Got Religion?

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How Churches, Mosques, and Synagogues Can Bring Young People Back

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Preface

A FEW YEARS AGO I was asked to join a committee at my synagogue that was tasked with figuring out how to make nursery school parents into more active synagogue members. Whatever else one could say about a drop-off in religious affiliation, these people—parents of young children—were supposed to be the ones we could count on to be active members. And yet week after week the vast majority of families did not come to synagogue. Maybe I was asked to be on the committee because I write about religion. Or maybe it's because I was part of the problem.

The committee organized focus groups and asked parents in their thirties and forties why they were willing to drop off their kids for preschool every morning but they weren't attending Shabbat services with them Saturdays or why they weren't volunteering more or why they weren't planning to sign the kids up for Hebrew school. The answers varied greatly. For some it was time; for others the service was not the sort they had grown up with; and for many, religious observance simply wasn't a priority.

But over and over, one line was repeated: "I'd come if I knew other people were coming."

Really? I began to grow frustrated (sometimes visibly so) when people offered this answer, wondering if I was talking to eighth-graders or grown-ups. *You'll come if other people come? If the cool kids come?* This seemed like such an absurd reason to stay home and at the same time something the leadership of the synagogue seemed to have very little ability to change.

There had to be some better way to think about getting, congregants involved. The frustration is even worse when it comes to

singles and their religious practices. They aren't even setting foot in the door to use the preschool. So what would possess them to start thinking seriously about joining or participating in the life of a religious institution?

Like thousands of religious institutions around the country, mine has made a valiant effort to engage the unaffiliated and the disaffected. Though I am a little older than many of the people interviewed in this book and, more importantly, I am at a different stage of life (married with kids, not single), seeing why young adults don't bother with religious life is very easy for me. As the rabbi at Sixth and I, a popular synagogue in Washington, DC, told me, "We're not competing with other synagogues on Friday nights. Our competition is movies and plays and bars and restaurants and parties."

Nonetheless, seeing the appeal of the religious institutions young adults have chosen is easy. It's not only because the cool kids are attending. In the course of researching this book I found the ones they attach themselves to are not necessarily the biggest or the most flashy. They are not the wealthiest or the ones employing the latest technology. They are the ones that help young adults form the habits of believers.

The period we refer to as "emerging adulthood" is a kind of second adolescence—not because twenty-somethings are immature but because their lives are unstable in the same ways adolescent lives are. They're moving to new places, with new roommates. They're making new friends, dating different people, trying out new jobs, going back to school, making money, and going into debt. At this stage in life they don't give religious institutions a lot of consideration.

But our churches and synagogues and mosques actually have the opportunity to create some stability for them, to give them real responsibility in a community, to help them form those habits that could last a lifetime.

As the sun goes down on Friday night, Jews around the world

sing a medieval hymn—"Shalom Aleichem"—in which we wish peace upon the "ministering angels." Who are these angels? According to the Talmud, one good angel and one evil angel accompany a person home on Friday night from the synagogue. "When they arrive home, if they find a candle lit, the table set, and beds arranged nicely, the good angel says, 'May it be God's will that next Shabbat be the same,' and the evil angel is compelled to respond, 'Amen!' Otherwise, [if the home is not prepared in honor of Shabbat] the evil angel says, 'May it be God's will that next Shabbat be the same,' and the good angel is compelled to respond, 'Amen!'"

My own rabbi was recently discussing this passage, and he made an important observation—one more sociological than theological. The fact of the matter, he told a group of us gathered, is that "Next Shabbat *will* probably be the same." In other words, if you light the candles and say the blessing over the challah and the wine, if you have prepared a nice meal and set aside time for your family and friends this Friday night, you will probably do the same thing next week. If you don't, chances are you won't next week either.

That is both the happy and the sad truth about young adults and religion. The habits they form this week will affect next week, too. And all the years to come.

Introduction

In a widely discussed 2013 article in the *Atlantic* called "A Million First Dates," author Dan Slater wrote that "online romance is threatening monogamy." Men and women are simply not willing to offer the same amount of commitment because in the backs of their minds they are always aware of the other possibilities. Here's what one single man in his early thirties told Slater about the way Internet dating affected the way he viewed the end of a long-term relationship:

> I'm about 95 percent certain that if I'd met Rachel offline, and if I'd never done online dating, I would've married her. At that point in my life, I would've overlooked everything else and done whatever it took to make things work. Did online dating change my perception of permanence? No doubt. When I sensed the breakup coming, I was okay with it. It didn't seem like there was going to be much of a mourning period, where you stare at your wall thinking you're destined to be alone and all that. I was eager to see what else was out there.

