "personally involved reflection on a religious faith."[25] It is a disciplined process of inquiry, examination, critique, and contemplation in which an individual or community seeks to better understand both faith itself and life in light of that faith. As an outcome, theology is an understanding of matters of faith that results from the process of theological reflection. It is an informed system of belief that provides a foundation for action and interaction in the world, both individually and communally.[26]

## Outline of Subsequent Chapters

A critical review of relevant literature and an introduction to the interpretive lens of adult development theory comprise Chapter II of this dissertation. Chapter III details the study's methodology, including a more thorough treatment of IPA. The study's findings are presented in

[24] For an introductory discussion of theology in general and Christian theology in particular, see: Justo L. González and Zaida Maldonado Pérez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002); Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics,* 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003); and Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

[25] Hanson, 4.

[26] Theology can be and is undertaken in the context of any number of religious faiths. Given my own faith tradition and professional context, my emphasis is specifically on Christian theology.

Chapter IV. Finally, Chapter V offers a discussion of the study's findings, including their interpretation through the lenses of Christian theology and adult development theory, and provides implications for practice and for research.

# Chapter II – Critical Review of Relevant Literature

## Introduction

This study, which explored congregants' experiences of change in their churches, was grounded in the current religious landscape in the United States and the existing literature on congregational change. This chapter investigates these elements and, in doing so, establishes both that the congregant's experience of change has not been satisfactorily addressed in the literature and that attending to this perspective is a worthwhile endeavor. First, the backdrop of the study is provided via a description of the religious landscape that has created an environment in which churches are facing changes. Second, literature related to change in a church context is discussed, with attention to both scholarly works and practitioner-oriented resources. Finally, the two adult development theories employed as an interpretive lens for the study's findings are introduced.

## The Religious Landscape in the United States

Any discussion of religion, and especially Christianity, in the United States must consider the legacy of Christendom and the reality of post-Christendom. Christendom, "the cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society and the church its legally established institutional form,"[27] began when the Roman emperor Constantine aligned himself with Christianity in the 4th century.[28] It continued as a dominant force in Western civilization for the next sixteen centuries as Christianity, which originated as

[27] Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 6–7.
[28] There is some debate as to whether Constantine converted to Christianity or merely became favorably disposed toward Christianity for political and strategic reasons. See: Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 25–32.

persecuted, marginalized movement, held an unprecedented place of power and privilege in European and, later, North American societies.[29] Under Christendom, the institutional church merged with the government, religion aligned with politics, and clergy created alliances with "ruling powers to share in those powers."[30] In the United States, which has a constitutional prohibition against the establishment of a national religion, the signs of Christendom were, arguably, less overt than Justinian's outlawing of all religions except Christianity throughout the Roman Empire[31] or the British monarch's status as supreme governor of the Church of England and sworn defender of the faith.[32] Yet Christendom's influence was no less strong. The belief in the United States as a Christian nation,[33] the concepts of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism,[34] the adoption of Christian morals as public morals,[35] the conflation of patriotism with the Christian faith (and vice versa),[36] the prominence of Christian religious leaders at governmental ceremonies and events, the observance of Christmas as a federal holiday—these and other manifestations of Christianity's cultural hegemony in U.S. went largely unchallenged until the late 20th and early 21st centuries, when Christendom began to collapse.[37] Christendom's demise came about gradually, the result of a complex set of interrelated factors including postmodernism, globalization, pluralism, societal fragmentation, and disillusionment

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[29] For a summary of the changes that took place, particularly in Europe, with the rise of Christendom, see: Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 66–69.
[30] Addison Hodges Hart, *Strangers and Pilgrims Once More: Being Disciples of Jesus in a Post-Christendom World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 15.
[31] Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 22.
[32] Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 139, 141–142.
[33] Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 29.
[34] Ibid., 24–25. See also: Robert T. Handy, "The American Messianic Consciousness: The Concept of the Chosen People and Manifest Destiny," *Review and Expositor* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 47–58.
[35] Robert T. Handy, "The Long Spell of Christendom," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 1977), 126.
[36] Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*, 27.
[37] Murray, *Post-Christendom,* 132. The collapse of Christendom does not, however, mean that all of its manifestations in U.S. culture have also come to an end. Indeed, many vestiges remain, some powerfully so.

with religion.[38] What has followed is post-Christendom, "the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence."[39] This is the culture that Christianity and its institutions inhabit in the United States today.

The rise of post-Christendom has resulted in profound cultural shifts, both within the Christian religious establishment and in the wider society. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore these shifts in detail, several consequences of these shifts warrant mention, as they are germane to the broader context of the present research study. First, the Christian religion and its institutions, especially churches, have been de-centered and have returned to the margins of power. Where once it represented authority, the church in a post-Christendom society "is just another institution" and is "no longer the keeper of truth and morality."[40] Second, the percentage of the population who identify as Christian has declined significantly in European and North American countries. In the United States, only 70.6% of adults taking part in a 2014 Pew Research Center survey identified as Christian—a decrease of nearly 8% from the previous such survey in 2007.[41] Third, religious pluralism has increased. The same Pew Research Center survey cited above found that 22.8% of respondents identified with no religious tradition (the so-called "Nones"), and 5.9% of respondents identified with a religious tradition other than Christianity, such as Islam or Hinduism.[42] Finally, church attendance in the United States has

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[38] Ibid., 132–133.
[39] Ibid., 21.
[40] Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled,* 29.
[41] In the 2007 survey, 78.4% of respondents identified as Christian. Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (May 12, 2015), 3. Downloaded from: https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.
[42] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 3.

declined across all Christian faith traditions since at least 2000.[43] According to the 2015 Faith Communities Today survey, the median congregation size, as measured by worship attendance, was eighty, and a majority of congregations had a worship attendance of less than one hundred.[44] Similarly, data from the 2012 National Congregations Study revealed that 42.7% of respondents attended a church with fifty or fewer people, which represents a 5% increase in small congregations since the same study was conducted in 1998.[45] All of these shifts have created an environment in which churches are facing change, both externally and internally.

Churches, however, are notoriously resistant to change. The 2015 Faith Communities Today survey confirms this notoriety is well deserved. According to the survey's findings, only a third of participating congregations embraced innovation in their worship services, and less than 1% of participating congregations had made changes to their programming in the previous five years.[46] Moreover, the percentage of congregations willing to change to meet new challenges had consistently declined between 2005 and 2015.[47] This is both striking and worrisome, as the study also found a direct correlation between a congregation's willingness to innovate and its level of spiritual health and vitality.[48] Said the study's author in an interview, "Thriving congregations

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[43] Roozen, "American Congregations 2010," 2, 14. See also: David Roozen, "Negative Numbers: The Decline Narrative Reaches Evangelicals," *Christian Century* (December 11, 2013), 10–11. Aaron Earls, "The Church Growth Gap: The Big Get Bigger While the Small Get Smaller," *Christianity Today* online (March 6, 2019), accessed March 27, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/lifeway-research-church-growth-attendance-size.html.

[44] The percentage of congregations with worship attendance under 100 was 57.9%. David A. Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," A *Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research), 2. Downloaded from: http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf

[45] In the 1998 study, 37.8% of respondents attended a church with fifty or fewer people. "Congregational QuickStats: Size of Congregation, Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed February 21, 2019, http://www.thearda.com/conQS/qs_295.asp.

[46] Roozen, "American Congregations 2015," 9–11.

[47] Ibid., 14.

[48] Ibid., 10, 14.

are nearly ten times more likely [than struggling congregations] to have changed themselves."[49] The willingness and ability of churches to navigate change is therefore crucial to their very health and survival.

A particular body of literature, consisting of both scholarly and practitioner-oriented works, has attempted to address the necessity and the challenges of change in a church context. It is to a selection of this literature that I now turn.

## The Literature on Change in a Church Context

The scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature on change in a church context can be broadly categorized as addressing the "Why," the "What," and the "How" of congregational change.

### Why – Reasons for Change and Explanations of Change

Taking the broadest view of the reasons for congregational change are books such as *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.[50] This seminal text contends that churches must take the context and consequences of post-Christendom seriously and, in doing so, reconsider their identity, theology, and mission. Similarly, *Church After Christendom*[51] explores the impact of post-Christendom on ecclesiology and church practices, while *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World*[52] focuses on the impact of post-Christendom, postcolonialism, and globalization on Christian mission. In their

[49] Religion News Service, "Against the Odds, Some Small Churches Thrive," *Christian Century* (February 3, 2016), 14.
[50] Guder, ed., *Missional Church*.
[51] Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004).
[52] Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled*.

own way, each of these texts uses the religious landscape of North America to argue for why churches must change.

Taking a more focused approach are the works that investigate explanations for specific changes in congregations. For example: A study by Flatt, Haskell, and Burgoyne[53] analyzes explanations for church growth and decline provided by congregants and clergy of both growing and declining mainline Protestant churches in Canada. The study found that congregants and clergy from declining congregations most often point to external factors, such as "the pressures of modern life" or "attitudes related to religion," as explanations for decreasing church membership and attendance,[54] while participants from growing congregations were more likely "to attribute the numerical fate of churches" to internal factors, such as the quality of the worship service or the attitude of the members.[55] The only participants to consider "supernatural factors," such as the church's spirituality or theology, as an explanation for growth were clergy, but they were just as likely to see the growth or decline of their congregations "as something which they could control, or at least affect significantly."[56] Another study on church growth and decline by the same authors[57] utilized surveys of congregants and clergy from thirteen declining churches and nine growing churches to identify characteristics of growing and declining churches. According to the study's findings, growing churches: have congregants and clergy that "are more theologically conservative and exhibit higher rates of Bible reading and prayer,"[58] focus on

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[53] Kevin N. Flatt, D. Millard Haskell, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Secularization and Attribution: How Mainline Protestant Clergy and Congregants Explain Church Growth and Decline," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 79 (2018): 78–107.
[54] Ibid., 88.
[55] Ibid., 99.
[56] Ibid., 99.
[57] David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58 (2016): 515–541.
[58] Ibid., 535.

evangelism as the church's primary purpose, emphasize youth programs, and have contemporary worship services. Growing churches also have a younger congregation and younger clergy.[59] Investigating a different type of change, a case study by Stephens[60] focuses specifically on the theology and beliefs underlying a United Methodist congregation's approach to ministry with LGBTQIA+ persons. The study utilized narrative theory to explore the congregation's self-understanding and theological convictions, particularly its "sense of identity in relation to God."[61] By attending to the preaching, testimony, and writing of the church's congregants and clergy, Stephens identifies that "radically inclusive love as a *charism* of the Holy Spirit … enabled [the congregation] to overcome not only LBGTQIA+ exclusion but also many other human-created barriers to loving God and neighbor."[62] According to the literature, then, the reasons for and explanations of congregational change include a variety of external, internal, and theological influences. In short, there is no single reason why congregational change takes place.

**What – Types of Change and Factors Supporting or Inhibiting Change**

The second broad category of literature describes congregational change in terms of the types of change and the factors that either support or inhibit change. The Association of Religion Data Archives serves as a repository of data from multiple years of the Religions Congregations and Membership Study, the National Congregations Study, the U.S Congregational Life Survey, and a number of other regional, national, international, and denominational studies of religion and religious life.[63] Comparing data across several years of surveys reveals trends and changes in

[59] Ibid.
[60] Darrell W. Stephens, "A Charismatic Learning: Open and Affirming Ministry in a Methodist Congregation," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 193–210.
[61] Ibid., 198.
[62] Ibid., 195.
[63] A list of the data archives is available at: http://thearda.com/Archive/browse.asp.

worship attendance, religious identity and behaviors, attitudes about moral and social issues, clergy characteristics, services provided by local congregations,[64] and more. A number of research studies rely on these data archives to investigate specific trends and changes. For example, Dougherty and Emerson[65] used data from three iterations of the National Congregations Study to examine the racial makeup of U.S. churches over a span of fourteen years. Their findings indicate that the percentage of multiracial congregations is growing,[66] racial/ethnic diversity within congregations is increasing,[67] and most multiracial congregations are led by white clergy, although the percentage of black clergy leading multiracial congregations had quadrupled between 1998 and 2012.[68] Drawing on its own research and work with churches, the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary[69] also identified changes taking place within congregations. In addition to differences in worship attendance patterns and congregational diversity, the Lewis Center finds changes related to how new attendees come to a church,[70] how churches are raising and allocating financial resources,[71] the types of mission activities congregations are engaging in,[72] and the employment and expectations of both clergy and staff leadership.[73] In a descriptive qualitative study, Kang and Jaskyte[74] relied on interviews with thirteen religious leaders to identify the types of change, or innovation, being implemented in congregations. These are categorized as service/product

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[64] See, for example: http://thearda.com/quickstats/qsdir.asp, http://thearda.com/ConQS/.
[65] Dougherty and Emerson, "The Changing Complexion of American Congregations," 24–38.
[66] Ibid., 30.
[67] Ibid., 34.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Changes Congregations are Facing Today* (Washington, DC: The Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary, 2014). Kindle. Note: The type of research that led to these findings is not disclosed.
[70] Ibid., location 187–248.
[71] Ibid., location 263–332.
[72] Ibid., location 335–370.
[73] Ibid., location 391–495.
[74] Byungdeok Kang and Kristina Jaskyte, "Congregational Leaders' Perceptions of Organizational Innovation," *Administration in Social Work*, 35 (2011): 161–179.

innovation, such as the addition of a new social service or program; process innovation, such as changes to the provision of worship services; and administrative innovation, such as changes to decision-making processes.[75] All of these studies, and others like them, describe what types of changes congregations are facing.

A related subset of literature, found primarily in research studies, attempts to identify inhibitors or supporters of congregational change. The same study by Kang and Jasktye that identified types of change also considered factors that inhibit or support innovation. According to the study, shared beliefs, shared vision, supportive leadership, and the quality, diversity, and quantity of human resources support innovation. Meanwhile, members'/leaders' attitudes, fear, and leadership transitions inhibit innovation.[76] Synthesizing a selection of studies funded by the Lilly Endowment between 1987 and 2002, Woods[77] gleaned five "factors of influence" that determine how churches respond to change. These are: willingness to change, theological thinking, organizational metaphors, clarity of purpose, and leadership.[78] In Woods's assessment, congregations are more likely to embrace change if the change is in their self-interest, if they are able to reflect on the change "theologically rather than secularly,"[79] if they embrace "living metaphors" that orient them toward outsiders,[80] if internal diversity is adopted as one of the church's core values,[81] and if leaders "serve as a catalyst for the involvement of others."[82] According to the literature, then, churches are experiencing a wide variety of changes, and a

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[75] Ibid., 170–171.
[76] Ibid., 171–175.
[77] Jeff Woods, "New Tasks for the New Congregation: Reflections on Congregational Studies," *Resources for American Christianity* (July 11, 2003).Downloaded from: https://web.archive.org/web/20181003095450/http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/research-article/new-tasks-for-the-new-congregation-reflections-on-congregational-studies.
[78] Ibid., 16–21.
[79] Ibid., 17.
[80] Ibid., 18.
[81] Ibid., 19.
[82] Ibid., 20.

number of factors, primarily internal to the congregation, have bearing whether those changes will be supported or inhibited.

**How – The Process of Congregational Change**

By far the largest category of literature on change in a church setting addresses the process of congregational change. Practitioner-oriented books make up the majority of these "how to" resources. Emblematic of the genre is *12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders*, which offers a series of actions "for the leader who recognizes the challenging realities of the congregation today, has a vision for a healthier expression of Christ's church, and is looking for some help with the process of congregational renovation."[83] Similarly, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organization Tools for Leaders* declares, "This is not a book about where your congregation is going. This is a book about how leaders can help your congregation get there."[84] *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* offers principles for congregational change and a model for transformation that emerged from the authors' work with an association of churches in Texas.[85] The classic and oft-cited *Strategies for Change* adopts a question-and-answer format to guide the reader—presumably a pastor—to "a five step sequence" and a twenty-five item checklist of guidelines for implementing change.[86] All four of these books, and many others like them, are written by pastors and/or church consultants and are based upon their own experiences leading congregational change.

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[83] Laubach, 10.
[84] Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998), 2.
[85] Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 1.
[86] Lyle E. Schaller, *Strategies for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 92–106.

Taking a slightly different approach are the "how to" resources that focus primarily on a specific aspect of congregational life during a time of change, and secondarily on the change process more generally. *When God Speaks Through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition* is "a companion for those called to preach during congregational transition, a conversational partner that will help preachers prepare, reflect, and pray as they preach during a congregational transition."[87] *Reweaving the Sacred: A Practical Guide to Change and Growth for Challenged Congregations* draws upon the author's Cherokee heritage and emphasizes the role of liturgy, ritual, story, and symbol in the revitalization of struggling faith communities.[88] "A New Vision for Worship: Discerning a Path Through the Minefield of Change" provides guidelines for implementing changes to a church's musical style or worship service,[89] which can be polarizing topics in a congregation. Recognizing that conflict often accompanies change, *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation (Even If You Hate Both): How to Implement Conscious Choices, Manage Emotions, and Build a Thriving Christian Community* seeks to normalize both conflict and change, as well as to provide a biblical, theological, and historical perspective on the issues, thereby helping congregations to engage change in a more productive manner.[90] Again, all of these resources are written by pastors and/or church consultants and are based upon their own experiences leading congregational change.

A smaller collection of practitioner-oriented resources addresses the process of change through the lens of a particular theory. For example: *How Your Congregation Learns: The*

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[87] Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through Change*, xvi.
[88] Carol J. Gallagher, *Reweaving the Sacred: A Practical Guide to Change and Growth for Challenged Congregations* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 4.
[89] Deborah Carlton Loftis, "A New Vision for Worship: Discerning a Path Through the Minefield of Change," *Choral Journal* 48/49, no. 12/1 (June/July 2008): 51–54.
[90] Anita L. Bradshaw, *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation (Even If You Hate Both): How to Implement Conscious Choices, Manage Emotions, and Build a Thriving Christian Community* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2015).