"Eager to see what else is out there." That pretty much describes the modern world—especially the world through the eyes of twenty- and thirty-somethings. It has become cliché to point out that the array of choices we have today often leaves us more unhappy than a limited spectrum might have. *Have I bought the right shampoo or is there one of the thousands of others on the mar-*

ket I'd like better? Have I purchased the right house or will watching House Hunters *make me regret it? Have I chosen the right restaurant or will I want to be eating the meal that a friend on Facebook has just posted a picture of?* Between the explosion of products to meet every desire, the accessibility of such products online, and the changes in technology—both reality television and social media—we know something better is always out there, and we know that someone else has it.

How could such a world not affect our choice of romantic partners—and everything else?

Books on the millennial generation tend to go on at length about the so-called paradox of choice and the related phenomenon of decision fatigue. Twenty-somethings, they report, are paralyzed in the face of too many options and exhausted by having to pick among them.

And they also don't want to close anything off by actually making a decision. They worry that any choice they make will be too permanent. In their book *Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?*, mother and daughter journalists Robin Marantz Henig and Samantha Henig cite a fascinating study demonstrating this tendency. In a computer game devised by MIT psychologists, young adult players are given a certain number of "clicks" that they can use to "open doors" or—once inside a room—get a small amount of money. After a few minutes of wandering, the players figure out which rooms have the most money. Theoretically they should simply keep clicking in those rooms. But sometimes, doors will start closing. Even players who know they will earn more from using their clicks inside a room will start to panic and click to keep the doors from closing.

In other words, even if the other possible directions for our lives are less valuable—even entirely implausible—we still don't want them to close.

The same month that Slater's article appeared, Barry Cooper penned a more theological description of this sense of genera-

tional panic in *Christianity Today*. Cooper wrote, "We are worshiping an idol. A false god. One of the Baals of our culture. His name is 'open options.'"

This false god "kills our relationships because He tells us it's better not to become too involved . . . He kills our giving because he tells us these are uncertain financial times and you never know when you need the money." Cooper concludes, "The god of open options is also a liar. He promises you that by keeping your options open, you can have everything and everyone. But in the end, you get nothing and no one."

These are the words of caution that many religious leaders would like to offer the millennial generation. Clergy, laypeople, teachers, parents, and grandparents are worried about this thing called "emerging adulthood," in which people seem to put off all the traditional markers of growing up—leaving home, becoming financially independent, getting married—in favor of this permanent merry-go-round of choices. This new phase of adulthood is diminishing the involvement of young people in religious institutions, sapping the strength and vitality of faith communities, and creating a more barren religious landscape for the young adults who do eventually decide to return to it.[1]

In the fall of 2012 the Pew Forum on Religious Life made headlines with its report that a third of American adults under the age of thirty claimed no religious affiliation, compared with only 9 percent of adults sixty-five and older. For those who had followed the polls, this finding was not entirely surprising. According to a 2007 survey of over a thousand young adults by Lifeway Research, seven in ten Protestants ages eighteen to thirty—both evangelical and mainline—who went to church regularly in high school said they stopped attending by age twenty-three. And more than a third of those said they had not returned, even sporadically, by age thirty. According to a 2013 survey by the Barna Group, 65 percent of Catholic-raised young adults say they are less religiously active today than they were at age fifteen. Even as far back as 2001, a

researcher at Hebrew Union College found that the percentage of Jews who had at least two religious affiliations (a synagogue, Jewish Community Center (JCC), or other Jewish organization) was only 25 percent among those ages twenty-five to thirty-four, compared to 58 percent for those sixty-five and over. A 2012 Gallup poll found that "Americans are least religious at age 23 and most religious at age 80."

As Mark Chaves, a professor at Duke University and the author of *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, writes, "People in the pews are getting older." Using data from the General Social Survey, he concludes that while "older people have always been overrepresented in American congregations . . . this overrepresentation has been exacerbated lately." In the 1970s, people who attended church frequently were on average three years older than the general population. In 2008, there was a five-year gap. We have reached a point where "the average churchgoing adult in the United States is now 50 years old." And when young adults do walk into a congregation where middle age is the norm, it seems unlikely they'll stay.