*Learning Journey from Challenge to Achievement*[91] conceives of change as learning and draws on the concept of learning organizations. *Choosing Change: How to Motivate Churches to Face the Future*[92] adapts the theory of reasoned action as a framework for congregational change and leadership.[93] And family systems theory provides the foundation for *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope*.[94] Also comprising a small portion of the "how to" literature, but with somewhat less of a practitioner orientation, are articles from peer-reviewed journals that address the process of congregational change. Concept papers advocate for the use of centering prayer as a means of changing congregational culture,[95] or the adoption of an organization communication perspective to reduce church decline,[96] or the preservation of core teachings when promoting change.[97] Case studies attempt to determine the best process for church revitalization,[98] or which change theory best explains a church's radical transformation after beginning to offer a weekly meal to people experiencing homelessness.[99] And a grounded theory study of South African churches advocates for understanding resistance to change from the perspective of social capital theory.[100] Finally among the "how to" literature are doctoral dissertations and Doctor of Ministry (DMin) projects that focus on the process of congregational

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[91] Tim Shapiro, *How Your Congregation Learns: The Learning Journey from Challenge to Achievement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).
[92] Coutts, *Choosing Change*.
[93] Note: It is only in the endnotes that Coutts identifies which specific theory informs his framework. See page 226. Throughout the book, he refers instead to "motivation theory" without mention of specific theories or theorists.
[94] Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).
[95] Paul David Lawson, "Leadership and Change Through Contemplation: A Parish Perspective," *Sewanee Theological Review* 43, no. 3 (Pentecost 2000): 326–337.
[96] Vincent R. Liburd, "Progress by Plunder—Renewal in the Local Church: An Organization Communication Perspective," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 47, no. 2 (Winter-Spring 1991): 72–88.
[97] Roger Finke, "Innovation Returns to Tradition: Using Core Teachings as the Foundation for Innovation Accommodation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004): 19–34.
[98] Darren Cronshaw, "Revitalization Consultancy Models: Australian Church Case Studies," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 19, no. 2 (2015): 317–345.
[99] Donde Ashmos Plowman et al., "Radical Change Accidentally: The Emergence and Amplification of Small Change," *Academy of Management Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 515–543.
[100] Noel J. Pearse, "Towards a Social Capital Theory of Resistance to Change," *Journal of Advances in Management Research* 7, no. 2 (2010): 163–175.

change. In a qualitative study using phenomenology and heuristic methodologies, Haskins devises steps to guide churches in a particular denominational tradition through change.[101] In DMin projects, Hayes proposes the use of "Solution-Focused Individual Care" as a method for facilitating congregational change,[102] Dongell identifies preparatory steps necessary for successful change,[103] and Ficken suggests a process for identifying the need for change and then implementing that change in congregations.[104] Clearly, a great number of theories, processes, and practices have been employed in the quest to understand how to implement congregational change.

**Critique of the Literature**

Taken as a whole, the literature on change in a church context is heavily weighted in three areas. First, the literature consists primarily of practitioner-oriented resources, most of which draw from anecdotal evidence and the author's own experience. While the wisdom of experience is not to be discounted, it does have its limitations, such as the extent to which it is generalizable or transferable. The addition of more empirical research would contribute significantly to the breadth and depth of the literature. Second, the literature on change in a church context has a strong, almost exclusive, focus on the pastor/leader. In many cases, this is immediately evident in the works' titles and subtitles. In other cases, the emphasis on the pastor/leader is more implicit, though no less noticeable, such as when major portions of the

[101] Roger W. Haskins, "Guiding the Church Through Change," abstract (PhD diss., Union Institute and University, 2009), ProQuest (AAT 3392050).
[102] Christopher James Hayes, "Solution-Focused Congregational Change: An Alternative Model for Effective Church Leadership," abstract (DMin Project, Texas Christian University, 2010), ProQuest (AAT 3408958).
[103] Oliver B. Dongell, "Preparatory Elements to Promote Congregational Change," abstract (DMin Project, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2006), ProQuest (AAT 3247739).
[104] Jock Ervin Ficken, "Affecting Congregational Change for an Effective Future," abstract (DMin Project, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997), ProQuest (AAT 9730372).

work are devoted to leadership practices or theories. Relatively little attention is given to the congregation, except as the passive recipient of the pastor's leadership and as the object of change. Third, the literature on change in a church context tends to view change exclusively as a process. This is evident in both the content and the sheer quantity of the "how to" resources; in the studies that focus on factors supporting or inhibiting change; and in the types of change being identified in the literature. Largely missing from the discussion is the recognition that change is an experience just as much as it is a process.

In my review of the literature, I could find only a few works that explicitly addressed change as an experience. Among these were three doctoral dissertations from the University of Phoenix, all of which took a phenomenological approach to explore some aspect of the pastor's experience with leading change,[105] and one DMin project that focused on how congregants experienced their pastors' leadership of change.[106] While these do address change as an experience, they join the preponderance of literature that centers on the pastor/leader to the exclusion of the congregation.[107] I could find only one work focusing exclusively on the congregation's experience of change: a mixed methods study by Wortmann and Schrader[108] surveyed older congregants on their reactions to the change from a traditional worship service,

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[105] Sharon Yvette Harrington, "Contemporary Worship: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Experiences of Megachurch Pastors in Leading Change," abstract (D.M. diss., University of Phoenix, 2011), ProQuest (AAT 10784276); Joey J. Jackson, "Investigating the Challenges Senior Pastors of Missionary Baptist Churches of Greater Minneapolis Experience During Change," abstract (D.M.IST. diss., University of Phoenix, 2013), ProQuest (AAT 3583288); and Michael J. Stewart, "A Phenomenological Study: Local Churches Providing Community Service with Diminishing Membership and Increasing Expenses," abstract (D.M. diss., University of Phoenix, 2008), ProQuest (AAT 3309262).

[106] Michael K. Leary, "How Congregants Experience Pastors Leading Change in Established Congregations," abstract (DMin project, Covenant Theological Seminary, 2011), http://covenantlibrary.org/etd/2014/Leary_Michael_DMin_2014.pdf.

[107] Although the DMin project cited above does include a congregational perspective, it is specifically the congregants' experience *of the pastor's leadership*. Even here, the true focus is on the pastor/leader.

[108] Susan L. Wortmann and Susan L. Schrader, "Older Members, Church Home, and Congregational Change: 'We Worked and Worshipped in This Home for Years and Now You Say We're Not Important…,'" *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Aging* 19, no. 2 (2007): 21–42.

which featured choral music and organ accompaniment, to a contemporary service with guitars, drums, and newer hymns. The congregant's perspective is clearly an overlooked topic in the literature on change in a church context.

However, attending to this perspective is a worthwhile endeavor. The congregant's experience is vital for understanding congregational change in all its complexity. And it equally has the potential to provide new insights into topics already under investigation, including the supporters and inhibitors of change, the process of change, and leadership approaches to change. Therefore, this research study intentionally explored congregants' experiences of change in their churches. Attention was given particularly to how the participants made meaning of their experiences and the role of faith in that meaning-making. Providing one lens for the interpretation of this meaning-making was adult development theory, which will now be introduced.

## Interpretive Lens: Adult Development Theory

Any number of theories offer an explanation for the ways in which individuals make meaning of experiences. In my earlier inquiries into the subject,[109] the theories I was most drawn to, and could most envision as being applicable in a church context, were adult development theories. The many individual theories that can be grouped together under the umbrella of "adult development theory" share a number of similarities. First, these theories outline the "sequential growth in complexity of meaning-making or reasoning" that takes place into and through

[109] Courtny B. Davis Olds, "Exploring a Theoretical Foundation for Congregational Change – Part Two of 'Congregational Change: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach'" (Independent Learning Agreement, Antioch University PhD in Leadership and Change, 7 June 2018), Microsoft Word file.

adulthood.[110] Second, underlying these theories is the assumption that development is possible throughout the lifespan; thinking, reasoning, meaning-making, value systems, and ways of knowing are not static or fixed, even in adulthood. Third, the theories use stages to describe "people's qualitatively different ways of thinking, talking, and acting"[111] at different points along the continuum of development. These stages occur in a prescribed order, with each subsequent stage encompassing all of the stages that preceded it. Fourth, generally speaking, "development to later stages of understanding entails more autonomy, more tolerance for difference and ambiguity, and more self-awareness."[112] However, development through all of the stages of any given theory is not guaranteed; it can stop at any stage. Finally, all adult development theories provide a means for understanding how individuals make meaning of their experience and respond to the world's increasing complexity. Because of this, "all stages can be seen as appropriate for any particular person and should be respected as such."[113] Rather than rely on adult development theory broadly, the interpretation of the study's findings engaged two specific adult development theories: constructive developmental theory and faith development theory.[114]

**Constructive Developmental Theory**

There are multiple iterations of constructive developmental theory, each associated with a particular theorist. The interpretive lens for this study relied specifically on the constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan, clinical psychologist and professor emeritus of adult

[110] Sofia Kjellström and Kristian Stålne, "Adult Development Theories as a Lens: Applications of Adult Development Theories in Research," *Behavioral Development Bulletin* 22, no. 2 (2017), 267.
[111] Ibid., 266.
[112] Ibid., 268.
[113] Ibid.
[114] My selection of these theories does not imply I do not have my critiques of them. Nevertheless, I do find these theories to be a helpful framework for understanding the experience of congregational change.

learning at Harvard Graduate School of Education.[115] Kegan's iteration of constructive developmental theory—which is also referred to as subject-object theory[116] and Kegan's theory of adult development,[117] and which here will be referred to simply as constructive developmental theory – was introduced in *The Evolving Self*[118] and further refined in *In Over Our Heads*.[119] It draws heavily from the work of psychologist and epistemologist Jean Piaget, yet whereas Piaget's cognitive development stages end with adolescence, Kegan "extend[s] Piagetian-style stages of development into adulthood."[120] Additionally, instead of "viewing meaning-making from the outside, descriptively,"[121] as Piaget does, Kegan shifts the perspective internally, to the way meaning is constructed and experiences are organized "by a dynamically maintained 'self.'"[122] In doing so, Kegan explores the evolution of "ways of knowing"[123] across the various stages of life.

Two underlying concepts are central to constructive developmental theory. First is the subject-object relationship. Subject "refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in. …We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject."[124] Object, meanwhile, "refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to

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[115] https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/robert-kegan.
[116] For example: Bruce Kenofer, "Development of the Self: A Presentation of Kegan's Subject-Object Theory," *Gestalt Review* 17, no. 1 (November 2001).
[117] For example: https://medium.com/@NataliMorad/how-to-be-an-adult-kegans-theory-of-adult-development-d63f4311b553.
[118] Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[119] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
[120] Karen Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 14, no. 3 (July 2006), 290.
[121] Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 12.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 6.
[124] Ibid., 32.

each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon."[125] In other words, subject is who we *are*; object is what we *have*. The second underlying concept is transformation of consciousness. This transformation is the gradual emergence of new "ways of knowing" that do not replace the former ways, but instead absorb the old into the new.[126] These two concepts, the subject-object relationship and transformation of consciousness, are closely linked. Because subject and object are not fixed for the duration of a person's lifetime, transformation of consciousness occurs when that to which a person had been subject now becomes object. Says Kegan, "transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we were embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can 'have it' rather than 'be had' by it—this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind."[127]

In describing this growth of the mind, Kegan identifies five orders of consciousness. These begin with the Incorporative Order,[128] from birth to around eighteen months of age. During this stage, "reflexes are primary"[129] and the baby has little sense of itself as being distinct from its environment or its caregivers. As such, it is subject to sensations and reflexive movements. Around eighteen months of age, however, a baby begins to develop the ability to differentiate itself from the world around it.[130] This then forms the basis for the subject-object relationship that is at the heart of each transformation of consciousness. The First Order of Consciousness, also known as the Impulsive Order, largely describes children from ages two until seven. These children construct the world through fantasy and imagination[131] and often

[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid., 9.
[127] Ibid., 32.
[128] Names for the orders are taken from *The Evolving Self.* Numerical designations are from *In Over Our Heads*.
[129] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 291.
[130] Kegan, *The Evolving Self,* 78.
[131] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 20.

exhibit magical thinking.[132] They are egocentric, assuming that others think and experience the world as they do, and they are unable to delay gratification, living essentially from moment-to-moment. In terms of the subject-object relationship, children operating from the First Order of Consciousness are subject to their perceptions and impulses. Movement and sensation, meanwhile, have become object. Around age seven or eight, the Second Order of Consciousness, or Imperial Order, develops as children "begin to construct a concrete world that conforms for the first time to the laws of nature, and they are interested in the limits and possibilities within that world."[133] From around age seven or eight until adolescence, children begin to recognize that others think and experience the world differently than they do,[134] and they begin to develop a self-concept, or notions about themselves that persist over time.[135] From a subject-object standpoint, children operating from the Second Order of Consciousness are subject to their needs, interests, and wishes, while their perceptions and impulses have become object.[136] Beginning in adolescence and continuing into adulthood, the Third Order of Consciousness, or the Interpersonal Order, is characterized by "the capacity for insight"[137] and the ability to both conceive of and plan for the future.[138] At this stage, one not only knows and considers one's own point of view, but also recognizes another's point of view and how one's relationships will be impacted by the competing perspectives.[139] "Relationships thus move from being extrinsically valuable to being intrinsically valuable."[140] Also at this stage, people hold strongly to "the

[132] Erikson, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 292.
[133] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads,* 20.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 293.
[136] Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, Table 9, page 134.
[137] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 294.
[138] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 26–28.
[139] Ibid., 24–26.
[140] Ibid., 26.

values, ideals, and beliefs with which they were raised,"[141] and the opinions and perceptions of others are highly valued.[142] Those operating from the Third Order of Consciousness demonstrate a "socialized mind,"[143] having "internalized the values of society or their surroundings."[144] Such individuals are subject to "interpersonalism" and mutuality; meanwhile, needs, interests, and wishes have become object.[145] Although this Interpersonal Order begins in adolescence, for many it continues through the duration of their adulthood; there is a larger percentage of people operating from the Third Order of Consciousness than from the subsequent orders combined.[146] The Fourth Order of Consciousness, or Institutional Order, emerges only if roles, relationships, and values are transformed from subject to object.[147] That transformation "reveals the ability of the individual to engage in *systemic thinking*, and to take one's previous sense of identity as an object of reflection."[148] As such, relationships, jobs, and values no longer define who one is, but become something that one has, as well as something that can be examined and revised. This capacity for shaping the contours of one's self is reflective of the "self-authoring" mind,[149] which is subject to self-authorship, identity, and ideology.[150] Approximately 35% of adults operate from the Fourth Order of Consciousness.[151] Finally, the Fifth Order of Consciousness, or Interindividual Order, is defined by "the recognition of our multiple selves, the capacity to see conflict as a signal of our over identification with a single system, the sense of our relationships

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[141] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 294.
[142] Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 17.
[143] Ibid., 16–17, and elsewhere.
[144] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 294.
[145] Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, Table 10, page 190.
[146] Around 45%–55% of people operate from the Third Order of Consciousness. See Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 28.
[147] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 294.
[148] Kenofer, "Development of the Self," 76–77. Italics in the original.
[149] Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 16, 18–19, and elsewhere.
[150] Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 226, table 10.
[151] See Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 28.

and connections as prior to and constitutive of the individual self, [and] an identification with the transformative process of our being rather than the formative products of our becoming."[152] At this stage, the "self-transforming mind"[153] is capable of engaging in dialectical thinking;[154] is enriched, rather than intimidated, by contradictions and paradoxes; and relishes the opportunity to co-construct experiences with others.[155] The less than one percent of adults who operate from the Fifth Order of Consciousness[156] are subject only to inter-individuality; self-authorship, identity, ideology, and all else has become object.[157]

In early iterations of constructive developmental theory, Kegan conceived of the movement through the orders or consciousness along a coil, with each order of consciousness represented by the point at which the loop began its repetition, and the transformations of consciousness represented by the portions of the coil between each order. He also distinguished between the "psychologies of inclusion" in the odd-numbered orders of consciousness and the "psychologies of independence" in the even-numbered orders of consciousness. In later representations, Kegan used a step-like progression on a graph in which the *x*-axis represented time and the *y*-axis represented increasing mental complexity. In this depiction, which addresses only those stages of development associated with adulthood, each plateau is identified with an order of consciousness, or "mind," and the inclines between the plateaus represent the transformations of consciousness. Regardless of the visual representation used, however, constructive developmental theory offers an explanation for how individuals "make sense of the

[152] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 351.
[153] Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 16, 19–20.
[154] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads,* 321–323.
[155] Eriksen, "The Constructive Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan," 296.
[156] See Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 28.
[157] Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 226, table 10.

world and operate within it."[158] Table 2.1 provides a summary of the stages of Kegan's constructive developmental theory that are most associated with adulthood.

**Table 2.1 Summary of Kegan's Constructive Developmental Theory (Later Stages)**

| Stage | Approximate Ages | Characteristics | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Third Order of Consciousness: Interpersonal Order (socialized mind) | adolescence and into adulthood | - ability to conceive of and plan for the future, opinions of others highly esteemed, relationships intrinsically valued<br>- subject to interpersonalism and mutuality<br>- needs, interests and wishes are object | - psychology of inclusion<br>- majority of adults operate from this stage |
| Fourth Order of Consciousness: Institutional Order (self-authoring mind) | adulthood (but might not emerge at all) | - systemic thinking, ability to reflect on one's sense of identity<br>- subject to self-authorship, identity, and ideology<br>- relationships, jobs, values are object | - psychology of independence<br>- ~ 35% of adults operate from this stage |
| Fifth Order of Consciousness: Interindividual Order (self-transforming mind) | adulthood (but might not emerge at all) | - dialectical thinking, the ability to hold paradoxes<br>- subject to inter-individuality<br>- self-authorship, identity, ideology, and everything else is object | - psychology of inclusion<br>- <1% of adults operate from this stage |

[158] Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 16.

**Faith Development Theory**

As with constructive developmental theory, there are multiple iterations of faith development theory, each associated with a particular theorist. The interpretive lens for this study drew specifically from the work of the late James Fowler (1940–2015), professor of theology and human development at Emory University.[159] Whereas many developmental theories are purely psychological in nature, Fowler's faith development theory, which here will be referred to simply as faith development theory, "stands at the convergence of developmental psychology and a tradition of liberal theology deriving from Christian origins,"[160] weaving together the structural developmental theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg,[161] the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson,[162] the maturation theory of Daniel Levinson,[163] and the theological perspectives of H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.[164] Key to understanding faith development theory is Fowler's conception of faith. Faith, according to Fowler, "is a *verb*; it is an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life."[165] Faith is also relational,[166] as it ties together individuals and groups who are committed to "shared centers of value and power."[167] Thus, faith and faith development have a "triadic structure" involving the self, the ones with whom the self has a significant relationship, and "the ultimate Other, or the center(s) of value and power in one's life structure,"[168] which

[159] http://ethics.emory.edu/about_the_center/J_Fowler.html.
[160] James W. Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001), 159.
[161] See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 270–273.
[162] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 38.
[163] Ibid., 110–114.
[164] Ibid., 98.
[165] Ibid., 16. Italics in the original.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," 169.
[168] Ibid., 163.

could be the Divine, a religious institution, family, success, a career,[169] or some other aspiration or ideal. Conceived of in this way, faith is different from, though not exclusive of, a religious tradition;[170] faith development theory equally encompasses those who adhere to a religious tradition and those who do not. Thus, faith development theory describes "a universal quality of human meaning making."[171]

Fowler identifies six stages of faith development that emerge from early childhood through adulthood. Faith itself, however, begins in infancy[172] as a baby relates to its caregivers and begins to develop a sense of self that is different from, but dependent upon, others. Although this phase of Undifferentiated Faith is not accessible to research, the "trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites)" formed here provide the foundation for the remaining stages of faith development.[173] The formal stages of faith development theory begin with Stage 1 (Intuitive-Projective Faith), which corresponds to the acquisition of language, the employment of imagination,[174] and the commencement of self-awareness.[175] Intuitive-Projective Faith is characterized by imaginative, fantasy-filled, and fluid[176] perceptions of God, the sacred,[177] and the caring or menacing forces in a child's life.[178] These perceptions are formed from pieced-together fragments of stories, images, and metaphors to which the child has been exposed in their culture, regardless of whether the child is from a religious or nonreligious family.[179]

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[169] James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer, eds., *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education, and Society* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 22.
[170] Ibid., vii, 1.
[171] Ibid.,. 22.
[172] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 119.
[173] Ibid., 121.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., 133.
[176] Ibid., 132–133.
[177] Ibid., 128.
[178] Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweitzer, eds., *Stages of Faith and Religious Development,* 24.
[179] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 128.