Some experts say that we have reason to remain calm in the face of these trends. Frank Newport, the editor of the Gallup Poll, for instance, concluded in his book *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America* that the aging of the U.S. population may actually portend good things for the health of faith here. He notes the strong correlation between age and faith and posits, "It is a good bet that we are going to see a religious renaissance among baby boomers as they age. As a result—and as long as younger Americans don't stray from religion in huge numbers—the country as a whole will become substantially more religious in the decades ahead."

Rodney Stark, a distinguished professor of religion at Baylor University and the author of *The Triumph of Christianity*, agrees that warnings about American secularization are overblown. "I think there's an enormous amount of concern about losing these

young people, and it's probably a false alarm," he tells me. "You can go back to Gallup polls in the 1930s and you find that people under the age of thirty aren't coming to church. As soon as they get married they come back." He says, with a note of frustration, "The Barna Group [which has reported on declining religious interest among millennials] has scared the heck out of people. It's caused churches to panic and to spend money they don't need to spend on things that can't be cured."

Stark cites Peter Berger, the prominent Boston University sociologist, who early in his career bought into the idea that as modernization spread, the world was headed inexorably toward secularization. About twenty years into his career, Berger began to realize that the evidence for this trend was simply not there, particularly in America. Berger once famously remarked that if India was the most religious country and Sweden the least religious, then America was a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. Not only did this statement more accurately describe the actual religious makeup of the country, but it suggested a reason for the blinders that many academics tend to put on when thinking about religion. As part of the Swedish ruling class, they don't know anyone who goes to church—so how could we be living in such a religiously fervent country?

Berger was certainly right. American religiosity continued even as European secularization set in. But decades later, several things have changed that may make us want to reexamine his characterization.

First, religious affiliation has become more the domain of the upper classes than the working classes, as Charles Murray noted in his recent book *Coming Apart*. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Murray compared the two representative towns of working-class Fishtown and upper-class Belmont: "Suppose we define 'de facto secular' as someone who either professes no religion at all or who attends a worship service no more than once a year. For the early [General Social Surveys] conducted from 1972 to 1976,

29 percent of Belmont and 38 percent of Fishtown fell into that category. Over the next three decades, secularization did indeed grow in Belmont, from 29 percent in the 1970s to 40 percent in the GSS surveys taken from 2006 to 2010. But it grew even more in Fishtown, from 38 percent to 59 percent."

How did this happen? Well, it may simply be that the ideas and habits of the elites began to trickle down to the rest of the population. Just as the social acceptance of premarital sex began with the educated classes and then became widespread among the lower classes, so it is also possible that a falling away from religion, which began with our "Swedes" at the top, has now spread to more and more of the "Indians" who make up the rest of the population.

Indeed, this seems more likely than not. Churchgoing used to be almost required in order to achieve respectability in American society. In addition to being the norm, it was also an aspirational activity. But when the upper classes decided that churchgoing was nothing but a silly bourgeois convention, it was perhaps only a matter of time before the rest of the country started dropping out. (And just as the explosion of out-of-wedlock births have had more harmful consequences to the lower classes, it is also true that the end of churchgoing for the poor has been more problematic, leading to fewer social ties and worse economic outcomes, for instance.[2])

But the real reason to wonder whether America is becoming less religious is the data on this younger generation. In 2010 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a report called *Religion among the Millennials*, in which the researchers compared this generation to other generations at the same age. Their conclusion: "Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were *at a comparable point in their life cycle* (20 percent in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13 percent in the late 1970s). Young adults also attend religious services less often than older Americans today. And compared with their elders today, fewer

young people say that religion is very important in their lives."

The report did find that there are certain ways in which millennials have remained "traditional" in their religious views and practices. For instance, they believe in life after death and in the reality of miracles in similar percentages to older cohorts. A similar percentage even believe with absolute certainty in the existence of God. And the percentage of this generation that prays every day is also very close to that of young people in prior decades. In the 1980s it was 41 percent; in the 1990s, 40 percent; and in the 2000s, 45 percent.