Stage 1 generally corresponds to ages two through six,[180] and the perceptions formed here are a powerful force in the child's ongoing faith development.[181] Stage 2 (Mythic-Literal Faith) develops with the emergence of concrete operational thinking[182] and when "the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observations that symbolize belonging to his or her community."[183] Mythic-Literal Faith is characterized by highly anthropomorphic images of God,[184] a conception of reciprocal justice to which both humans and the Divine are subject,[185] and literalness of belief, moral rules, and attitudes.[186] Stage 2 generally corresponds to elementary school-aged children; however, adolescents and some adults can be found in this stage.[187] Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) emerges with the development of formal operational thought, which allows for the ability to reflect upon one's own thinking and experiences.[188] Faith in this stage is "conventional, in that it is seen as everybody's faith system or the faith system of the entire community. And it is synthetic in that it is nonanalytical; it comes as a sort of unified, global wholeness."[189] Synthetic-Conventional Faith is characterized by an unexamined system of values and meaning, a reliance upon interpersonal relationship to structure identity and outlook, and a view that symbols and rituals are inseparable from the transcendent or the reality they represent.[190] Stage 3 develops in and is most closely associated with adolescence; however, "a considerable number" of adults are also in Stage 3.[191] The

[180] Ibid., 123.
[181] Ibid., 132–133.
[182] Ibid., 134.
[183] Ibid., 149.
[184] Ibid., 139.
[185] Ibid., 143.
[186] Ibid., 149.
[187] Ibid., 146.
[188] Ibid., 151.
[189] Ibid., 167.
[190] Ibid., 164.
[191] Ibid., 161.

emergence of Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith) is frequently associated with an introspective self-examination precipitated by the disorienting experience of "leaving home—emotionally or physically, or both."[192] Individuative-Reflective Faith is characterized by an explicit, examined value system[193] and the ability to think "in terms of the impersonal imperatives of law, rules and the standards that govern social roles."[194] Interpersonal relationships play less of a role in identity formation,[195] and symbols, rather than mediating the sacred, are critically interrogated for their meaning.[196] Stage 4 is associated with late adolescence/early adulthood (early to mid-twenties); however, not all adults reach Stage 4 and for many who do, the stage emerges in their mid-thirties or forties.[197] Stage 5 (Conjunctive Faith) begins with the dawning recognition that Stage 4's "logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts" is insufficient for making sense of life's complexities.[198] Conjunctive Faith is therefore characterized by "the embrace of polarities, an alertness to paradox, and the need for multiple interpretations of reality."[199] Although the features of the stage have not been adequately described,[200] it can be conceived of as a profound openness to "both/and"[201] and the integration of perspective and identity that were previously unknown or overlooked.[202] If Stage 5 emerges at all, it does so in midlife or later adulthood.[203] Finally, Stage 6 (Universalizing Faith) is the "normative endpoint, the culminating image of mature faith" according to faith development

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[192] Ibid., 173.
[193] Ibid., 177.
[194] Ibid., 180.
[195] Ibid., 182.
[196] Ibid., 180.
[197] Ibid., 182.
[198] Ibid., 183.
[199] Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweitzer, eds., *Stages of Faith and Religious Development,* 25.
[200] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 184.
[201] Ibid., 185.
[202] Ibid., 197.
[203] Ibid., 198.

theory.[204] Universalizing Faith is characterized by "inclusiveness of community, radical commitment to justice and love, and selfless passion for a transformed world."[205] Fowler's conception of the normative endpoint for his faith development theory is highly influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr's description of "radical monotheistic faith," in which "the reality of God— transcendent and ever exceeding our grasp—exerts transforming and redeeming tension on the structure of our common life and faith."[206] Stage 6 is as uncommon to achieve as it is difficult to describe; when it emerges at all, it tends to do so late in adulthood.[207]

Fowler employed a rising spiral to model the movement and progression from one faith stage to another. Along the spiral, "each stage represents a widening of vision and valuing, correlating with a parallel increase in the certainty and depth of selfhood, making for qualitative increases in intimacy with self-other-world."[208] From Undifferentiated Faith through Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith), there is a progressive outward movement toward individualism. This reverses in Stages 5 (Conjunctive Faith) and Stage 6 (Universalizing Faith), in which inclusiveness and unity become stronger forces than individualism in the construction of faith and self.[209] Although the stages are evenly spaced along the spiral in the model, and although certain stages are closely associated with specific age ranges, there is no set duration for a stage nor for the transition between stages. The transitions between stages can be long, difficult, or even interrupted. And as noted above, faith development can reach a state of equilibrium at most any stage along the spiral. Nevertheless, "each stage has the potential for wholeness, grace and integrity and for strengths sufficient for either life's blows or blessings."[210] Table 2.2 provides a

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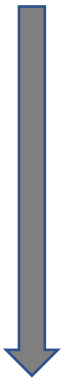
[204] Ibid., 199.
[205] Ibid., 201.
[206] Ibid., 204.
[207] Ibid., 200, 202.
[208] Ibid., 274.
[209] Ibid., 274.
[210] Ibid.

summary of the stages of Fowler's faith development theory that are most associated with adulthood.

**Table 1.2 Summary of Fowler's Faith Development Theory (Later Stages)**

| Stage | Approximate Ages | Characteristics | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stage 3: Synthetic Conventional Faith | adolescence (also present in many adults) | - unexamined values system, reliance upon relationships to structure identity and outlook<br>- symbols inseparable from what they represent | Progressive Movement toward Individualism  |
| Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith | late adolescence/early adulthood or later (but might not emerge at all) | - explicit, examined value system, relationships less significant for identity formation<br>- symbols interrogated for meaning | |
| Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith | midlife or later adulthood (but might not emerge at all) | - acceptance of polarities, paradox, and multiple interpretations of reality<br>- openness to "both/and" | Progressive Movement toward Inclusiveness and Unity  |
| Stage 6: Universalizing Faith | late adulthood (but unlikely to emerge at all) | - radical, selfless commitment to justice, love, and transformation<br>- the "normative endpoint" of faith | |

**Implications for Congregational Change**

Constructive developmental theory and faith development theory have significant implications for congregational change. First and foremost, both theories propose that an individual's stage of development shapes that person's worldview, value system, thinking, meaning-making, and actions. In other words, one sees and interprets life through the lens of one's current stage of development. In the same way, any proposed congregational change and even faith itself will also be seen and interpreted through one's current stage of development. For example: A person representing the socialized mind of constructive development theory's Third Order of Consciousness (Interpersonal Order) or faith development theory's Synthetic-Conventional Faith of Stage 3 may hear the biblical mandate to "welcome the stranger"[211] as an exhortation to show greater hospitality to visitors at a Sunday worship service. Meanwhile, a person representing the self-authoring mind of constructive developmental theory's Fourth Order of Consciousness (Institutional Order) or faith development theory's Individuative-Reflective Faith of Stage 5 may hear the same biblical mandate to "welcome the stranger" as a call for immigration reform, an invitation to join the sanctuary movement, or justification for acts of civil disobedience on behalf of undocumented workers in the United States, *as well as* a reminder to greet visitors on a Sunday morning. Were these two individuals to engage in a conversation about the church's ministry of "welcoming the stranger," they would approach the topic with very different value systems and would likely have very different ideas as to how such a ministry should proceed.

[211] This mandate is derived from passages such as Deuteronomy 10:19, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," and Romans 12:13, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (NRSV). See also Matthew 25:31–46 and Hebrews 13:2.

Another significant implication of these adult development theories for congregational change is closely related to the first. According to constructive developmental theory and faith development theory, it is not until the later and increasingly rarer stages that one has the ability to embrace paradox, along with multiple versions of "self" and "truth." At the earlier, more commonly occurring stages, one's own perspective is generally seen as the only valid one and other perspectives are dismissed as inaccurate or untrue; in a church setting, they might also be deemed un-Christian. Additionally, because the developmental stages describe *how* one thinks and not *what* one thinks, two people representing the same stage of development may use a similar value system to arrive at different conclusions about the same topic or issue. As a result of these characteristics, the average congregation will be peopled with individuals who have a wide variety of deeply-held perspectives and who are genuinely unable to hold the differing perspectives of others as valid. This creates an environment in which culture wars proliferate over topics such as abortion, divorce, marriage equality, worship style, the role of women in church leadership, and countless others, with each "side" believing they are "right." Thus, conflict naturally arises, even among well-intentioned people, when a congregation attempts to navigate change.

## Conclusion

The religious landscape in the United States is one in which churches are facing monumental change, both externally and internally. The existing literature provides insights into the "what," "why," and "how" of congregational change, especially when change is conceived of as a process spearheaded by the pastor/leader of the church. Largely absent from the literature, however, is an understanding of change as an experience, and particularly an experience of the

congregation. Yet conceiving of change as an experience and attending to the perspective of congregants are vitally important for a more complete understanding congregational change. This dissertation research study attempted to contribute to that understanding by exploring congregants' experiences of change in their churches and by using adult development theory— specifically, Kegan's constructive developmental theory and Fowler's faith development theory—as a lens to interpret how the participants made meaning of their experiences. The following chapter addresses the details of the study.

# Chapter III – Methodology

## Introduction

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, existing scholarship and literature on congregational change has focused primarily on the leader's perspective while giving little attention to the congregant's perspective. This dissertation research study therefore sought to address this gap by using IPA to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. This present chapter is devoted to the methodology and design of that study.

Chapter III begins with an overview of interpretive phenomenological analysis. The methodology's historical and philosophical context is provided, its research applications and guidelines are discussed, and its suitability for the study is outlined. The chapter concludes with the details of the study's design. Participant selection criteria and procedures, data collection and analysis, interpretation of data and findings, quality control measures, and ethical considerations are all addressed.

## Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

### Historical and Philosophical Context

An overview of interpretive phenomenological analysis begins more broadly, with phenomenology itself. Phenomenology developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, largely in response to the "objectification of the world" prevalent in scientific research at the time.[212]

[212] Kim Usher and Debra Jackson, "Phenomenology," in *Qualitative Methods: A Practical Guide*, eds. Jane Mills and Melanie Birks (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2017), 3.

While phenomenology is now recognized as both a philosophy and a methodology,[213] its roots are firmly in the realm of philosophy, with philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sarte, Hans-George Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, among others, all contributing to its development. The contributions of Husserl and Heidegger, in particular, are foundational to phenomenology and key to understanding the methodology.

Husserl, with his emphasis on "the things themselves,"[214] is commonly credited as the founder of the modern phenomenological movement.[215] Husserl argued that "the experiential content of consciousness" should be examined and studied in its own terms.[216] This orientation was radically different from positivist thinking, in which "objectivity" was prized and "understanding, perception, perspective, agency, and experiences … were treated as 'removed' from that with which they were in relation."[217] Husserl's chief concern with "the things themselves" was to identify and describe their essences, or their essential natures.[218] Central to this endeavor are intentionality and bracketing. *Intentionality* is "the self-transcending way that consciousness relates to other objects,"[219] in that "consciousness is always conscious of something."[220] According Husserl, studying and understanding a phenomenon, or what the

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[213] This point is made by most authors writing on the topic of phenomenology. See, for example: Patricia Benner, "Interpretive Phenomenology," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2008), 1; Thomas S. Eberle, "Phenomenology as a Research Method," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data* Analysis, ed. Uwe Flick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2013), 2; Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 2.

[214] See: Frederick J. Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2011), 53; Eberle, "Phenomenology as a Research Method," 2; and others.

[215] See, for example: Mark D. Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2018), 6; Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 4; Wertz et al., *Five Ways, 52*. Although Husserl is generally recognized as the originator of phenomenology, he himself was building upon and responding to many other thinkers who came before him. These examples acknowledge that as well.

[216] Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2009), 12.

[217] Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, 8.

[218] Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 6.

[219] Wertz et al., *Five Ways,* 52.

[220] Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 3.

consciousness is conscious of, requires *bracketing*, the setting aside of all prior knowledge in order "to come to a deeper understanding of that phenomenon, free from any preconceived, taken-for-granted notions of the phenomenon."[221] For Husserl, then, phenomenology is a transcendental and descriptive enterprise.

Although a student of Husserl's, Heidegger brought an entirely different perspective to the philosophy of phenomenology.[222] "Heidegger questioned the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretive stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world—the world of things, people, relationships and language."[223] In doing so, Heidegger "moved phenomenology beyond a philosophy of how things are constituted in consciousness" to one that recognizes "that human beings are always embedded in a world of meanings."[224] Thus for Heidegger, the phenomenon is existence itself, including the activities and relationships that give meaning to one's existence.[225] Central to Heidegger's phenomenological approach are hermeneutics, intersubjectivity, and the hermeneutic circle. As a discipline, *hermeneutics*, or the theory of interpretation, originated in biblical studies as scholars sought to better elucidate the meaning of scriptural texts. Theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher broadened hermeneutics to a more "generic form" of interpretation that encompassed any text or discourse, rather than exclusively biblical texts.[226] Heidegger then applied this more expansive understanding of hermeneutics to phenomenology, which he perceived as an "explicitly interpretive activity."[227] According to Heidegger, gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon requires not bracketing, but *intersubjectivity*—acknowledgement of "the shared, overlapping and relational nature of [human

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[221] Ibid., 5.
[222] Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research,* 8.
[223] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 16.
[224] Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 5.
[225] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 16–17.
[226] Ibid., 21–22.
[227] Ibid., 25.

beings'] engagement in the world."[228] Heidegger's approach to phenomenology is also closely associated with the *hermeneutic circle*, a heuristic approach that explores the relationship between the whole and the parts of a phenomenon and offers an iterative method of interpretation. The interpretive or analytic process

> moves from a naïve reading of the text, to a more structured analysis where the reader begins to look for patterns of connection, to the final stage where the interpretation of the whole incorporates the first two phases. In this way, there is no true starting point from where understanding can be developed, as understanding the whole involves understanding the parts, even where the understanding is preliminary.[229]

For Heidegger, then, phenomenology is an existential and interpretive enterprise.

**Research Applications and Guidelines**

Following its initial development, phenomenology gradually expanded from the field of philosophy and developed as a research methodology. As a research methodology, phenomenology is "the careful and systematic reflective study of the *lived experience*,"[230] the goal of which is to "understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it."[231] True to the methodology's philosophical foundations, experience is explored in its own terms, without seeking to fit it into "predefined or overly abstract categories."[232] In this way, phenomenology "does not aim to develop a theory that might help us to control or explain the world; rather, it aims to bring deeper insight to help us be in greater contact with the world."[233] Phenomenology as a research methodology was first employed in psychiatry.[234] From there it

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[228] Ibid., 16.
[229] Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 6.
[230] Ibid., 2. Italics original.
[231] Cohen, Steeves, and Kahn, *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research*, 3.
[232] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 1.
[233] Usher and Jackson, "Phenomenology," 3.
[234] Wertz et al., *Five Ways,* 53.

found application in psychology, sociology, nursing and health sciences, and education,[235] among other disciplines. With "lived experience" as its starting point and focus, phenomenology can be used to investigate any number of subjects, in any number of fields. It is an especially useful methodology when a researcher is studying a new topic or seeking to provide a "fresh perspective" on a topic that has previously been studied using other methods.[236] Although it is common to speak of phenomenology in the singular, multiple distinct methodologies, each with their own approach, method, and procedures, fall under this heading. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is one of these.

While its philosophical foundations emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, IPA can trace its specific history to the mid-1990s[237] and an effort to move psychological research away from quantitative studies that established generalities about human behavior,[238] toward a research approach that was qualitative, experiential, and particular.[239] To achieve this purpose, IPA draws on Husserl, Heidegger, and the range of phenomenological approaches.[240] Influenced by Husserl's emphasis on "the things themselves," IPA is committed to "see[ing] things as they present themselves in their own terms, rather than as defined by prior scientific hypotheses or abstract conceptualization."[241] At the same time, reminiscent of Heidegger, IPA takes an interpretive stance, adopting a double hermeneutic: "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of

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[235] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1998), 52.
[236] Cohen, Steeves, and Kahn, *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research,* 3.
[237] Jonathan A. Smith, "Beyond the Divide Between Cognition and Discourse: Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis in Health Psychology," *Psychology and Health* 11, no. 2 (1996): 261–271. This article is considered the first to present IPA as a distinct methodology and research approach.
[238] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 29.
[239] Ibid., 4.
[240] Eatuogh and Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 6.
[241] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 25–26.

their world."[242] In the vein of Ricoeur, who outlined a variety of interpretive stances, IPA "combines an empathetic hermeneutics with a questioning hermeneutics," seeking to both understand the participants' experiences and ask critical questions of the data that might reveal a deeper level of understanding than what the participants themselves could provide.[243] In addition to phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is also influenced by symbolic interactionism, which argues that individuals ascribe meaning to events or experiences in the context of, or as a result of, social interactions, and these meanings "are only obtained through a process of interpretation."[244] Finally, IPA "is resolutely idiographic, focusing on the particular rather than the universal."[245] Although more general claims are not entirely eschewed, careful attention is given to formulating these from the particular cases.[246] Taken together, these influencing factors contribute to IPA being

> an approach which is dedicated to the detailed explorations of personal meaning and lived experience. More particularly, the aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings that particular experiences, events, and states hold for people.[247]

Thus, the "phenomenon" in IPA is everyday lived experience that has become significant in some way.[248]

As is often the case with qualitative research, "there is no single, definitive way to do IPA."[249] However, there are guidelines for employing the methodology, particularly in regard to

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[242] Ibid., 26.
[243] Ibid., 26.
[244] Smith, "Beyond the Divide," 263.
[245] Virginia Eatough and Jonathan A. Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, ed. Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2011), 7.
[246] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 27.
[247] Ibid., 25.
[248] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 1.
[249] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 25.

research questions, sample, data collection, data analysis, and write-up. **IPA research questions** are exploratory, not explanatory. In fact, "'exploring' has been used more commonly than any other verb to state the IPA researchers' actions and intentions in relation to their chosen object of investigation."[250] As such, research questions revolve not around theory, but around situations, experiences, and sensemaking.[251] Theory-driven questions do have a place in IPA research; however, it is secondary. Theory-driven questions will only come into play at the interpretive stage of the research, and there is no guarantee they will be answered by the research data.[252] The **sample** in an IPA study is typically small and homogeneous in order to allow for depth of exploration and for analysis of the variability across the group's experience.[253] Purposeful sampling is employed to identify participants who can provide insight into the phenomenon being studied. In selecting participants, the emphasis is on the perspective represented, not the population represented.[254] **Data collection** most commonly takes the form of semistructured, one-on-one interviews.[255] It is recommended that the researcher draw up a list of questions to facilitate the interaction between researcher and participant. However, this list serves as a guide only, as the direction of each interview is largely determined by the participant's responses.[256] **Data analysis** in an IPA study does not follow a single method. Instead, "the essence of IPA lies in its analytic *focus* … toward [the] participants' attempts to make sense of their experience."[257] However, there are general guidelines for the process.[258] Typically, individual interview

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[250] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 46.
[251] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 27–28.
[252] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 48.
[253] Ibid., 50.
[254] Ibid., 48–49.
[255] Katie Reid, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, "Exploring Lived Experience," *Psychologist* 18, no. 1 (January 2005), 22.
[256] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 35.
[257] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 79. Italics original.
[258] For the following discussion of data analysis in an IPA study, see Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 82–103, except where otherwise noted.

transcripts are examined, emergent themes are identified and developed, and connections across themes are noted. When the analysis of one transcript is complete, the researcher moves on to the next transcript. Finally, when all transcripts have been analyzed individually, the researcher looks for patterns across cases. As these guidelines suggest, interpretation of the data moves between representing the participants' experience and interpreting the participants' experience,[259] and between focusing on the data as a whole and on discrete portions of an interview.[260] In the **write-up** of an IPA study, the researcher "is concerned with translating the themes into a narrative account."[261] A table of the identified themes is presented, a narrative account of the findings is constructed, and verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts are used as supporting documentation.[262] Even though the data analysis is grounded in the participants' own words, the final product may be "several steps abstracted from them," as at each level the researcher moves "toward a more interpretive stance."[263] This "dual reading"—attention to the participants' specific experiences, as well as to an interpretation of those experiences—is considered by some to be the distinctive feature of a good IPA study.[264]

**Suitability for the Study**

IPA was a suitable methodology for this dissertation research study for several reasons. First, in its examination of congregants' experiences of change in their churches, the study focused on the meaning-making associated with a significant lived experience in the participants' lives. This focus is the hallmark of an IPA study, and a significant lived experience is the

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[259] Eatough and Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 17.
[260] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 104–106.
[261] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 48.
[262] Ibid., 49.
[263] Eatough and Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 20.
[264] See, for example: Eatough and Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 20; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 101.

phenomenon at the very heart of the methodology. Second, with its attention on the *congregant's* experience, the study provides a novel perspective on the complex issue of congregational change. Any of the phenomenological methodologies are useful for providing a fresh perspective on a topic,[265] and IPA in particular is "especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty."[266] Third, in its exploratory approach to the experience of congregational change and to the meaning-making associated with it, the study aligns with the overall aim and goal of IPA which is "the detailed explorations of personal meaning and lived experience."[267] Finally, in its analysis and interpretation of the data, the study sought to both understand the congregants' experiences and to ask critical questions that might reveal a deeper level of understanding, particularly in regard to aspects of faith, attributions of sacredness, and the presence of guiding value systems. This combination of an empathetic hermeneutics and a questioning hermeneutics is inherent within IPA's methodology. There was, therefore, a strong alignment between the research topic and the methodology chosen to explore it.[268]

## Study Design

Having provided an introduction to interpretive phenomenological analysis, I now describe the study that utilized this methodology to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. Details of the study design, including participant selection criteria and procedures, data collection and analysis methods, interpretation of data and findings, quality control measures, and ethical considerations are all addressed.

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[265] Cohen, Steeves, and Kahn, *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research*, 3.
[266] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 28.
[267] Ibid., 25.
[268] The alignment between the researcher and the chosen methodology was addressed in the discussion of research positionality in Chapter I.

**Participant Selection Criteria**

In keeping with IPA guidelines, participants were selected on the basis of their ability to provide insight into the congregant's experience of change in a church setting. Several inclusion criteria were used to guide participant selection. The first of these criteria related to the type of churches from which the participants were drawn. Participants were primarily drawn from midsize churches affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination. Mainline denominations[269] tend to have similar core beliefs, be theologically moderate to liberal, and be socially engaged. In the early- and mid-20th century, these denominations, along with their associated churches and leaders, held positions of prominence not only in religious circles, but also in the broader U.S. culture and society. Since the late 20th century, however, most churches within mainline denominations have experienced decreasing attendance,[270] and the denominations themselves have been characterized as being in decline.[271] Because there is some disagreement among scholars and churchgoers as to which denominations are classified as mainline, the list provided by the Association of Religion Data Archives[272] was used to determine if a church was affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination. Midsize churches, defined for the purpose of this study as those having an average Sunday attendance of 50–150, tend to be pastor-centric in their

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[269] For a discussion of the history and characteristics of mainline denominations, see, for example: Jason S. Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); William McKinney, "Mainline Protestantism," in *Contemporary American Religion*, Vol. 2, ed. Wade Clark Roof (New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2000), 407–410.

[270] See, for example: Roozen, "American Congregations 2010," 2, 14; Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 3–4, 20–21, 25–27.

[271] This characterization of decline is evidenced, in part, by resources and recommendations intended to combat it. See, for example: Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround: Strategies for Congregations and Denominations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); David Neff, "How to Fix Mainline Decline," *Christianity Today* 37, no. 7 (June 21, 1993), 17.

[272] Association of Religion Data Archives, "Mainline Protestant Denominations," accessed February 21, 2019, http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/mainline.asp.

organization and leadership structure, as well as in their spiritual life and church culture.[273] The pastor features prominently in the planning and leading of worship services, as well as any Christian education or spiritual formation activities, such as a Bible study or prayer group. Although the church may have any number of boards or committees and several key laypersons involved in leadership, the pastor remains at the center of the running of the church. The pastor also typically knows all congregants by name and has some level of familiarity with their lives. Congregants, meanwhile, rely on the pastor to provide the vision and direction for the church, as well as to tend to their spiritual needs. Given the personal connection between the pastor and congregants, persons in the church are able to approach the pastor directly in times of personal crisis or if they have some concern related to the church. Drawing participants primarily from midsize, mainline Protestant churches provided some commonality among those who took part in the study.

The second inclusion criterion related to the change in the participants' churches. The study conceived of change broadly, as any deviation from established custom or the status quo. This enabled the participants to define change more specifically as it related to their own church contexts and experiences. As expected, the participants identified an array of changes in their churches, including splits, mergers, location moves, denominational switches, leadership transitions, worship service revisions, and LGBTQ policy adoption. Although the changes themselves were many and varied, they shared the characteristic of having taken place in the recent past. In other words, the change initiative was neither currently ongoing, nor was it

[273] The following discussion draws from Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 81–86; and Roy Oswald, "How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate Sized Churches," in *Size Transitions in Congregations*, edited by Beth Ann Gaede (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 35–38. These, in turn, draw from Arlin J. Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry* (New York: The Episcopal Church Center, [1986]), which is the first work to describe the distinctive features and styles associated with congregations of similar size.

something that took place in the church's distant history. Focusing on recent change enabled participants in the study to reflect on the full arc of their experience with the change, as well as the change's impact on the congregation. This provided depth to the data and allowed both the participants and the researcher to fully engage the hermeneutic circle, exploring the interaction between the parts and the whole of the experience.

The final inclusion criteria related to the participants themselves. Participants in the study must have been regular attendees of the church during the time the change was taking place. For the purpose of this study, regular attendance was defined as being present in a church's worship service at least two times per month and not being affiliated with another congregation. However, it was not necessary for the participant to be a regular attendee of the church at the time of data collection. Lastly, but not of least importance, all participants in the study were congregants – that is, neither clergy nor staff members. This was crucial, as the study specifically sought to explore the *congregant's* experience of change in a church setting.

**Participant Selection Procedures**

Whenever the subject of my dissertation research arose in conversations with churchgoing friends and fellow clergypersons while the study was being developed, someone invariably said, "Oh, you should talk to the people at my church," or "Have you heard about the change at *Fill-in-the-Blank* Church?" There seemed to be no shortage of churches that had recently undergone a change of some sort. I initially focused my participant recruitment efforts on pastors and denominational leaders within my own professional network, as well as those recommended or introduced to me by colleagues. My hope was that these individuals, although ineligible to participant in the study themselves, would be able to connect me with congregants

who might be potential participants. I contacted over thirty pastors and denominational leaders, both active and retired, across a wide geographic area and denominational spectrum. Ultimately, only three pastors responded favorably to my request to be connected with individuals from their congregations who might be willing to participate in the study. Seeing that my recruitment efforts thus far were largely unsuccessful, I changed tactics and focused instead on asking churchgoing friends and acquaintances—congregants, rather than pastors or denominational leaders—if they were aware of fellow churchgoers who might fit my participant selection criteria. This proved to be more successful, as I was connected directly with potential participants and a smaller number of inquiries led to a larger number positive responses.

Having identified a pool of thirty potential participants through the above recruitment methods, I made contact with these individuals via email or phone to introduce myself, explain the purpose of the study, and invite their participation. A sample contact email is included in Appendix A,[274] and the information sheet provided to all potential participants is included in Appendix B. I then had initial screening conversations with those who expressed willingness to participate in the study to confirm they met the participant selection criteria, to gain information on the nature of change in their church, and to ascertain their willingness to talk openly and honestly about their experience of that change. See Appendix C for guidelines for this initial screening conversation. I then selected eleven participants to interview for data collection purposes[275] and obtained their informed consent to participate in the study using the form provided in Appendix D. These eleven individuals were selected on the basis of their willingness

[274] Note: Similar information was covered in the phone conversation if a potential participant was contacted via phone instead of by email.

[275] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin suggest between three and six participants is a "reasonable sample size" for an IPA study. (See Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,* 51–52). Given the open-ended manner in which my study conceived of change, however, I expected that a larger sample would be needed in order to achieve data saturation.

to talk openly and honestly about their experience of congregational change, and for their contribution toward maximum diversity in the study's sample. Because mainline Protestant congregations tend to be predominantly older, white, and female,[276] it was expected from the outset that the study's sample would have limited diversity in regard to age, gender, or race/ethnicity. However, some diversity was achieved in this area, as well as in regard to denominational affiliation, geographic location, and the specific nature of change in the participants' churches. Of the study's eleven participants, nine were women and two were men. Their ages ranged from thirty-three to seventy-seven. One participant identified as African American, one as Chinese, two as black, and seven as white. Five participants resided in the Midwest, and three each resided in the Northeast and South. Together, the participants represented six denominations: American Baptist Churches USA, Churches of Christ,[277] the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church. The participants and the nature of change in their churches will be introduced more fully in Chapter IV.

**Data Collection**

In keeping with IPA conventions, the study relied on semistructured interviews for data collection. I conducted in-person, one-one-one, semistructured interviews with each of the participants, using the interview guide provided in Appendix E. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient for each participant and were recorded, then later transcribed. The

[276] According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, which is the most recent year for which such comprehensive data exists, the median age of adults in mainline Protestant churches is 52, 86% of mainline Protestant congregants are "white, non-Hispanic," and women make up 55% of mainline Protestant congregations. Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religions Landscape," 50–52, 60–61.

[277] Churches of Christ was the only denomination represented in the study that is not classified as mainline Protestant by the Association of Religion Data Archives.

average length of recorded interviews was sixty-six minutes, although the total amount of time spent with each participant was longer. Because I was committed to geographic diversity in my sample and to collecting data in person, I drove nearly 2,300 miles during the data collection period.

**Data Analysis**

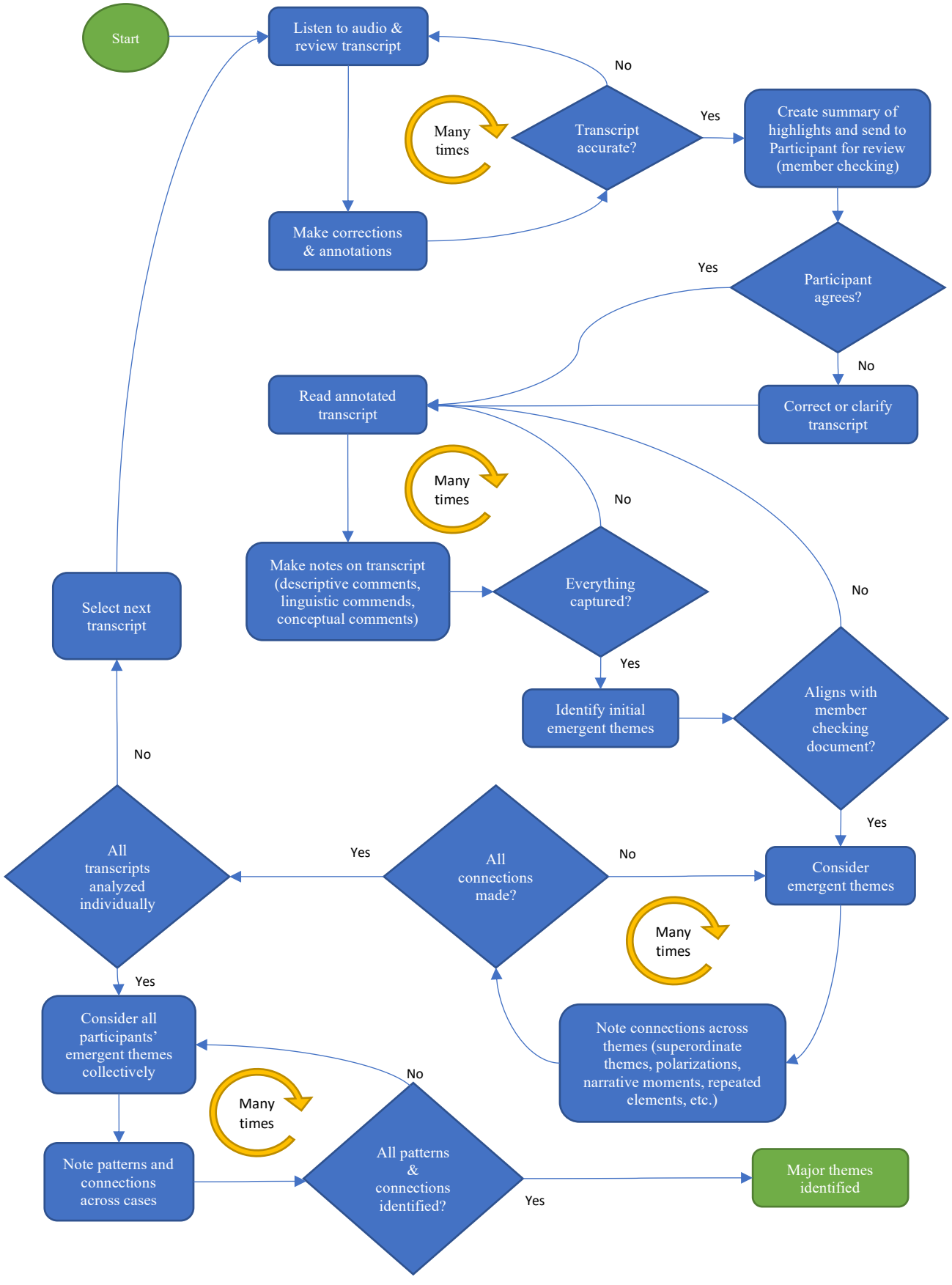
As previously noted, there is no single method for working with data in an IPA study. I therefore took a fluid and iterative approach to the process.[278] To begin, I listened to the interview audio and read the interview transcript multiple times. This allowed me to enter the participant's world and to note in the transcript any significant pauses, intonations, or expressions of emotion during the interview. After reading the transcript several times, I created a one-page summary of the interview's highlights, which I sent to the participant for review. A copy of the email that accompanied this member-checking document is included as Appendix F. If the participant subsequently made changes to the page of highlights, I noted these in the relevant portion of the interview transcript so that successive readings and further data analysis would take into account the participant's corrections or clarifications. Then, I returned to the now-annotated transcript, reading it multiple times and making initial notes. These typically fell into one of three categories: descriptive comments, about the content of the interview; linguistic comments, about the language used by the participant; and/or conceptual comments, which often took the form of questions and which also began to move the analysis to a more abstract level. Working iteratively from these notes and the transcript, I identified emergent themes in the

[278] The following discussion of IPA data analysis draws from guidelines suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 81–103, except where otherwise noted.

participant's interview data, keeping in mind that a theme in an IPA study is "always experiential—it is a way of marking or capturing an element of the participant's lived experience and sense-making in regard to that experience."[279] These initial emergent themes were written on a large notepad page, posted on the wall in my workspace, and then read in light of the member-checking document to ensure the themes I had identified were in keeping with the participant's experience. If they were not, I returned to the transcript and my notes in order to reconsider what was emerging from the participant's experience. If the themes were in keeping with participant's experience as captured in the member-checking document, I proceeded to make note of connections across emergent themes. These connections often took the form of superordinate themes, polarizations, narrative moments, and/or repeated elements, among others, and were captured on the notepad page on the wall with lines, arrows, and other notations. When the analysis of one transcript was concluded, I moved to the next transcript and repeated the process. Finally, when all transcripts were analyzed individually, I collectively considered the eleven notepad pages posted on the wall and made note of patterns and connections across all participants' emergent themes, this time using different colors to identify the links between and among the participants' experiences. From this process of analysis, I identified five major themes, each with several sub-themes, in the participants' experiences of change in their churches. These will be presented in Chapter IV. Figure 3.1 illustrates my data analysis process, and Appendix G provides a sample of the output at various stages of the process.

[279] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 48.

**Figure 3.1 – Data Analysis Process**



**Interpretation of Data and Findings**

In a methodology called "interpretive phenomenological analysis," interpretation is a critical component of the study. As noted earlier in the chapter, IPA adopts a double hermeneutic: "[T]he participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world."[280] For me, this involved several components, occurring throughout the study. First, I took notes on my thoughts, observations, and impressions immediately after each interview, again after my initial review of the transcript, and periodically throughout data analysis. This allowed me to continually reflect on how my identity, positionality, and biases might be shaping the study, how I was reading the data, or how I was performing my role as researcher. Second, I engaged both an empathetic hermeneutics and a questioning hermeneutics during data analysis. The empathetic hermeneutics prompted me to try to understand and describe the what the congregational change experience was like for the participants from their own points of view. It was a "putting myself in their shoes" approach to the data. The questioning hermeneutics prompted me to ask critical questions of the data that might reveal insights the participants themselves could not provide. It was a "stepping back and asking what else might be going on here?" approach to the participants' experiences. These two hermeneutics were held in constant tension throughout the data analysis process.[281] Finally, I viewed the study's findings through two interpretive lenses: Christian theology and adult development theory. These lenses enabled to me explore questions such as "What does the participant's experience of the change reveal about her understanding of God?

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[280] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 26.

[281] The descriptive comments included when making initial notes on the annotated transcript are an example of an empathetic hermeneutics, while the conceptual comments similarly included are an example of a questioning hermeneutics. In hindsight, it is possible that the empathetic hermeneutics exerted a stronger pull because I was a novice researcher and because I was committed to respecting the participants and their experiences. This slight imbalance, however, in no way negates the analysis or the study's findings.

What is the participant's underlying value system? What role did faith play in the participant's experience of the change?" as I attempted to make sense of the findings themselves and their implications for both practice and future research. A discussion of the study's findings as seen through these lenses will be presented in Chapter V.

## Quality Control Measures

The two quality control measures I employed to ensure, to the best of my ability, that the study was rigorous and its findings were credible have already been mentioned elsewhere in this chapter. The notes I made on my thoughts, observations, and impressions throughout the data collection and analysis processes were not only an aspect of interpretation; they were also a key component of **researcher reflexivity**. I discussed in Chapter I the positionality I brought to the study; however, it was not sufficient to only be aware of this at the study's outset. Instead, it was important for me to continually attend to my own metacognition in order to safeguard the study's rigor and the credibility of its findings. **Member checking** was a quality control measure as well as a step in the data analysis process. By providing all participants with a one-page summary of the highlights from their interview and inviting their comments on it, I was able to confirm that these highlights, and my understanding of them, truthfully represented the participants' experiences as relayed to me in the interview.[282] Together, these quality control measures enhanced the study's validity, accuracy, and trustworthiness.