But all of these measures of religiosity are extra-institutional. Praying does not necessarily mean setting foot inside a church or a synagogue or a mosque. Believing in heaven or hell does not imply anything about a particular religious group's theology. And acknowledging God's existence does not mean that you believe the same thing about God that your coreligionists do. Or even that you have coreligionists.

Atheism has not carried the day among young adults—at least not yet. Rather, a combination of agnosticism, a disinterest in and distrust of religious institutions (to which we shall return momentarily), and a general sense of confusion about exactly what we mean when we talk about religion and morality describes the current condition.

In his book *Souls in Transition*, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith examines the data from his vast longitudinal National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR). The study's interviews with "emerging adults" tend to show almost no power of moral reasoning and a vague inarticulateness. Smith shows how postmodernism affects the teenage worldview.

Take this all-too-typical explanation from one respondent of how one might tell right from wrong: "Morality is how I feel too, because in my heart, I could feel it. You could feel what's right or wrong in your heart as well as your mind. Most of the time, I always felt, I feel it in my heart and it makes it easier for me to

morally decide what's right and wrong. Because if I feel about doing something, I'm going to feel it in my heart, and if it feels good, I'm going to do it."

Smith notes that the persistent use of "feel" instead of "think" or "argue" is "a shift in language use that expresses an essentially subjectivistic and emotivistic approach to moral reasoning and rational argument." He concludes that such young adults "are de facto doubtful that an identifiable, objective, shared reality might exist across and around all people."

This kind of reasoning, if you can call it that, doesn't generally lead people to conclude there is or is not a deity. But this stance also doesn't motivate them to find out about, let alone become a particularly involved member of, a religious community either. With no shared reality and each one of us experiencing God differently, what do we have to learn from religion? That is where the real problems seem to arise.

According to the Pew Report, only 18 percent of millennials report attending religious services weekly or nearly weekly. That's compared to 26 percent of baby boomers and 21 percent of Generation Xers at the same age. It's not a steep drop-off but it is a steady one, says Mark Chaves. "There is a long-term pattern," he says. "Each generation is a little less religiously involved than the one before it." And he has found that no single event like the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, for instance, has really changed the way people practice religion in the long run.

Indeed, Chaves goes further to say there is "nothing new or unique about twenty-somethings, and it is misleading to focus on just one age group or cohort." They are just sinking down a little further than their parents on the religiosity scale.

Others, however, say this new phase of emerging adulthood is definitely presenting unique challenges. David Kinnaman, the author of *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*, says that technology is in part to blame for the problem. In the same way that young adults have become

accustomed to taking a little bit of what they need from a variety of sources—whether it's music or online college courses—they get some of their spiritual nourishment from websites, some from a church, and some from their social group. Kinnaman explains, "They still think of and use institutions in a 'What's in it for me?' kind of way." So they take what they need. But then, he says, "Institutions are less significant in shaping and creating the entirety of their experience."

In addition to new technology and the fact that young people seem averse to joining institutions, other factors are pulling them away from organized religion. For one thing, they are responding to the new social cues we have about church attendance—which is to say, no stigma is attached to saying you don't belong to a church anymore.

Smith, who has just collected his fourth wave of data from the NSYR (men and women in their mid to late twenties), tells me, "It is simply not going to be the case that young adults will keep returning to church at the same rates. It is more acceptable to say, 'I'm not religious' or 'I'm an atheist.' And young people are more likely to say that."

Even Russell Moore, the newly installed head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Commission, has observed this trend.

In an interview published in the *Wall Street Journal*, Moore tells the story of a friend from college two decades ago, an atheist, who asked for the name of a church that wasn't very demanding of its congregation. When Moore inquired why, the friend said he needed a church to attend because he planned to run for governor some day. Moore says the story shows that in the past you had to join a church even if you had no belief because everyone else belonged. But today his friend wouldn't feel so obliged because "the idea that to be a good person, to be a good American, you have to go to church" has largely disappeared.

But the most important reason that young people are not mak-

ing a commitment to institutional religion has to do with their habits of family formation. They are getting married at later ages. The average age of first marriage for women is now twenty-seven, and for men, it's twenty-nine.

Getting married, and especially having children of one's own, was once the most common impetus for joining a church or synagogue. But now more people are not marrying at all. Cohabiting used to be seen as the precursor to marriage, but now many young people see it as an alternative to marriage. According to a 2013 report from the Center for Health Statistics, "Within three years of cohabiting, 40 percent of women had transitioned to marriage; 32 percent remained living together; 27 percent had broken up."