The study's proposal included one additional quality control measure, which was not employed in the actual study: a focus group. I originally proposed convening a focus group of five to ten participants who had not taken part in the one-on-one interviews to discuss the

[282] Very few participants made changes or corrections, and the majority of these were minor. The most common response from participants to the interview highlights was, "You nailed it!"

emergent themes and reflect on those themes in light of their own experiences of congregational change. However, as data analysis began to reveal the extent to which the emergent themes were present in the majority of participants' experiences, I determined, in consultation with my dissertation committee, that such a focus group was not necessary. From a methodological standpoint, a focus group as I originally proposed is not generally part of an IPA study. Furthermore, my study included more interviews than is common for an IPA study. In addition to providing a surfeit of data, the large sample size acted as its own quality control measure by contributing to the rigor of the study and credibility of its findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

There were no major ethical issues with the study. The study did not involve minors or vulnerable populations. Participants provided informed consent and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the completion of data analysis. Standard practices were followed to ensure anonymity of participants, and participants were assured that their experiences would not be shared with others in their church. In this document, all participants have been provided with pseudonyms, and potentially identifying information has been stripped from interview quotations.

# Chapter IV – The Study's Findings

## Introduction

As described in Chapter III, this dissertation research study used interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. The study, which was grounded in the current religious landscape in the United States and the existing literature on change in a church setting, grew out of the assumption that the congregation's perspective is crucial to understanding change in a church context and gaining insights into how congregational change might be navigated more successfully. This chapter presents the results of that study. Chapter IV begins with an introduction to the study's participants. Then, reflections on my role as the study's researcher are offered. The chapter's final and largest section is devoted to the study's findings, including the five major themes that emerged from the data.

## Participant Introductions

Although all human-centered research studies are reliant upon the participants who take part in them, IPA studies, which explore "personal meaning and lived experience"[283] in detail, are particularly indebted to their participants, for the participants themselves, their experiences, and their attempts at meaning-making are truly at the center of the studies. It is therefore appropriate that a chapter dedicated to the findings of my IPA research study begin with an introduction to the participants who made the study possible.[284]

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[283] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 25.

[284] I believe it is no exaggeration to say that this study would not have been possible without the involvement of these participants. I likewise acknowledge that the involvement of different participants might have resulted in a very different study, with different findings.

This study's eleven participants, nine women and two men, represent six denominations and three geographical regions in the United States. They live in cities, suburbs, and small towns. They are African American, black, Chinese, and white; married, widowed, single, and divorced; working professionals, retirees, and stay-at-home parents. Their churches have split, merged, moved, been renamed, switched denominations, started new ministries, undergone leadership transitions, revised their worship services, and/or taken a position on LGBTQ issues. The chief commonalities among the participants are their affiliation with a church that undertook some kind of change in recent years, and their willingness to share their experiences of that change with me. Following are brief introductions to each of the eleven individuals who graciously participated in this research study.[285]

- *Joanna* is a 59-year-old white woman and longtime member of an American Baptist church in the Northeast. She was part of a leadership group that took her church through a discernment process that ultimately led to a decision to become a welcoming and affirming congregation—that is, a church in which all aspects of congregational life and leadership are open to LGBTQ people. The church also recently celebrated the retirement of its senior pastor and currently has an interim pastor.
- *Deborah* is a 67-year-old white woman the Midwest. She had been an active member of a church affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for several years when the congregation decided to join a more conservative denomination in response to the legalization of same-sex marriage and the church's ongoing disagreement with the ELCA on issues related to sexuality and gender. She left the church on the day the congregation voted to disaffiliate with the ELCA.

[285] Note: Names provided are pseudonyms.

- *Daniel* is a 40-year-old African American man and member of a Church of Christ in the Midwest. His church recently moved into a much larger building, in a higher-traffic area, with the intent of growing and becoming more involved in the community. Instead, attendance has declined and he wonders if the church has the right people, with the right skills, in the right leadership positions for the work that needs to be done now.
- *Martha* is a 66-year-old white woman and a longtime member of a United Methodist church in the South. Her church has merged, moved, and undergone several leadership transitions in the past ten or more years. The church's most recent change is a move to a new building, which she loves and feels very proud of.
- *Rachel* is a 59-year-old white woman who is a longtime member of an American Baptist church in the Northeast. The church recently adopted a policy that makes it welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ people. Around the same time, but unrelatedly, the senior pastor retired after ten years of service with the church.
- *Esther* is a 74-year-old black woman in the Midwest. She is a former member of an Episcopal church that split when the priest wanted the church to become Anglican. The remnant Episcopal congregation eventually lost its building due to financial issues under the leadership of another priest and many members due to internal conflict and the lack of a church building. She herself left the church when it finally settled on a pub as the location for its worship services.
- *Hannah* is a 51-year-old white woman in the South. The United Methodist church she formerly attended has a long history of change, including mergers, location moves, name changes, and pastoral leadership transitions. She eventually decided to leave the church after the congregation purchased a property that did not fit with what she understood the

church's original vision to be and because of what she saw as a lack of integrity within the church's leadership.

- *Phoebe* is a black woman who attends a Church of Christ in the Midwest. Her church recently changed its name and relocated to a different building, with the vision of doing more outreach in the community. The congregation was initially excited about and supportive of the changes, but that has now shifted; some members are leaving the church and others are complaining behind the scenes.
- *Ruth* is a 56-year-old Chinese woman in the Northeast whose church recently sought and was granted dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA). The church had a history of discontent with the PCUSA related to theological views, mission focus, and stances taken by the national body that did not reflect the church's stances on the same issues. She was on the session[286] during this time and was heavily involved in the details of the church's dismissal from one denomination and acceptance into another.
- *Lydia* is a 33-year-old white woman and a member of a United Methodist church in the South. Her church has experienced constant change for nearly fifteen years: two mergers, two location moves, two name changes, multiple pastoral leadership transitions, and the institution of a contemporary worship service. She has been part of this church for most of her life and has been supportive of the various mergers, moves, and changes.
- *Philip* is a 77-year-old white man who attends a predominantly white Episcopal church in the Midwest. He and other members of his church joined with members of several predominantly black Episcopal congregations in the area to form a conversation group focused on racial reconciliation. He is excited that, after meeting together for over a year,

[286] Session is the name for the governing body of a Presbyterian church.

the group is now reaching the stage where it will propose action steps to its representative churches.

The experiences of these eleven individuals constituted the study's data, from which the findings emerged.

## Researcher Reflections

Before presenting those findings, however, I must acknowledge my own role in the study. Just as an IPA study is particularly indebted to its participants, it is also uniquely shaped by its researcher. Not only does the researcher "[try] to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world"[287] during data analysis and interpretation, the researcher also establishes a collaborative relationship with the participants during data collection.[288] Therefore, it is necessary for an IPA researcher to reflect up how she "explicitly enters into the research process."[289]

As discussed in Chapter I, I am a lifelong churchgoer and an ordained minister with decades of firsthand knowledge of the challenges of congregational change. As a congregant, I have experienced change "from the pew" and have been part of the lay leadership responsible for implementing change. As a minister, I have proposed or instituted change "from the pulpit" that impacted congregants in large and small ways. Therefore, I could relate to the participants in my study; their experiences were not unknown or unfamiliar to me. At the same time, their experiences were uniquely theirs. Whatever similarities I might find to my own experiences, it

[287] Smith and Osborn, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 26.
[288] Reid, Flowers, and Larkin, "Exploring Lived Experience," 20.
[289] Ibid.

was important for me to recognize that my relationship to the participants was that of researcher, not pastor or fellow congregant.

Maintaining awareness of this distinction was aided by the fact that all but one of the participants were strangers to me prior to their recruitment into the study.[290] With this one exception, the participant and I met in person for the first time when I arrived for the interview.[291] In all cases, the interview took place in a location I had never been before: three participant homes, two church buildings, five cafés, one local library. Given the amount of unfamiliarity involved,[292] I expected to have some trepidation entering into the interviews. Yet this did not prove to be the case. Sitting down with these relative strangers in unfamiliar settings to have conversations about their experiences of change in their churches, which is a deeply personal topic, felt completely natural to me. Hindsight enables me to attribute this to several factors. First, I am able to navigate unknown and unpredictable situations, particularly in my professional life,[293] with some degree of skill. Second, the participants themselves were obviously unafraid to talk with a relative stranger, or else they would not have volunteered to participate in the study. And third, while the researcher/participant dynamic was new to me and to the participants, the pastor/congregant dynamic was not. As previously noted, I was mindful throughout the data collection that my relationship to the participants was that of researcher, not pastor. Nevertheless, my positionality did provide an aspect of familiarity to an otherwise

[290] The one participant who was known to me prior to the study was not a church-based acquaintance. As such, that participant knew me neither in a pastoral capacity nor as a fellow congregation member. Additionally, I had not been in contact with the participant for many years.
[291] As noted in Chapter III, I had connected with the participants by email and phone prior to the in-person interview.
[292] I am also a novice researcher, which added to the unfamiliarity of the situation, and I was unaccustomed to conducting semistructured, qualitative research interviews.
[293] Most of my ministry career has been bi-vocational, as I have worked concurrently in ministry and in healthcare, which is my first profession. In both settings, I frequently encounter unknown and unpredictable situations.

unfamiliar situation, both for me and for the participants. I believe these factors, taken together, enabled me to enter into the interviews without trepidation.

While I was pleasantly surprised by how natural it felt to have the conversations with the participants, I was completely unprepared for the abundant hospitality they showed to me. I was given fresh pastries in participants' homes. I was offered a drink or a snack in cafés and church buildings. My comfort and convenience was taken into account in the selection of chairs, the temperature of the room, the placement of the audio recorder. I was, without fail, treated as a welcomed guest, regardless of where the interview took place.

During the interviews, I was privileged to be invited to enter the participants' worlds for a short while. And I was amazed and honored by what people shared with me: heartbreak, joy, grief, excitement, anger, hope, fear, faith, doubt, prayers, laughter, tears, and more. After a few interviews, I was no longer surprised if a participant cried. On more than one occasion, I silently implored the audio recorder to somehow capture the personality, the body language, the sense of humor of the person sitting across from me. What the participants shared was so much more than their words.

Perhaps this was why the experience of conducting the interviews was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. Creating an environment in which participants could share openly required focused, attentive listening and a nonjudgmental presence on my part. These, in turn, demanded a great deal of energy. After each interview, I felt depleted. Most difficult were the days in which I conducted multiple interviews[294] or drove a long distance prior to an interview.[295] Thankfully, the exhaustion was not in vain. Each interview was a valuable contribution to the research study,

[294] The most interviews I conducted in a single day was three. One or two interviews per day was more typical.
[295] On one occasion, I drove 400+ miles and then immediately conducted two back-to-back interviews.

the results of which were dependent, in no small part, on the dynamic between me as the researcher and each of the eleven participants.

## The Study's Findings

Consistent with IPA, the study's findings took the form of themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. As noted in Chapter III, these themes were identified by first analyzing each interview transcript individually, then by considering the data as a whole to establish patterns and connections across the interviews. In this way, data analysis was an iterative process that moved between representing the participants' experience and interpreting the participants' experience,[296] and between focusing on the data as a whole and on discrete portions of an interview.[297] Five major themes, each with several sub-themes, emerged from this process.[298] These themes and sub-themes are listed in Table 4.1.

[296] Eatough and Smith, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," 17.
[297] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 104–106.
[298] Major themes were those identified in at least six of the eleven interviews.

**Table 4.1 Emergent Themes**

| Theme and Related Sub-Themes | Prevalence |
|---|---|
| The Centrality of Faith<br>- Personal Faith as a Guiding Principle<br>- Personal Faith as a Sustaining Force<br>- Personal Faith as a Lens | 9 of 11 participants |
| The Presence of Conflict or Discord<br>- Within the Congregation<br>- Between Participant and Congregation or Leadership<br>- Within Participant's Family | 9 of 11 participants |
| A Predominance of Negative Emotions<br>- Sadness<br>- Frustration<br>- Anger<br>- Others | 9 of 11 participants |
| An Aspect of Learning<br>- As Part of the Experience<br>- From the Experience<br>- In Response to the Experience | 8 of 11 participants |
| A Sense of Resolution<br>- Peace with What Is<br>- Hope for What Could Be | 11 of 11 participants |

The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to discussing each theme and providing select, illustrative quotes from participant interviews.[299]

## The Centrality of Faith

The first theme to emerge from the data was the centrality of faith in the participants' experiences. This finding is not surprising, given the participants are churchgoers and people of

[299] Note: Brackets [ ] will be used to indicate that a portion of the interview transcript, which was not related to the present topic, was omitted in the quotation.

faith and the experience of change under investigation was specific to a church context. Instead, it is reasonable and even expected that participants' faith would come into play as they navigated the change or sought to make meaning of the experience. This theme emerged for nine of the eleven participants, yet the specific role of faith took several forms.

*Personal Faith as a Guiding Principle*

Faith served as a guiding principle for Deborah, Rachel, Esther, and Philip. Each relied on their theology, their understanding of the Christian faith, to determine how they would respond to the change at their church. Rachel's decision to support her church's move toward becoming welcoming and affirming was based on her understanding of Jesus's commandment to love.[300] For her, the only possible course of action in light of that commandment was to fully accept LGBTQ people into the life of the church and for the church to establish a policy reflecting that acceptance. Said Rachel,

> I think it came back to what's important is love. That the first commandment is to love and any other kind of stand about gay/lesbian type things, I think, would not be about love. I'd say my faith is just believing that love is what's important and is probably the most important part of my faith journey.

Similarly, Philip's support for and involvement in the racial reconciliation group came from the importance he attaches to Jesus's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.[301] In his historically segregated community, white residents had traditionally not been neighborly toward black residents and he wished to be part of a group that was working to change that narrative.

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[300] "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 12:34–35 (NRSV). See also: John 15:12.

[301] "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22: 34–40 (NRSV). See also: Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

Deborah's decision to leave her church when it disaffiliated with the ELCA to join a denomination that did not support the full inclusion of LGBTQ people sprung from her own understanding of God's abundance, which does not allow for the "othering," or the exclusion, of anyone. Said Deborah,

> This abundance of God is so rich, it can't be empty. It's just forever. It just never quits. It's like, there's enough for me, there's enough for you, and oh my gosh, it's still coming. You cannot exhaust the abundance of God. Somehow, that has led to this idea that you can't "other" people.

The only way for her to act in accordance with her belief in God's abundance was to leave the church. Esther, likewise, decided to leave her church when faced with a conflict between her faith and the church's actions. She could not reconcile worshipping in a pub, the church's new home for worship services after losing its building, with her beliefs and her strict upbringing. For her, a pub was "symbolic of evil" and she was unable to confer upon it the same respect she would a church building or sanctuary, which she saw as "God's house." As a result, she left her longtime church and joined a one with a more traditional building.

In these four instances, the participants' personal faith, or their theology, served as the guiding principle for determining how they would respond to the change at their churches.

*Personal Faith as a Sustaining Force*

For Martha, Hannah, and Phoebe, faith was a sustaining force in the midst of both the change itself and its repercussions. Esther relied upon her faith in this way as well. Each turned to her faith to provide guidance, support, stability, assurance, or comfort particularly, but not exclusively, during periods of conflict or uncertainty. Esther witnessed many people abandoning their faith when the church split and eventually lost its building. Her faith, meanwhile, was not shaken and in fact was a source of stability:

> I have a very strong faith, and I will thank my grandmother for that, even though I didn't when I was little. [ ] I just have a strong belief …. I have had a good life, some bad stuff, but I know God's got my back. [ ] Strong belief, pray every day …. [Faith] is just my foundation forever. I don't know how people do it without God.

Similarly, Phoebe identified faith as her foundation and source of stability: "I know that my foundation is all about God." She continues to trust in God's guidance as church members now leave and others complain behind the scenes, remaining optimistic that God will direct the congregation and the leadership so that the church can overcome its present obstacles and survive. Hannah relied on prayer to uphold and comfort her during the difficult periods associated with her church's changes: "I said a lot of prayers," particularly when conflict was present and when relationships were strained. Martha turned to God for guidance and assurance throughout the many changes at her church. She sensed God was directing the process from the outset: "I felt God's presence in everything we did." And her faith gave her confidence that the church was moving forward in the right direction: "I think [my confidence] was coming from God because I never wavered." Now that the church is experiencing the growing pains associated with being in a new building, her faith continues to provide assurance: "I think God's working with us. I think he's getting us through these hurdles."

In these ways, the participants' personal faith served as a sustaining force during the change at their churches.

### *Personal Faith as a Lens*

Faith served as a lens through which Lydia and Ruth viewed the changes at their respective churches. Each saw the changes in light of her faith, which helped her to make meaning of the experience. In recent years, Lydia has found herself becoming more active in

missionary work and outreach. She felt her church supported this involvement, and she saw some of the church's changes, especially in regard to increased outreach ministry, as paralleling her own faith journey. Reflecting back on her experience of change at her church, Ruth said of the process of dismissal from the PCUSA and acceptance into another denomination, and especially the uncertainty involved:

> This is just another training ground or a reminder of how we understand God's bigness and then also the mystery of not knowing everything and just hanging onto God, whether in good times and in bad.

In these ways, the participants saw the change through the lens of their faith.

**The Presence of Conflict or Discord**

The second theme to emerge from the data was the presence of conflict or discord in the participants' experiences of change in their churches. Few participants specifically used the word "conflict" or its synonyms to describe their experiences. Yet the data conveyed an overwhelming sense of division, friction, dissension, strife, and dispute. In some instances, this discord simmered below the surface or had only a minor impact on the participant or congregation. In others, the conflict boiled over into a dominant feature of the experience. As with the centrality of faith in the participants' experiences, the presence of conflict or discord is unsurprising: congregational change is often accompanied by discord or conflict.[302] For the nine participants in the study for whom this emerged as a theme, conflict or discord was present, to varying degrees,

[302] Many resources on congregational change address conflict in some form. See, for example: Bradshaw, *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation*; Loftis, "A New Vision for Worship;" Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*.).

within the congregation, between the participant and the congregation or leadership, and, in one case, within the participant's family.

### *Within the Congregation*

Eight participants' experiences were characterized by conflict or discord within the congregation. Although these participants held opinions or perspectives that might have differed from others in the congregation, the overall sense from the data was the conflict or discord in these instances was a congregation-wide phenomenon, rather than one specific to the participants themselves. The manifestation of the conflict or discord varied from church to church and participant to participant, as did their experiences of it.

Joanna described her church as "healthy" and noted that the decision to become welcoming and affirming had support from "80–85% of the congregation." Nevertheless, there was some tension between those who participated in the discernment process leading up to the welcoming and affirming decision and those who did not engage with the process until the end, when they expressed their opposition to the decision. Rachel reflected that "a lot of people felt really good about it" when her church adopted a policy of inclusion toward LGBTQ people. At the same time, she was aware that the initiative did not have universal support and that there had been prior rifts in the congregation over the issue of sexuality when people affiliated with the church had come out as gay. In both of these instances, the discord, while present, was limited in scope and was not an overwhelming feature of the participants' experience.