More Americans are also delaying having children—and more are not having children at all. America's fertility rate is currently 1.93, and it has been below the replacement rate of 2.1 since the early 1970s. Even if people do get married and have children, they are doing it later, which means many of their religious habits are already formed. And fewer children means that the family is less focused and, at any rate, focused for a shorter time on the formation of the children. Families are spending fewer years using synagogue preschools or taking children to catechism classes.

Moreover, the economic downturn may have had a negative effect on marriage. A survey in 2012 of the National Association of Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys found that its members were seeing a large increase in people whose student loan debt is making them delay starting families. As one woman mired in student loans told the *Wall Street Journal*, "How could I consider having children if I can barely support myself?"

So perhaps the solution then is just to wait (albeit a little longer than we used to) for these young people to get their financial footing, to get married, to have children. As a patient parent might say, just give them time.

Smith worries that "a lot of religious leaders have become complacent about this." He expects that "there will be a gradual trend

toward fewer and fewer coming back." And then he cautions that religious leaders "should be concerned about twenty-somethings leaving *even if they do come back*." If they return after a long time away, "they've been formed by others." This, says Smith, will cause religious institutions even greater challenges. By the time these millennials return, they will be "more consumerist in their orientation" and more shaped by "secularist propositions."

Not only are they unaccustomed to thinking in religious terms, they are out of the habit of belonging to a religious community. Fitting back in, even if they have some impulse to try, is going to be difficult.

For all of these reasons—the trends of family formation, the cultural acceptability of not belonging to a religious institution, and the steady decline in attendance that Chaves points to—it seems to me that religious leaders have every reason for concern. We are at a crucial point in terms of arresting this decline, if only this generation can be turned around.

But first we must continue to explore the underlying reasons for this trend. Some analysts say that churches themselves—not simply larger cultural factors—are to blame for these problems. As Kinnaman found in his research, young adults find themselves at odds with the church over its view of science, sex, doubt, the broader culture, and social justice. He suggests that the church has not paid very close attention to the concerns of this generation and that young men and women are bristling at the messages that the church has been offering for millennia.

Many church leaders respond that their theology cannot change simply because they are trying to reach young people who are, in Smith's words, "formed by others." But traditionalist theology is not all that grates on young people.

In fact, well-intentioned efforts by the churches themselves may also be to blame. Take teen parachurch organizations and campus ministries, which have exploded in recent decades as part of an attempt to keep young people active in religious life. Some

leaders claim that these groups have altered the way that young people view worship and have changed the expectations of what belonging to a faith group entails.

This marketing to young people actually began as far back as Billy Graham in 1940s with Youth for Christ (YFC). Back then, of course, as Thomas Bergler recounts in his book *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, Christian leaders were primarily concerned about the threats of communism and juvenile delinquency (preachers saw the two as deeply related) rather than technology and sex. But their belief that evangelizing young people was the key to solving the world's problems has remained constant.

Although the tactic may seem obvious, prior to the 1930s, as Bergler notes, churches were intergenerational affairs, with the message tailored to adults. Adolescents (there was no such thing as "teenagers" back then) were expected to absorb the same religious ideas as their parents in largely the same manner. They were expected to aspire to what Bergler calls "Christian maturity." But "between 1930 and 1950, Americans got blasted by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War," and "concerned Christians launched dozens of new youth organizations in this period in the hopes of protecting young people from the evil effects of these crises and mobilizing them to make a difference in a dangerous world."

Almost a century later, these organizations have morphed into the exciting, innovative, activist organizations that dot the nation's college campuses. From Campus Crusade to Hillel to Muslim Student Associations, observers say that while these groups have succeeded in mobilizing young people, they have also made it more difficult for young people to enter the grown-up, multigenerational churches afterward. Even at Notre Dame, where Smith teaches, he says that kids who attend daily Mass get used to what he calls a "gourmet liturgy," and have trouble finding the same level of religious experience after graduation.[3]

But the problems getting young adults into the habits of reli-

gious participation do not begin with college. Rather, they start at home, with family. The well-documented phenomenon of helicopter parents has produced a generation that not only wants to put off marriage for as long as possible but also put off responsibility of any sort. Treating young men and women in their twenties as if they are children means that their presence in churches and synagogues is superfluous. If they don't show up, nothing will go wrong. The middle-aged members of the congregation will make sure everything is taken care of. Right?