For Daniel, Phoebe, and Esther, the discord or conflict was a more prominent feature of their experiences of change in their churches. In Daniel's church, strife emerged after the congregation moved into a larger building, which was found to be in need of unexpected repairs.

Those who volunteered with the repairs and those who did not were particularly at odds. Said Daniel,

> We moved into the building and there were unexpected repairs, delays. It's like moving into a fixer-upper … It's taken additional people, manpower and support that we're struggling with because [the building is much larger than the previous one]. So it requires more people to be in multiple places and without the additional growth we were expecting, you got the same people being pulled in multiple directions. [ ] People show up, we have some high performers who are engaged, but in general it's a struggle because you have the ones who are performing are wearing down. It's hard to keep them engaged and try to engage everyone else in a more equal perspective.

Phoebe observed that her church struggled with the implementation of its new vision, which then led to friction within the congregation. When the goal of becoming more involved in the community and the changes necessary to achieve it were first announced, "it was seemingly embraced by the majority of members." Afterwards, however,

> we began experiencing major bumps in the road. Those bumps have now turned into a train wreck. [ ] The train wreck itself is that people are leaving the church. They're not happy with what's going on.

Esther's church experienced a split over denominational affiliation: two-thirds of the congregation wished to remain Episcopal, while the remainder joined the priest in preferring to become Anglican. This set off a yearlong struggle over ownership of the church building and the future of the church, during which many members left.

Finally, conflict was a major feature of Hannah's, Martha's, and Lydia's experiences of change in their churches, even if the conflict was eventually resolved. Hannah noted underlying division between portions of the congregation following a church merger and her congregation's move into the other church's building:

> When we ended up in the same location, the nitty-gritty started coming out. And from my observations, it seemed like our congregation was all on board with a vision of, we're going to come together in your building—their building at the time, which was now our building, all of our building—until we could find

> another location to build a larger church that was mutually agreeable to everyone. Their perspective was, we're never leaving this location. I think there was miscommunication somewhere along the way. I just think there were miscommunications. Then there was a lot of tension because while they were being encouraged to be welcoming and warm and hospitable to us, which was very nice and kind and appreciated, they felt like they just had to roll over and let us do anything we wanted.

Martha described "animosity" and "tension" within her church that were "almost unbearable," especially in the period of time leading up to the move into the new building, because of the strained relationship between the two congregations that merged to form the new church. Said Martha,

> It got worse instead of better. No matter what we did, or tried to fit ourselves in and get something going to maintain their traditions, they didn't work with us. It was complete withdrawal, in my opinion. Or maybe it was resentment …. Anyway, it was pretty awkward.

In Lydia's church, existing divisions turned into "fractures" when the church was preparing to vote on the purchase of a new property. Those opposed to the new property distributed flyers and posted yard signs, while those in favor of the new property organized campaigns to call inactive members who might be inclined to vote "yes." The opposite sides were also on display during church meetings. Said Lydia,

> We had multiple church conferences before [the vote] where people would come. It was usually people who didn't want to move who would come and they would just come and yell at our pastor …. It was horrible. I remember feeling like I was going to lose my church because there was this kind of fracture. [ ] [The day of the vote] was the most stressful day because people had been arguing about this …. The vote passed by like 60%. It was contentious.

For all eight of these participants, the experience of change was characterized by varying degrees of discord or conflict within the congregation.

*Between the Participant and the Congregation or Leadership*

In three instances, conflict or discord was present between the participant and the congregation or leadership. Unlike discord or conflict within the congregation, which was a congregation-wide phenomenon, these experiences were specific to the participant. In other words, these participants themselves experienced discord or conflict between themselves and the congregation or leadership.

Deborah joined an ELCA congregation assuming the church shared the denomination's stance on the full acceptance of LGBTQ members and ministers. Later, when this proved not to be the case, she found herself at odds not only with the pastor and many in the congregation but also with the church's approach to discussing sexuality. Said Deborah,

> We started having meetings and the pastor held a Sunday school series, "It's Not All About Sex." [My sister and I] thought that sounded like a balanced approach to discussion and we went to that Sunday school class. And it was quite clear that the pastor was saying homosexuality is a sin and it's again the nature of God and man. That Sunday school wasn't a format to discuss it, it was a format to tell us how to think. [ ] My impression was we would be taking about it as a body, as a congregation …. I think [the class and the other meetings] just confirmed that the way the people thought was already good.

She described feeling "dissonant" when she recognized the extent to which her beliefs and expectations were not shared by the majority of the congregation and the pastor. In addition to the conflict within the congregation, Hannah's experience of change included a disagreement with the pastor. The pastor presented a vision of a church that was focused solely on outreach, and he began to cut back on education and spiritual growth opportunities for church members. Hannah was not in support of this:

> It really bothered me. Because I do know that our job is to reach out and make disciples, but if we're not feeding ourselves, if we're not growing ourselves, it's hard to go out and make a difference in the world if you're not expanding your own spiritual journey. [ ] I feel very strongly about that.

Her attempts to present this perspective in church leadership meetings were unsuccessful. Phoebe also experienced discord or conflict in more than one form. As well as the struggles within the congregation related to the church's new vision and implementation, she felt a divide between herself and others in the congregation because of others' actions. Said Phoebe,

> I have been able to witness actions that are not Christ-like. And for me, it is very disheartening … to see individuals who profess to be something spiritually that they're not.

Such encounters with "the uncaring human nature of people" left her "with a broken spirit."

For these three participants, the experience of change was characterized by conflict or discord between the participant and the congregation or leadership.

*Within the Participant's Family*

For one participant, the changes and internal conflict at the church spilled over into family life. When Esther's church split along Anglican/Episcopal lines, her husband decided to worship with both remnant congregations, as well as at the Episcopal church Esther was now attending, which was also where their son was a priest. This took a toll on Esther's relationship with her husband:

> The hardest part for me was that I felt my husband was not supporting our son. I felt [my husband] was a traitor by continuing with the Anglican church as well. That was a very difficult time for me in my relationship with my husband, because my momma bear was saying, "You support your kid." And he's saying, but he had friends that were in [the other churches]. To me, it's not about your friends …. You don't go to church for your friends, you go to church for God. It was a huge, huge, huge upheaval for me.

Until it was resolved, this conflict was a central feature of Esther's experience of her church's changes and their aftermath.

## A Predominance of Negative Emotions

Emerging simultaneously with the presence of conflict or discord was the third theme: a predominance of negative emotions. This again emerged in the experiences of nine of the eleven participants. Given the degree to which conflict or discord was a feature of the participants' experiences, it is understandable that negative emotions would also be part of their experiences of change in their churches. The emotions that surfaced most frequently were sadness, frustration, and anger; eight participants expressed one, two, or all three of these during the interviews when describing their experiences. One additional participant expressed other, but equally negative, emotions when describing her experience.

### *Sadness*

Sadness emerged as part of the experience of change in their churches for seven participants. This sadness most often stemmed from loss—loss of church members, loss of relationships.

Joanna and Rachel both noted a degree of sadness when people left their churches in response to the decision to become welcoming and affirming. For Rachel, the feeling of sadness and loss was compounded by the church's general decline in attendance over the past three decades and the end of longstanding activities as members age and are no longer able to be as active as they once were.

Hannah expressed profound sadness at the relationships that were lost as a result of the conflict and divisions at the church:

> It hurts my heart that some of the people who were most influential in the spiritual journeys of [my children's] lives or who were close friends of mine aren't necessarily that close anymore.

For Esther, having friendships negatively affected by the Anglican/Episcopal split and witnessing people not only leave church but also lose their faith was a source of sadness. Lydia expressed sadness, but also acceptance, that during one of its mergers her congregation moved out of the church building in which she grew up. Sadness remained, however, because of friendships that were lost over the vote to purchase the church's new/current building:

> I have lost some good friends because they joined the side of "we don't want to go" and they found other churches now. These are people that I babysat from when they were infants, people I considered family. It was really rough.

Deborah was deeply saddened that people were rejected by their churches because of their sexuality and that portions of her congregation were unable to empathize with that experience. Said Deborah,

> I just felt they had never viscerally understood or experienced the pain of not being accepted that a gay person has endured in church. If you go back thirty years, me neither. Maybe even twenty-five years, me neither, until somebody said, 'In the church I was raised in, I couldn't take Communion.' 'Why?' 'I'm gay.' Again, the first reaction is, 'What's the problem?' Then when you get to that visceral level [where the person is made to feel] 'I am an abomination. I am sinful. I am wrong. God made me wrong. I am not accepted,' it's like, wow. Just deep sadness about it. That's what it was like for me, deeply sad.

Sadness also accompanied her decision to leave her church, and her recognition that "fractured" relationships were a consequence of both her decision to leave and the church's decision to disaffiliate with the ELCA. Martha, who is very pleased with the outcome of her church's changes and who felt the process was being led by God, nevertheless described the experience of change at her church as "heartbreaking" and compared aspects of it to her experience of divorce. Said Martha,

> My divorce was many years ago, in the '80s, but that heartbreak I felt again, which I never thought I'd feel again, when so many people were being hateful. Because it was in a place of love, and to feel that tore my stomach up, my heart. I didn't think I'd ever feel that again. [ ] With heartbreak came loss, like loss of relationships. Just like when you lose your marriage, you lose some friends.

> Some family are not going to go along your journey with you, which also happened to me on occasion.

For these seven participants, sadness was a component of their experience of change in their churches.

*Frustration*

Frustration emerged as an emotion in the experience for Rachel, Hannah, Joanna, and Daniel. This frustration was frequently related to a specific group of people within the congregation. Rachel recognized that a difference in background contributed to a difference of perspectives with certain individuals in the church, and this, in turn, contributed to her frustration:

> When I think about the people I get most frustrated with at church, they are the people who aren't from that background or don't have that perspective [*referring to her education and her professional identity*].

Hannah's conflict with the pastor over his lack of support for education and spiritual growth opportunities for church members was a source of frustration for her, as was her perception that some of the people on church staff used bullying tactics to push their agendas or shut down debate. As part of the leadership group that guided her church through its discernment process, Joanna found it challenging to get people who held a more conservative point of view to engage in the process:

> It was hard and sometimes frustrating, trying to figure out how to engage people in the conversation that we only heard weren't happy with the conversation. So they're having all these side conversations in all sorts of other places, but they're not coming to these more public, planned gatherings so that we could work as a whole group together. Because that group was taking people through the process, but some people were having all of their conversations outside of that process, and then annoyed sometimes because they didn't think their voice was heard. It's frustrating because you can't do anything more, but you can't bring them in.

In Daniel's case, however, frustration was not related to a specific group of people within the congregation, but was a primary feature of his feelings with both the process and the outcome of the change in his church:

> It's been a challenge …. And then I think with my increased levels of responsibility [in other areas of life], it's taken more of a toll than it usually would have. [I'm] burned out, tired, frustrated. Trying not to give up or throw in the towel, but also stepping back more, so like not accepting new responsibilities. Certainly not volunteering for additional workload. I have also felt myself not quite apathy, but less engaged. [ ] It has become more of a job than a joy.

For these participants, the experience of change in their churches was characterized by frustration.

*Anger*

Anger also emerged as a characteristic of four participants' experiences, all of whom had also expressed sadness and two of whom had additionally expressed frustration. Strong, negative emotions can be related or even intertwined, and in some instance that was the case with these participants. In other cases, the anger conveyed in these participants' interview was entirely unrelated to their frustration or sadness.

Although Deborah's predominant emotion over the treatment of LGBTQ people in churches was deep sadness, she also recognized anger at the situation as well: "I used to be, and I probably still am, mad at times. But the older I get, it's sad." Hannah's anger was intertwined with her frustration over the bullying tactics of some of the church leaders and those tactics' consequences: "[I'm] angry that so many people have been hurt in this process. Angry that so many people have left and they don't care."

Esther's anger was related to the conflict within her family during and after her church's split: she was angry with her husband over his decision to attend the Anglican church. "I was so

angry with him, I was making myself sick," she said. Joanna's anger, which was short-lived, was entirely separate from any other emotions or conflict associated with her experience of change. She became angry with the interim pastor for making changes to the worship service:

> He instituted a few changes that really got me ticked off … like the order or service. [ ] I hate to say this, somebody was messing with my church service and it made me angry. Can I get over that? Yeah, and I did. I say it that way because I know from having organized the worship service [myself] for such a long time. But I also know that element of education we kept trying to pull in. You don't just go changing people's worship service and not talking about it because they do get wedded to what they're used to and what they expect.

For these four participants, a portion of their experience of change in their churches was characterized by anger.

*Other Emotions*

The negative emotions expressed by Phoebe did not fit into one of the above categories, but negative emotions were no less a part of her experience of change in her church. The discord between herself and other members of the congregation resulting from actions she did not find to be Christ-like left her with a "broken spirit." This was "devastating" to her, and she found the whole experience to be "disheartening."

**An Aspect of Learning**

A fourth theme to emerge from the data was an aspect of learning in the participants' experiences of change in their churches. Although the presence of this theme first took me by surprise,[303] it should not have. A "disorienting dilemma" is often the catalyst for adult

[303] It was a pleasant surprise.

learning,[304] and some type of change can frequently be an aspect of that dilemma. For eight participants in this study, learning occurred as part of, from, and/or in response to the experience of change in the church.

*As Part of the Experience*

For Rachel and Joanna, learning was an integral part of their experiences of change in their churches. Rachel availed herself of the Sunday school classes, small groups, and other education opportunities offered as her church considered whether or not to become a welcoming and affirming congregation. The books, study groups, and guest speakers were a key feature of her experience. Joanna entered into her church's discernment process around issues of sexuality and gender with an attitude of learning, which she attributed both to her personality and to her faith:

> My faith is in a God where there is a spirit that is helping to give me life and insight as I'm opening my hands to look for that and with a congregation who, corporately, is hopefully doing something similar. For me, whenever there's something that involves change or things that are happening differently, how and when can I step back to give myself time to think about that and talk to others and read. [ ] And so it's always about what is the Spirit trying to teach me and what is my role supposed to be, whether that is changes at church, changes at work.

This attitude kept her open to whatever lesson or insight were revealed as part of the change experience.

*From the Experience*

Five participants learned from the experience of change in their church. In other words, the change experience was directly responsible for their learning. Rachel exemplifies this:

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[304] Jack Mezirow introduced the concept of disorienting dilemmas and their role in adult learning in: *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).

> I actually did feel like I learned something. Because like I said, I was one of those kind of people who thought, "We are welcoming," and that's how you see yourself. For me, I really do feel like there was an education piece that really helped me to see the need for making it a real policy or stand kind of thing. [ ] Listening to people who are gay or lesbian or queer, listening to them and their experiences that they've had in churches, that was really helpful for me. There were other things about the classes that were interesting, but that was specifically like, okay, I understand how you feel or how you see things or why it's important.

As a result of the experience of change at her church, Martha gained better insights into her strengths and how she operates in a committee or in a leadership position. Ruth took three "spiritual lessons" away from her experience:

> Thinking about whether we ended up staying with the PCUSA or leaving and go to a different denomination, as long as the church is faithful, God is still there …. I think that, to me, is one of the spiritual lessons. [ ] Another part of the spiritual learning is this: to get away from the we/they that put the church against the presbytery. Because too, the presbytery, the money that we had to give them to buy back the building, it's not that they use it to throw parties. They use it to help maintain other churches in the presbytery that did not have the means to keep up the building. So it is still back into the PCUSA's ministry. For me, I thought, okay, that they still have some of whatever effectiveness that God gives in the local area to do ministry. So who am I to say that [the church's new denomination has] a calling higher or better and more approved by God than your PCUSA calling? [ ] Part of the spiritual lesson is to be willing to entertain or even embrace a different outcome that I believe that God is still in the picture.

For Daniel, his experience led to insights regarding the process and implementation of change and the importance of having the right people, with the right skills, in the right leadership positions. These insights will be applicable in other areas of his life. Philip found his participation in the racial reconciliation group to be a personal learning experience. Said Philip,

> What we've been doing is just talking about what has it been like for me to be black or me to be white, whatever, and it's amazing. Now you get a sense of—it's much more complex. Like any human activity, it's more involved than what you read about in the papers or something like that. [ ] The experience that is life for black people was tougher than it was for white people. [ ] The other thing I found is that … there's a lot of common ground. You're hungry just like me. You go to church and they've got the same kind of stuff … So that was kind of, you don't need to be putting everyone over in this field. We're all in the same field. [ ] Also interesting, I don't remember white people talking about how life was for them in

> our initial wave of conversations up to today …. I don't think it ever came up. I don't remember any white people saying, 'Man, it was tough.' It probably wasn't tough. There may have been tough about it, but society was not pushing on them too hard. Society was pushing on black people.

For these five participants, the experience of change in their churches included an aspect of learning from the experience.

*In Response to the Experience*

For Esther and Lydia, learning took place in response to the experience of change. After leaving the church that was worshipping in a pub and joining another church where her son was a priest, Esther sought out more education on Episcopal polity. Said Esther,

> This whole thing, for me, brought me into the church to find out what was going on. I took a class that explained the history of the Episcopal Church and the canons of the church and the rules and regulations of the church …. A lot of that was to find out what my son was getting into. A lot of it was just because I'm nosy.

Following the changes in her church, Lydia learned to embrace the different congregational dynamics that resulted from the church's numerical growth. Said Lydia,

> Mostly now it feels like I don't know everyone because the church has grown so much. It used to be, not super tight and close-knit, but I used to know so many people …. [But] now I don't know these people. I'm not a super outgoing person. I'm not always going to go up to the new people. I will sometimes, but it takes effort. [ ] [The familiar, smaller community feel] is not there for me now. We're supposed to be there to glorify God and to worship the good things and learn more about his plans and trying to figure out the world. And, like, that's awesome, and I can get that in an uncomfortable way, too. So that was more of a mindset change recently. It took me a while.

In these ways, learning took place in response to the experience of change in the participants' churches.

## A Sense of Resolution

Finally, the fifth theme to emerge from the data was a sense of resolution. This was a feature of all eleven participants' experiences of change in their churches. Because a sense of resolution was the most frequently occurring theme, logic might dictate that it be presented earlier in the discussion of the study's findings. However, because this theme can only be understood in light of the other emergent themes, it is rightfully being presented last. Sense of resolution captures how the participants settled, acted upon, or found meaning in the conflict/discord, negative emotions, and/or learning that characterized their experiences, often in ways that engaged their faith. Each participant found peace with what is, identified hope for what could be, or adopted both of these approaches.

### *Peace with What Is*

For eight participants, a sense of resolution came from peace with what is. This peace was not always found in the same manner, however. Some participants fully embraced the outcome of the changes in their churches. Others created new outcomes for themselves or embarked upon further changes.

Three of the four participants who fully embraced the outcome of the changes also identified strongly with their churches. Martha felt joy and pride in the new church building, which she saw as "an instrument of worship." Lydia was very happy with the church's new location, the current pastor, and the contemporary worship service. For Ruth, who planned to remain part of the church regardless of its denominational affiliation and "would have been just fine" if her church had stayed in the PCUSA, the process of switching denominations resulted in a "win-win-win" situation for the church, the pastors, and the Presbytery; each had the best

possible outcome. It also had a favorable outcome for her personally, as her time was freed up when she was no longer involved in the details of the transition from one denomination to another. Said Ruth,

> I only have so much time, so much resources, energy, and everything. God is limitless, but we are limited. I redeemed some time and so I am able to devote more time to [my job]. Now I know the church doesn't need me at night, [work] can have me at night. There's always the trade-off. Also, I don't feel guilty if I had to be away or travel a lot. Whereas, when the church is going through that with all the meetings and all that, being around a lot is helpful. [ ] It's a sense of responsibility and freedom in schedules and things like that. It's not just the pragmatic part, but it's mental space too. That's the parallel. All of a sudden, it's like oh, I've got my life back … there's a sense of openness, whether it's on my schedule or in my heart. [ ] I very much welcome my extra bandwidth post-transition.