Also ironic is that the very helicopter parents who are helping to produce this lackluster religious participation are the same people making their children crazy about getting good grades, honing their athletic prowess, and getting into top colleges. Faced with an overscheduled kid, a helicopter parent is much more likely to sign him up for an SAT prep class than a church youth group.

And what of the religious institutions themselves? Do they assume that, because the megachurch model worked for the baby boomers, these large institutions will continue to attract young people? They may, but for a group that is particularly suspicious of bureaucracy and slick advertising, something different could be necessary.

The kind of radical individualism and distrust of institutions that characterizes this generation has actually earned them a great deal of praise. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote recently, they are "wonderful young people who are doing good. Typically, they've spent a year studying abroad. They've traveled in the poorer regions of the world. Now they have devoted themselves to a purpose larger than self. Often they are bursting with enthusiasm for some social entrepreneurship project: making a cheap water-purification system, starting a company that will empower Rwandan women by selling their crafts in boutiques around the world."

But the kind of individualism that inspires young adults to bypass traditional institutions in favor of small, grassroots efforts

can be problematic as well. The kind of à la carte existence that Kinnaman describes in which media, education, and now religion are all ingested in small bits makes it hard to produce the kind of social change that this generation would like to see. As Brooks notes in the context of the millennial efforts in the third world, "They have little faith in the political process and believe that real change happens on the ground beneath it. That's a delusion. You can cram all the nongovernmental organizations you want into a country, but if there is no rule of law and if the ruling class is predatory then your achievements won't add up to much."

It is not the case, though, that most religious leaders are complacent in the face of all this mistrust and disaffection. After traveling around the country and interviewing dozens of rabbis, pastors, priests, and imams, I perceive a sense of desperation. They feel as if they are trying a variety of different approaches but nothing seems to be working. And while they understand the importance of keeping these young people in the fold, they also have to serve the people who actually show up every week. How much time and how many resources can they devote to a generation that seems defined by its disengagement?

These leaders wonder: Is it possible to get these young people to step up and take responsibility even if they are not married or planning to have children soon? Can religious institutions treat twenty-somethings like adults even if no one else does?

The short answers are yes and yes. I asked a variety of experts in academia and different religious communities about which groups are serving this population well and which places are actually drawing in young people on a regular basis. This book reflects the results of those interviews as well as visits to the institutions with the most promising models.

Despite the amazing religious diversity of this country, the way that faith leaders describe their problems does not vary much across religious lines. The time has come to take a broad-minded, ecumenical approach to this question. Many of the structural

solutions for one religious group can be adapted to work for another group.

"There will always be winners and losers" among religious institutions, as Mark Chaves cautions. A church on the upswing today could be on the downswing tomorrow. Religious institutions may even have a natural life cycle, meaning that they can only be the "hot" item for so long.

But I have tried to pick religious institutions that seem to have some staying power, a real sense of serving millennials—and turning millennials into "servants" of a larger purpose themselves. In the seven chapters that follow, I have profiled communities from a variety of backgrounds—Jewish, Mormon, Catholic, Evangelical, Muslim—and tried to figure out what challenges they faced and how they rose to meet them. While I explain some of the theological issues that govern how each one operates, I try to go beyond those issues in order to get at the organizational and social solutions that each one has adopted.

This survey of the efforts being made to bring young adults into the fold is hardly exhaustive, and readers will notice that, despite the geographic, racial, and cultural diversity represented in these chapters, they still present a somewhat skewed portrait. With the exception of a Mormon congregation in Utah and the black church in central New Jersey, most of these chapters are focused on college-educated young people. As we have discussed, this is the population where the bulk of churchgoers in America come from and so it is where the bulk of the efforts are coming from. Also, if church is "aspirational" and if the college-educated (those with a bachelor's degree now make up a third of the population between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine) are setting the trends for the rest of the society, there is good reason to focus on this group. By changing their behavior, religious leaders may succeed in altering larger trends.

One of the reasons that American religion has remained so vibrant for so long is that our religious institutions are constantly

changing, ready to adapt to the influx of immigrants, different social and economic circumstances, and new technologies.