Although not identifying as strongly with her church as the participants above, Rachel also fully embraced the outcome of the changes in her church. Said Rachel,

> I think that becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation was definitely the most important thing that happened recently in the life of our church. [ ] I'd say we are actually, both of us, my husband and I, were pretty happy that it happened. [ ] I do feel there was joy around the decision—at least for me personally that was it.

For another four participants, peace with what is came from creating new outcomes for themselves or embarking upon further changes. Deborah found a church that aligned with her theology and values and is engaged in social justice work. Similarly, Hannah found a new church, at which she and her family have had an overwhelmingly positive experience. Esther joined another Episcopal church, became involved in the diocese, and resolved her anger toward her husband. And Joanna explored why the interim pastor made the changes he did to the worship service, which led to new insights:

> It caused me to kind of have a number of conversations with different people to say, "Can you tell me why this is happening?" That was interesting in that it helped me connect with [the interim pastor] better. I think he learned a few things too. Because part of that came out of me having spent years working at the

> church, having seen how we worked through processes at the church. [ ] The school he was coming from was very different … In hindsight, does it mean it's good, bad, or the other? No, it's just different.

For these eight participants, the resolution of their experience of change in their church was characterized by peace with what is.

*Hope for What Could Be*

For five participants, a sense of resolution came from hope for what could be. For Rachel and Martha, this hope coexisted with peace with what is: Rachel had hope for the church to develop ministries that "meet people where they are," while Martha held hope for broken relationships to be reconciled. For Daniel, Phoebe, and Philip, however, hope existed on its own. Daniel had hope that the outcome of the changes at his church could ultimately be positive, in spite of the challenges:

> I haven't given up hope that this can be a great thing. That we can make this what it needs to be. [ ] I believe in the possibility that the change can take hold, that we can really engage the community. It's there. It will take some work. It will take a lot more involvement and engagement. But it's certainly feasible.

Similarly, hope for a different future kept Phoebe at her church, in spite of her negative experience:

> I don't know why I'm still there. I truly don't. I think part of it is that I have hope. I hope that I live long enough to see God step in the midst of this and stop the train wreck and everyone walk out of there unscathed. That's what I pray for. [ ] The learning that can come from this experience can be powerful.

Philip's hope was of a different sort. Rather than hope for a negative to turn into a positive, he had hope for the spread of a positive outcome. After meeting together for over a year, the racial reconciliation group had reached the stage where it would propose action steps to its

representative churches. Philip found this exciting and believed changes could come about in the church and community as a result of the group's efforts. Said Philip,

> The next step will be, so what do we do about it? We're going to spend no short amount of time, it's going to be a while, on what can you do. [ ] Doing something, that's exciting, and that's the fun of it; exploring, trying. [ ] It's not nearly fast enough for me, but then I'm used to that. But I have no question. I think this is all very encouraging. [ ] Maybe I'll cause a ripple somewhere and maybe the church will cause a ripple, which really would be cool.

For these five participants, the resolution of their experience of change in their church was characterized, at least in part, by hope for what could be.

**Negative Case Analysis**

The five themes to emerge from the data described the experiences of a strong majority of the participants; each theme was represented by eight, nine, or all eleven participants. However, two participants' experiences were notable outliers.

Philip's experience was overwhelmingly positive, with emotions such as excitement and without a strong indication of conflict or discord. This made his experience an outlier among the study's participants. The change at Philip's church was also an outlier, in that the change—the formation of a racial reconciliation conversation group—was not yet a church-wide initiative and Philip's participation in it was voluntary. In other words, the change only impacted a small number of people at his church, and he chose to be among them. This gave Philip more of a measure of control over his experience than many other participants were afforded.[305]

Ruth's experience was also an outlier. Although she had no opinion as to her church's denominational affiliation, she did desire that the decision-making process have integrity: that it

[305] It would be interesting to follow up with Philip and others in the congregation if/when the racial reconciliation work becomes more of a churchwide effort to see if conflict/discord or negative emotions emerge then.

be detailed and thorough, that it be done prayerfully and amicably, and that the unity of the congregation be maintained. These outcomes were achieved. Such a positive result no doubt influenced Ruth's experience of change, as did the fact that the denominational switch had tremendous support among the congregation and caused no discernable difference in the day-to-day functioning of the church. In other participants' experiences, the change initiative was not so universally supported or it led to significant disruptions in the life of the church.

In these outlier experiences, neither the presence of conflict nor a predominance of negative emotions emerged as themes, which suggests that congregational change can be experienced positively. The outliers also highlight the role of agency in the experience of congregational change. Ruth was heavily involved in leadership of the change process, and Philip volunteered to take part in the new racial reconciliation group. Thus, each had opportunity to display more agency in their change experiences than did many of the other participants. And this agency could have been a contributing factor in the positive nature of their experiences. The implications of increased agency for congregational change practices will be included in the discussion of the study's findings, to which I now turn.

# Chapter V – Discussion

## Introduction

With this study, I set out to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. The reason was twofold. First, Christian churches are notoriously resistant to change, yet the religious landscape in the United States is shifting in ways that require congregations to innovate and adapt if they are to survive. Change—whether internal or external, planned or unplanned, welcomed or reviled—is an inescapable aspect of churches' realities. Second, existing literature on the subject is largely silent when it comes to the perspective of those who are most impacted by congregational change: namely, the congregants themselves. If congregational change is to be understood in all its complexity, and if churches and their leaders are to successfully navigate change, then congregants' experiences and perspectives must be taken into consideration. Thus, I sought to address both a problem in practice and a gap in the literature.

To guide the undertaking, I relied on interpretive phenomenological analysis, a qualitative methodology dedicated to exploring, in detail, significant lived experiences. In-person, one-on-one, semistructured interviews were conducted with eleven participants. These participants represented six Protestant denominations, three geographic regions of the United States, and churches that had faced a wide variety of changes. Interview recordings and transcripts constituted the study's data and were analyzed, first individually and then collectively, to identify the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences.

Five major themes characterized the experiences of at least eight of the participants: the centrality of faith, the presence of conflict or discord, a predominance of negative emotions, an aspect of learning, and a sense of resolution. Personal faith served as a guiding principle during the change, a sustaining force in the midst of the change, and/or as a lens through which to view

the change. Conflict or discord was present within the congregation, between the participants and the congregation or church leadership, and/or within the participant's family. Sadness, frustration, anger, and other negative emotions predominated in the participants' experiences. Learning was part of the participants' experiences of congregational change, the participants learned from the experience, and/or the participants engaged in learning in response to the experience. Finally, all of the participants' experiences of change in their churches included a sense of resolution, either from peace with what is or from hope for what could be. Although the study's findings are not altogether surprising, especially to those who have experienced congregational change, they are nonetheless significant. These experiential themes elevate the voices of congregants and provide a "perspective from the pew" that is sorely lacking in congregational change literature.

The study's findings contribute to a fuller understanding of congregational change in their own right. And they yield further insights when seen through the study's interpretive lenses and when applied to practice and research. The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to those undertakings. The study's findings will first be viewed through the interpretive lens of Christian theology. Then, the findings will be viewed through the interpretive lens of adult development theory, specifically the constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan and the faith development theory of James Fowler. Finally, the study's implications for practice and for research will be discussed.

## The Study's Findings as Seen Through the Interpretive Lens of Christian Theology

Given who I am and how I approach the world, it was natural for me to employ a theological lens when interpreting the study's findings. As noted in Chapter I, theology is

classically defined as "faith seeking understanding" and refers to both a process and an outcome. It is a disciplined process of inquiry, examination, critique, and contemplation in which an individual or community seeks to better understand both faith itself, and life in light of that faith; and it is an informed system of belief that provides a foundation for action and interaction in the world. A theological lens, then, considers both the faith or belief itself and the process of understanding it. Thus, when employing the interpretive lens of Christian theology, I considered what the findings might indicate about the participants' beliefs and how participants engaged their faith to make sense of and respond to their experiences of change in their churches. The insights revealed through this lens could be organized around conceptions of God, ecclesiology, eschatology, and theological conflicts.

**Conceptions of God**

The participants' experiences of change were often shaped by their personal beliefs about God. An expansive view of God and God's love prompted some participants to support opening their churches to people who were previously excluded, or to seek a church that would be welcoming of all people. Elsewhere, the language used by those who relied on their faith as a sustaining force during the changes calls to mind the biblical imagery of God as rock, refuge, and deliverer.[306] And several participants conceived of God as being directly involved in their lives, which then shaped how they perceived the change and God's role in it.

[306] A prime example of this imagery can be found in Psalm 18:1–3: "I love you, O LORD, my strength./ The LORD is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer,/ my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,/ my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold./ I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,/ so I shall be saved from my enemies." (NRSV)

**Ecclesiology**

Ecclesiology, or beliefs about the nature and mission of the church, also featured prominently in participants' experiences of change. More than one participant considered the church building itself to be sacred and revered it accordingly. Among nearly all participants was a prevailing belief in, or expectation of, unity within the congregation; however, it was a unity that did not allow for diversity of opinion, perspective, or conviction. Many of the specific negative emotions that emerged as subthemes in the data arose when unity was challenged, whether by the expression of differing viewpoints, the development of factions over an issue, the loss of church members, or the unwillingness of a portion of the congregation to participate in established processes or procedures. As for the mission of the church, several participants gave indication of a belief that a local church has a role in addressing social justice issues and/or contributing to the health and wholeness of the community in which it is located.

**Eschatology**

The final theme to emerge from the data, sense of resolution, points to an eschatological belief. Eschatology is the area of theology that addresses last or final things and the goal toward which all creation is moving.[307] This goal is characterized by hope, or the assurance of what God has done, is doing, and will continue to in the world. That the participants found peace with what is or hope for what could be, even and especially in the face of conflict and negative emotions, indicates an underlying belief in the assurance of God's presence, activity, and provision for the future.

[307] For a discussion of eschatology, see: González and Pérez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 139–141; Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 333–334; McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 165–167.

**Theological Conflicts**

Finally, viewing the study's findings through a theological lens reveals the extent to which the conflict or discord experienced by the participants was related to beliefs. Conflicts over sexuality, denominational affiliation, Christian leadership, and Christ-like behavior are inherently theological in nature, whether they are recognized as such or not. Positions on sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion are inextricably tied to one's understanding of sin and salvation, what it means to be created in the image of God, and the bounds of God's love, mercy, and justice. The question of denominational affiliation touches on issues of ecclesiology and missiology,[308] among others. Perceptions of Christian leadership and Christ-like behavior implicitly draw on theologies of power, grace, and hospitality, as well as on Christology[309] and Christian ethics. Even conflicts in participants' churches between "the new and different" and "the way we've always done it" were often theological in nature even if they were not theological in presentation. When "the way we've always done it" becomes synonymous with orthodoxy or orthopraxis,[310] it can itself come to be viewed as sacred. "The new and different," then, does not simply challenge an existing policy, program, or expression of the church; it challenges, and perhaps threatens, deeply held beliefs about the "right" way to worship, conduct church business, honor longstanding traditions, or steward church resources. Thus, the conflict that ensues is a theological one.

[308] Missiology addresses the work of the church in the world.
[309] Christology explores the person and nature of Jesus.
[310] Orthodoxy is right belief, and orthopraxis is right practice or action.

## The Study's Findings as Seen Through the Interpretive Lens of Adult Development Theory

As noted in Chapter II, I selected the interpretive lens of adult development theory— specifically the constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan and the faith development theory of James Fowler—because of its usefulness in explaining how individuals make meaning of experiences, and for its potential applicability in a church context. By way of brief review,[311] adult development theory proposes that the maturation of thinking, reasoning, meaning-making, and ways of knowing does not end with adolescence, but continues into adulthood and throughout the lifespan. Under this umbrella, constructive developmental theory focuses on the ways in which an individual constructs meaning and organizes experiences across various stages of life, with an emphasis on what the self is subject to and what the self perceives as object. Faith development theory similarly addresses meaning making across the lifespan but gives particular attention to the role of faith in the endeavor. In this context, faith is conceived as an active way of being that involves the self, the ones with whom the self has a significant relationship, and "the ultimate Other."[312] An adult development theory lens, then, considers the ways in which people interpret and make sense of experiences, focusing not on *what* a person thinks but rather on *how* a person thinks.[313] Thus, when employing the interpretive lens of adult development theory, I considered what the findings might suggest about participants' stages of development and how participants made sense of their experiences. The insights revealed

[311] Please refer back to Chapter II for a more detailed description of each of the theories, including descriptions of their various stages.
[312] Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," 163.
[313] I employed these adult development theories with full awareness of their limitations. The stages of development are rigidly defined and perhaps not as universal and distinct in "real life" as they are described. Also, neither Kegan nor Fowler considers how his relative privilege as a white, North American man might have impacted the development of his theory. Thus, there are legitimate questions as to whether the theories are equally descriptive of people of various racial/ethnic backgrounds, genders, socioeconomic standings, cultures, and so on. Nevertheless, I did find Kegan's and Fowler's theories to be useful lenses through which to view the study's findings.

through this lens could be organized around meaning making, learning and development, identity, and a clash of worldviews.

**Meaning Making**

As discussed in Chapter IV, the centrality of faith was a major them in the participants' experiences of change in their churches. However, faith was not only a characteristic of the participants' experiences; it was also a tool for making meaning of these experiences. The subthemes themselves give evidence of this: personal faith as a *guiding principle*, personal faith as a *sustaining force*, personal faith as a *lens.* For many participants, their faith—their theology—mediated both their experiences and their responses to those experiences. In other words, the participants did not simply think *about* their faith, they thought *through* their faith.[314] From a developmental standpoint, this is an important distinction. Thinking about one's faith is to take the approach, "The Bible says *x* on this topic," or "I was taught *y* is wrong." Thinking through one's faith, however, is to take the approach, "What do I understand this scripture to mean, and how does my life experience come to bear on the topic? What have I come to believe about *z*, and what does that mean in regard to the current situation and my approach to it?" This is a more complex way of thinking and is indicative of later stages of development. In constructive developmental theory, thinking through one's faith is to treat it as object, rather than to be subject to it. In faith development theory, it is evidence of an examined, deliberate, internalized faith. The study's findings therefore suggest that participants displayed characteristics of the Fourth Order of Consciousness (self-authoring mind) and Stage Four (Individuative-Reflective) Faith when relying on faith to make meaning of their experiences.

[314] With thanks to committee member Matthew Lyons for this helpful language.

**Learning and Development**

The theme of learning, which also emerged from the data, shows a distinct connection to adult development theory. For most of the study's participants, the change in their churches provided an opportunity for learning. For some participants, this learning manifested as a greater awareness of their own personalities and ways of being in the world. For other participants, the change in their churches prompted reflection on the beliefs and values they held most dear. Still for others, learning was connected to an openness to new ideas and perspectives. In all of these instances, learning was also an opportunity for development, or what Kegan refers to as transformation of consciousness.[315] Through their learning and as a result of their experiences of change, the participants were, to varying degrees, moving toward a new stage of faith or order of consciousness. For most participants, this movement appeared to be from the socialized mind of the Third Order of Consciousness and the Synthetic Conventional Faith of Stage Three toward the self-authoring mind of the Fourth Order of Consciousness and the Individuative Reflective Faith of Stage Four, but some participants appeared to be moving toward the transition between Fourth Order of Consciousness/Stage Four Faith and Fifth Order of Consciousness/Stage Five Faith. Although none of the participants framed their learning in terms of adult development theory, several participants did note the ways in which they themselves had learned or changed as a result of the experiences in their churches. More common, however, were the participants who came to this realization *during* the interview, as they recounted and reflected on their experiences. In fact, several participants commented on how the act of participating in the interview helped to clarify their thinking about and understanding of their experience. Clearly,

[315] Refer back to Chapter II for a discussion of transformation of consciousness. Or, see: Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*.

for most of the study's participants, their experiences of change in their churches was an opportunity for transformation and development.

**Identity**

In addition to demonstrating the ways in which participants used faith as a tool for making meaning, the theme "sense of resolution" also provides insight into how one's stage of development can shape one's identity and experiences. Constructive developmental theory holds that the majority of adults in Western societies operate from the socialized mind, or the Third Order of Consciousness. For these individuals, relationships and social structures are central to identity and an understanding of self. It follows, then, that the loss of relationships or communities would be especially worrisome and would have a negative impact on one's sense of self and wellbeing, and, therefore, one would be invested in maintaining those relationships and communities if at all possible. In this study, three of the participants who found "peace with what is" were noted to identify strongly with their churches. Two of these also experienced negative emotions around friendships and church members who were lost as a result of the changes. Although many factors can, and do, influence emotions and one's sense of identity, here they appear to be informed, at least in part, by the socialized mind of the Third Order of Consciousness. A continued ability to identify with and be part of their churches contributed to these participants' support of the changes at their churches and their sense of peace with the outcome of those changes.

**Clash of Worldviews**

Finally, just as a theological lens reveals the extent to which the discord or conflict in the participants' experiences was theological in nature, an adult development theory lens reveals the extent to which the same conflicts are developmental in nature. A central tenet of adult development theory is that an individual's stage of development shapes that person's worldview, value system, thinking, meaning-making, and actions. In other words, one sees and interprets life through the lens of one's current stage of development. Therefore, individuals at different stages of development will experience and understand the same event, or the same change, in different ways. This can be seen in the participants' experiences in the various conflicts over "the new and different" and "the way we've always done it" within their churches. Congregants operating from the Synthetic-Conventional Faith of Stage 3 are likely to be inclined to view tradition as sacred in its own right, whereas congregants operating from the Individuative Reflective Faith of Stage 4 are likely to interrogate the tradition's meaning and conceive of a way to convey that meaning in a new ritual or practice. Thus, for example, one group of congregants might expect things to largely remain the same when the congregation moves from one building to the next, and another group of congregants might anticipate that programs, policies, and practices will be revised to take into account the new space. The former group will perceive of proposed changes as a threat to the church's identity, while the latter group will welcome the opportunity to examine how the church's identity will be expressed in its new location. Another relevant tenet of adult development theory is that it is only at the later stages of development that people are able to embrace multiple realities and to recognized perspectives other than their own as valid. Thus, congregants are inclined to hold their particular theology, opinion, or perspective as correct and true while dismissing competing views or even deeming them "un-Christian." Again,

this is evident in the participants' experiences. Much of the discord or conflict and some of the associated negative emotions could be attributed to congregants' varying abilities to wrestle with and accept the perspectives of others within the church. That is to say, the participants and their fellow congregants struggled to engage in dialectical thinking. According to constructive developmental theory and faith development theory, the ability to engage in dialectical thinking is associated with the self-transforming mind of the Fifth Order of Consciousness and the Conjunctive Faith of Stage 5, respectively. Chronologically, these stages are related to middle or later adulthood, but they are uncommon. According to Kegan, less than one percent of adults operate from the Fifth Order of Consciousness, and Fowler indicates that the emergence of Stage 5 Faith is not a given. In other words, dialectical thinking is rare[316] and conflicts naturally arise over competing worldviews.