But this new frontier seems more frightening in some ways. It is not just the view of some secular elite that American religion is losing ground. There is no reason for hysteria, but there is cause for concern. And religious leaders and parents aren't the only ones wringing their hands. Young adults themselves are feeling a little lost. So much of life until their twenties is scripted by parents and teachers that it is hard to know what to do when they get to be their own authors.

If it's true, as a pastor told me, that leaving college is like "jumping off a religious cliff," then the institutions described in this book are the parachutes softening the fall. Ideally, they're the trampolines, propelling young people to get excited about and involved again in organized religion.

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Location, Location, Location

How the "Theology of Place" Is Plugging Young Adults Back into Their Communities and Their Churches

If you watch enough episodes of *House Hunters*, *Property Virgins*, or any of the other myriad reality shows in which people search for and eventually purchase a home, you find that buyers, and especially young buyers, want three things (in no particular order): a kitchen with granite countertops and stainless steel appliances, an open floor plan, and a location within walking distance of shops and restaurants. When I began to watch these shows a few years after my own migration from the city to the suburbs of New York, I was a little surprised by how commonly this last factor was mentioned. I nearly fell off the couch when I saw a young couple demanding that their agents find them a place "within the Cleveland city limits."

I once lived in a place with my husband where you could walk to everything—the park, the dry cleaner, the independent bookstore, the coffee shop, the outrageously priced supermarket—but I never dreamed of staying there permanently. The impracticality of not owning a car, the high rents, the tiny spaces (even with an open floor plan) never appealed to me.

It turns out, though, that I am in a minority. The evidence is not merely in reality shows or among the folks in my old neighborhood who liked bringing their newborns to hip bars to hang out. As Alan Ehrenhalt argues in his book, *The Great Inversion and the*

Future of the American City, "We are living in a moment in which the massive outward migration of the affluent that characterized the second half of the twentieth century is coming to an end. And we need to adjust our perceptions of cities, suburbs, and urban mobility as a result."

A variety of reasons exist for this return to urban life. People realized that extralong commutes were cutting into their time with family, particularly when the hours of professionals were getting longer already. Lower crime rates in urban areas also made cities more desirable. But young people might also crave the kind of close-knit community that their grandparents once had. (Many say that they experienced such an environment in college.) Now, though, instead of living in close proximity to a large extended family, young people have become part of urban tribes, groups of friends who hang out together—even once they marry and have children.

Given this shift, perhaps it is no surprise that churches, particularly evangelical ones, have rediscovered their own urban roots. Perhaps the most well-known pioneer of this trend is Timothy Keller, who was asked by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) to start a church in New York in 1989. Today Redeemer has well over five thousand people in regular Sunday attendance. In 2001 Redeemer launched a "church planting" center, which has successfully helped to start almost two hundred churches across the country and around the world. Keller is among the most influential church leaders in America, not least because he has advocated a serious Christian engagement with the city.

In his widely consulted book, *Center City*, Keller writes, "Paul and other Christian missionaries went to great cities because when Christianity was planted there, it spread regionally (cities were the centers of transportation routes); it also spread globally (cities were multiethnic, international centers and converts took the gospel back to their homeland) and finally it more readily affected the culture (the centers of learning, law and government

were in the cities)." For these same reasons, though, Christianity in America has experienced it strongest pushback in cities. Urban areas, particularly on the coasts, have gained reputations as centers of an elitist secularism, and for the second half of the twentieth century, many Christians did not see them as particularly hospitable.

But today, the faithful seem ready to engage. Here's how *Christianity Today* editor Andy Crouch described the phenomenon in a 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article:

> A new generation of church founders believes that city centers will be the beachhead of a new evangelization. While U.S. cities aren't growing as fast as overseas metropolises like Lagos or Shanghai, their renaissance since the crime-ridden 1970s is one of the cultural headlines of the last generation, and it has been accompanied by burgeoning urban congregations. On a Sunday morning in any American city the signs of change come in literal form: placards on sidewalks and corners announcing church meetings.

But now church leaders are looking to take this migration a step further. Rather than simply relocate megachurches into an urban environment, pastors are looking to entrench a new church model into American neighborhoods.