## Implications for Practice

The study's findings have a number of implications for practice, particularly in the areas of congregational change endeavors, the practice of ministry, and Christian education/spiritual formation. The implementation of these can be tailored depending on the type of change, the context and congregational make-up of the church, the church's polity and leadership structure, the strengths of the pastor, and other such factors.

[316] It is worth noting that Kegan's and Fowler's research was carried out in North America and their theories are therefore specific to Western cultures and societies. Likewise, the context of this study was specific to the United States.

**Congregational Change Endeavors**

First, the study supports the notion that congregational changes is as much an experience as it is a process, and that more attention deserves to be paid to congregants' perspectives and experiences during change endeavors. Clergy who are not already attuned to and empathetic toward their congregations would do well to cultivate this awareness. Second, the outlier experiences of Philip and Ruth[317] are instructive: Ruth was heavily involved in leadership of the change process, and Philip volunteered to take part in the new racial reconciliation group. Thus, each had opportunity to display more agency in their change experiences than did many of the other participants, and neither's experience was characterized by the conflict and negative emotions so prevalent in other participants' experiences. Of course not all congregants can be heavily involved in leadership of the change process, and few congregational changes are optional for congregants. However, might there be ways in which congregants can be and be seen as active participants in the change endeavor? Such increased agency could make for a better experience. Third, I was struck by the number of participants who credited their participation in the study with a better understanding of their experiences. The opportunity to recount and reflect on their experiences contributed to learning, development, and meaning making.[318] Building such dialogue opportunities into congregational change processes could promote personal as well as congregational transformation and could lead to more successful change initiatives. One way to accomplish this would be to invite a consultant or a pastor from another church to facilitate small groups that would allow congregants to reflect on their experiences.

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[317] Refer back to the discussion of Negative Case Analysis in Chapter IV.

[318] Other studies support this notion. For a discussion of the value of dialogue in learning, see: Jon F. Wergin, *Deep Learning in a Disorienting World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

**Practice of Ministry**

Two ministry practices in particular are deserving of special consideration during times of change: pastoral care and preaching. The study indicated that change takes a significant toll on congregants, even those who are supportive of the change. Therefore, pastors and church leaders may need to invest additional time and effort into pastoral care as they accompany congregants through their experiences of change. Preaching is the medium through which most pastors communicate directly and most regularly with the largest number of congregants. Preachers may therefore wish to craft sermons that explicitly address the change and the experiences of the congregants. Considerations include: Are sermons conveying the theological foundation for the change? Are the messages modeling and encouraging how to think through one's faith as it relates to the change? Are the sermons accessible to congregants across a spectrum of theologies and developmental stages?

**Christian Education/Faith Formation**

The study's findings indicate that faith can be a helpful tool for meaning-making in times of change, but it requires the ability to think through one's faith, or to treat it as object. Generally speaking, however, most Christian Education and faith formation programs stop short of this stage of development, either by ending chronologically in adolescence or by failing to move beyond an unexamined system of values and beliefs. As a result, many people are ill-equipped to engage their faith in times of change or when presented with a disorienting dilemma. If churches are to navigate change more successfully, then Christian education and faith formation programs need to be approached in such a way as to equip congregants of all ages to use their faith as a tool for meaning-making.

## Implications for Research

Although this study does address a gap in the literature by approaching congregational change as an experience and by giving attention to the congregants' perspectives, that gap has in no way been filled. Additional studies are warranted, as they will continue to contribute to a fuller understanding of congregational change and the ways in which it can most successfully be navigated. One suggestion would be explore congregants' expectations of their pastors during times of change. The subject of congregational change is also ripe for action research studies. Any of the aforementioned implications for practice could feasibly be the basis for an action research study, if a congregation were willing to take part. Also a worthwhile area for research is seminary education: Are seminary graduates equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to preach, provide pastoral care, and lead during times of congregational change? Is the education and training adequately preparing future pastors for the situations they will face in their congregations? Finally, the purpose of this study was not to test adult development theories in faith settings. However, another study could certainly take that approach. What is the role of faith in adult development? Is it possible to be at one stage of development in regard to one's faith and another stage of development in other areas of life? How do people in faith communities negotiate a clash of worldviews, and how do they resolve the personal pain such a clash causes? These and many other questions are deserving of future research.

## Conclusion

Although completed in pursuit of an academic degree, this dissertation was more than an academic exercise. It was a profoundly personal undertaking. As I stated in Chapter I, I have decades of firsthand experience with the challenges of congregational change, both from the pew

and from the pulpit. I have witnessed the powerful struggle between “the new and different” and “the way we’ve always done it.” I have seen how even the idea of change can divide a congregation. I have taken part in successful change endeavors and in failed change endeavors. And through all of these experiences, I have often found myself dissatisfied with the ways churches and their leaders, myself included, engage change. So I have long wondered, “Why is congregational change so difficult? And how could we, congregations and minsters alike, do it differently or better?” This curiosity is born of conviction as much as it is of experience. I am convinced that congregational health and vitality is dependent, at least in part, on the ability to navigate change. I am further convinced that healthy, vital congregations have the potential, and the responsibility, to be agents of transformation in individual lives and in the wider world. And because of these convictions, I am committed to the future of churches in the United States. Thus, this dissertation was an opportunity to explore my curiosity, deepen my conviction, and act on my commitment.

This dissertation was also a personal undertaking in that it challenged me to consider how I had approached congregational change in the past, especially from a position of leadership. Like much of the congregational change literature, I did not give sufficient attention to change as an experience or to the perspectives of congregants, except as they related to input on the change process. I did not fully appreciate the extent to which congregational change could be an opportunity for learning and transformation, nor the importance of engaging in dialogue as a way of making meaning of one’s experiences. I almost certainly did not devote sufficient time or attention to pastoral care during times of change. The dissertation likewise challenged me to consider how I myself might act upon the implications for practice I have identified, regardless

of whether my future ministry practice is as a pastor, an educator, a consultant, or in some other role.

Finally, this dissertation was a personal undertaking in that it enabled me to live into growing my identity as a scholar-practitioner. My approach to congregational change and pastoral leadership seeks to be one in which theology and theory are integrated. By relying on both Christian theology and adult development theories as interpretive lenses, and by attending to both practice and research, this dissertation helped me become more comfortable at the intersection of Church and Academy where I have chosen to situate myself. Additionally, the experience of conducting qualitative research prompted me to consider how future studies, perhaps even some I have identified in the implications of this study, might be ways in which I further develop my identity as a scholar-practitioner.

Churches in the United States will continue to face myriad changes. And their notorious resistance to change will not be easily overcome. However, like several of the study's participants, I have "hope for what could be"—in this case, a future in which congregations are healthy and thriving, successfully navigating change, and having a transformative impact on the world around them. Perhaps this dissertation will be one small step in that direction.

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# Appendix

**Appendix A: Sample Contact Email to Potential Participants**

Dear *Name*,

My name is Courtny Davis Olds. I was given your contact information by *Jane Smith*. She suggested I get in touch because you might be able to assist me with the research I am conducting for my dissertation. I am a PhD candidate at Antioch University, and I am studying what it is like for people when their church goes through some kind of change. I understand that your church recently experienced a change. I wonder if you might be willing to talk with me about your experience?

I've included an attachment that gives more information about the study, including the time commitment of those who take part. I am also happy to answer any questions you might have as you consider whether or not you would like to participate. You can contact me at this email, or by phone/text at the number given below.

I looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Courtny
[phone number redacted]

Courtny B. Davis Olds
PhD Candidate
Graduate School of Leadership and Change, Antioch University

PS – I will follow up in one week if I have not heard from you, just in case this initial email did not reach your inbox.

## Appendix B: Research Study Information Sheet

**What is this research study about?**

This research study explores the experience of congregants when their church has undergone some type of change. For the purpose of the study, "change" is broadly defined as any departure from established custom or the status quo. In other words, change is anything new or different.

**Why is this study being done?**

The research study is part of a dissertation that will fulfill the degree requirements for a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University.

This topic, in particular, was chosen because there is very little research on it and the researcher thinks there is value to understanding what people experience during a time of change in their church. (See below for more information on the researcher.)

**Who is conducting this study?**

The research study is being conducted by Courtny Davis Olds, a PhD candidate at Antioch University. Courtny is also a lifelong churchgoer and an ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches USA, with experience as a pastor, missionary, and church consultant. Every church that Courtny has been part of, whether she was sitting in the pew or standing in the pulpit, has gone through some type of change. Some of those churches did it well; many of those churches had difficulty with it. Courtny thinks that understanding the congregants' experience will help churches navigate change more successfully, and will help pastors be better preachers, teachers, and leaders during times of change in their churches.

**Who is eligible to participate in this study?**

Adults who regularly attend (or previously attended) a church that recently went through some type of change are eligible to participate in the study. Participants are specifically being sought from churches that have an average worship attendance of 50–150 and are affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination. Clergy and church staff are not eligible to participate.

If you are interested in participating in the study but you are not certain if you are eligible, please contact the researcher. (Courtny's email address and phone number are provided at the end of this document.)

***Continued on the next page.***

**What will be required of me if I participate?**

Participants in the study will be asked to talk about and reflect on their experience with their church's recent change.

Every participant in the study will have a conversation with Courtny by phone or video chat. This will take approximately 20 minutes.

Some participants will have a longer, in-person, one-on-one "interview" with Courtny. This will take 60–90 minutes. (All interviews will be scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for the participant.)

Other participants in the study will take part in a "focus group" session of 5–10 people. This in-person, group conversation will last 60–90 minutes. (The focus group session will scheduled at a time that is convenient for those taking part, but it may require participants to drive up to 25 miles.)

**Will what I say be shared with my pastor or others in my church?**

Short answer: NO.

Longer answer: Neither your participation in this study nor what you say about your experience will be shared with your pastor, your spouse, your friends, or with anyone in your church. In the write-up of the study, you will be given a pseudonym and your location will be given by geographic region only (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, or West/Southwest). If references are made to your church, your church will also be given a pseudonym. Only the researcher will know which pseudonym goes with which participant.

**What if I decide to participate in the study now, but I change my mind later?**

You can withdraw your participation in the study at any time prior to the completion of data analysis.

**Who do I contact if I have additional questions?**

You can contact the researcher, Courtny Davis Olds, by email at [email redacted] or by phone/text at [phone number redacted].

## Appendix C: Guidelines for Initial Screening Conversation

- Were you a congregant in a church that recently experienced some kind of change?
- Do you know what denomination the church is affiliated with?
- What is the average attendance at a Sunday worship service? (best guess)
- In a typical month, how many Sundays did you attend the worship service?
- Tell me a little about the change the church experienced.
- What was the change like for you?

## Appendix D: Informed Consent to Participate in a Dissertation Research Study

*Note: A copy of the full Informed Consent Form will be provided for your records.*

**Name of Researcher:** Courtny B. Davis Olds
**Name of Organization:** Antioch University, PhD in Leadership and Change Program
**Name of Study:** "Exploring Congregants' Experiences of Change: A Phenomenological Study" (working title)

**Introduction:** This dissertation research study is being completed as part of the degree requirements for a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. The researcher, Courtny B. Davis Olds, is both a student in that program and a minister who is interested in congregational change.

What follows is information about the project, along with an invitation to participate. You may discuss this information with anyone you wish, and you may take time to reflect on whether you would like to participate or not. You may also ask questions of the researcher at any time.

**Purpose of the Research Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore congregants' experiences of change in their churches. Very little literature on congregational change is devoted to this perspective. The findings of this study have the potential to help churches navigate change more successfully, and to help pastors be better preachers, teachers, and leaders during times of change in their churches.

**Research Study Activities:** Participants in this study will be asked to talk openly and honestly about their experience with their church's recent change.

All participants will have a short (approximately 20 minute) conversation with the researcher via phone or video chat. Additional research study activities may be as follows:

- ☐ Some participants will have a longer (60–90 minute) in-person, one-on-one interview with the researcher. All interviews will be scheduled for a time and location that is convenient for the participant. Please check the box to the left if you are willing to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, if asked.

- ☐ Other participants in the study will take part in a focus group session of 5–10 people. This in-person, group conversation will last 60–90 minutes and be facilitated by the researcher. Efforts will be made to schedule the focus group session at a time and location that is convenient for those taking part, but participants may be required to drive up to 25 miles. Please check the box to the left if you are willing to participate in the focus group, if asked.

Interviews and the focus group conversation will be recorded for research purposes. These recordings, and any other information that may connect you to the study, will be kept in a secure location. All participants will be given pseudonyms and "de-identified" prior to publication of the study or sharing of the research results.

**Participant Selection:** You are being invited to take part in this dissertation research study because you are (or were) an active attendee of a midsize, mainline Protestant church that recently experienced change. You are not eligible to take part in this study if you are a clergyperson or staff member of the church.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You will not be penalized for your decision not to participate, nor will you be penalized for any of your contributions during the study. You may withdraw from this study at any time prior to the completion of data analysis.

**Risks:** It is not expected that you will be harmed or distressed as a result of participating in this study. Should you choose to participate, you may stop the interview or leave the focus group discussion at any time if you become uncomfortable.

**Benefits:** Some people find talking about their experiences to be positive and personally beneficial. However, there is no assurance of benefit to you from participating in this research study. Your participation will assist in the researcher's learning and may help others in the future.

**Reimbursements:** You will not be provided any monetary incentive to take part in this research study.

**Confidentiality/Limits of Confidentiality:** All interviews and the focus group conversation will be recorded and transcribed. The interview recording, its transcription, and the signed Informed Consent form will be kept in a secure location. For the purposes of the dissertation study write-up, you will be given a pseudonym and your location will be given by geographic region only (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West/Southwest). If references are made to your church, your church will also be given a pseudonym. Only the research will know which pseudonym corresponds to which participant.

Generally speaking, your contributions to the study are considered private information. However, there are times when this is not the case. Information cannot be kept private (confidential) when:

- The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused.
- The researcher finds out that that a person plans self-harm, such as by committing suicide.
- The researcher finds out that a person plans to harm someone else.

There are laws requiring many professionals to take action if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or is self-harming, harming another, or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe. In most states, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to self-harm or to harm another person. Please ask any questions you may have

about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that the researcher cannot keep some things private.

**Future Publication:** The researcher, Courtny B. Davis Olds, reserves the right to include any results of this study in future scholarly presentations and/or publications. As noted above, all information will be "de-identified" prior to publication.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** You do not have to take part in this dissertation research study if you do not wish to do so, and you may withdraw from the study at any time prior to the completion of data analysis.

**Whom to Contact:** If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher, Courtny Davis Olds, via email at [email redacted] or by phone/text at [phone number redacted].

If you have any ethical concerns about this study, you may contact Lisa Kreeger, PhD, Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Antioch University Ph.D. in Leadership and Change. Email: [email redacted]

The proposal for this dissertation research study has been reviewed and approved by the Antioch International Review Board (IRB), which is a committee tasked with ensuring that research participants are protected. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger at the email address above.

**THE REMAINDER OF THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK**

**DO YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY?**

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily consent to be a participant in this dissertation research study.

Name of Participant (printed): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

**DO YOU FURTHER CONSENT TO BE AUDIOTAPED IN THIS STUDY?**

I voluntarily agree to have my interview or focus group conversation recorded for the purpose of this study. I agree to allow the use of these recordings as described in this form.

Name of Participant (printed): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

*To be completed by the researcher or the person taking consent:*

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the dissertation research study, and that all questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Name of Researcher/Person Taking Consent: _____

Signature of Researcher/Person Taking Consent: _____

Date: _____

## Appendix E: Semistructured Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little about your church.
2. Tell me about the change that recently took place.
3. What was it like for you as your church was going through this change?
4. What was your reaction when you first learned this change was taking place?
5. What was your attitude toward the change later on?
6. How, if at all, did your faith come into play during this time?
7. Did anything change for you, personally, as this change was going on in your church?
8. How was this experience of change similar to or different from experiences of change in other aspects of your life?

**Appendix F: Member Checking Email**

Dear *Participant Name*,

Thank you, again, for participating in my research study. I have attached a one-page Word document with highlights from your interview. Obviously, there was much more in our conversation than can be captured in one page! But these were some of the major points, as I understood them. Could you review this and make any additions or corrections? I want to make certain that I have accurately understood what you sought to convey and what you thought was most significant about your experience of change in your church.

Feel free to make notations on the document itself, or to ask me any questions. If at all possible, please send your response by Friday, October 25th.

Many thanks!

Courtny

## Appendix G: Data Analysis Process Outputs

P1 Interview Highlights (Member-Checking Document)

- The most significant recent change in the life of the church was becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation. Another significant change, which was around the same time, was the retirement of the senior pastor.

- The process of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation involved some learning on her part, which strengthened her support of the initiative and helped her to more clearly see the need for a definitive statement and policy regarding LGBTQ acceptance.

- Her faith, and specifically her understanding of God's love and the importance of loving one another, served as a foundation for her support of the church's exploration of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation.

- She found it frustrating that not everyone availed themselves of the education opportunities offered as the church was in the discernment process about being a welcoming and affirming congregation.

- Another frustration was certain individuals who got up and said the same things over and over again in church meetings. She recognized that these individuals did not have the same educational and professional background that she does, and so she and they are coming from different perspectives.

- There is some sadness over losing members and friendships as a result of the church's stance on LGBTQ issues, as well as some sadness over the general decline in membership and the end of activities that were once meaningful to her.

- Being connected to a small group and the relationships there have been a source of support and joy during difficult times in the life of the church.

- In addition to the change at the church, there were also a lot of changes in her personal life around the same time. She is grateful to have a spouse with whom to share those struggles and experiences.

- On the whole, she has hope for the future of the church and wants to see it institute ministries that are relevant to people's lives now (rather than simply recreating ministries that were popular in the past).

P1 Initial Emergent Themes
*(reproduced here from a large notepad page that was posted on the wall of my workspace)*

- her own learning thru the process of becoming a welcoming & affirming church
  - saw the need for an official policy
  - eye-opening to hear firsthand accounts from LGBTQ persons
  - as she learned more, become more supporting of/enthusiastic about the process

- emotions of the experience
  - frustration
  - sadness
  - joy → outcome of experience

- relational toll
  - lost close friendship
  - members left the church

- guiding force behind her response/stance is commandment to love

- concurrent changes in other areas of life

- importance of relationships as source of support

Key themes:
- education/learning
- role of faith

P1 Notations During Collective Consideration of Participants' Emergent Themes
*(2nd round of notations on the large notepad page that was posted on the wall of my workspace)*

her own learning thru the process of becoming a welcoming & affirming church
- saw the need for an official policy
- eye-opening to hear firsthand accounts from LGBTQ persons
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- lost close friendship
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guiding force behind her response/stance is commandment to love

concurrent changes in other areas of life

- importance of relationships as source of support

Key themes:
education/learning
role of faith

Color Code
- Role of faith in the experience
- Negative emotions
- Lost relationship/relational toll
- Learning
- Other changes
- Underlying conflict
- Resolution