Ray Cannata came to New Orleans from a church in suburban New Jersey. He had attended Princeton Theological Seminary and then interned at a church nearby. When he finished his degree the church hired him first as an associate pastor, and then, when the senior pastor left, Cannata took his place. He describes the church as a congregation of young families with about 250 members. "It was a place where people worked long hours and they commuted really far and they were very successful." The arrangement made it difficult for the church to really build a community since many

of the people weren't even in the vicinity of the church most of the week.

But even when the members were at the church or participating in church activities, the community was not a cohesive one, according to Cannata. He was trying to figure out a way to help them with the problems they did have, but the solutions only seemed to make the communal issues worse. The church, he said, "was very much program-oriented. It seemed helpful to have a women's ministry and an old persons' ministry and a singles' ministry, but then I realized that there are unintended consequences." He says he was "creating consumers by the way I was perpetuating this model."

The extent to which religious leaders want to discourage millennials from thinking of themselves as consumers of religion is a theme that came up again and again in my interviews. On the one hand, young adults seem to have a completely me-centered mind-set when they are deciding what church to join—who has the best music, the coolest pastor, the most dynamic crowd, and which is located near my house—but a big part of what they are looking for is the opportunity to serve a community. Whether these two impulses are compatible remains to be seen.

But Cannata is very clear about the problems that church consumers create for community: "I really felt like you have a women's ministry and what happens is women are hanging out with other women. They're not hanging out with men. They're getting into their particular things, which are great and a part of the body [of Christ], but that's not the whole picture of what the body ought to be. It creates people who are more selfish and a little more 'Only other women understand me.' Same thing with men. Same thing with kids."

Cannata is a tall man with a beard and mustache. He listens intently whenever his interlocutors speak. But if they don't, he could give an hourlong monologue and you might not notice. Relaxing on a leather armchair in the living room of his shotgun-

style house at a busy intersection in New Orleans, he could not look more at home as he documents the problems facing American Christianity and the difficulties it must overcome to engage the next generation of young adults.

He worries that American culture is creating an individualistic rather than communal version of Christianity. "Christianity becomes a self-help program in that context. In other words, 'I'm having trouble in my marriage, so I want the church to provide me with the data that's going to help me have a better marriage,' rather than saying, 'I'm here missionally to serve' or 'I'm part of a body, part of the family. I'm here to give and to take.'"

Cannata began to rethink all of the things he was taught about church "growth"—various theories and programs about what would increase the size of a congregation. He says, "Christianity got along fine without this stuff for 1,970 years, but it's all unique to American culture and it's unique to suburbia in a lot of ways." Catering to more congregants in order to grow the congregation seemed to him a fruitless exercise. Indeed, the Faith Communities Survey from 2013 found that young adults are attracted to congregations that place a lot of emphasis on spiritual practices, not necessarily the ones that have special programs for people in their age group.

So then Cannata began to wonder about the suburban element of the equation. He was invited to interview for a position at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New Orleans just before Hurricane Katrina hit. "I fell in love about thirty seconds after we got here," he recalls of the visit he made here with his wife. The congregation was small, and he did not form much of an impression of the church or its current leadership. For Cannata, it seemed to be all about, to borrow a phrase, "Location, location, location."

There were a lot of things Cannata wanted to do differently when he arrived to take over three months after Katrina. And thanks to the fact that there were only seventeen church members left when he showed up, he had a blank slate. He wanted a

more liturgical service, weekly Communion, and a different kind of music. But most of all he wanted something that was "neighborhood-y, that had a sense of place." He had begun to think about the "theology of place." The church had to be focused, he told me, "on one geographic area and really minister to that."

The Bible is very focused on places, notes Cannata. In any passage from the Bible, he says, you are likely to be told where something occurred. While the sermons are focused on "ethical issues and morality," he thinks that the specifics are important. The Bible mentions the places, he says, "to remind you that it's an earthly thing. It happened in a place. It's not a fairy tale. It's not 'Once upon a time.'" Someone once told him that "having a theology of place is acting like the incarnation really happened." At the end of the day, says Cannata, "We believe Jesus is God in the flesh, breaking into time and place in history. And he is really there in a real place in a real time. He didn't pick Greece. He didn't pick Illinois. He picked Bethlehem." (The way Cannata talks, some might think Jesus should have come to the Big Easy instead.)

Cannata has read Jane Jacobs's masterwork, *The Death and Life of American Cities*, four times now. Her book was the first and perhaps most important critique of urban planning in the middle of the twentieth century. She called for neighborhoods to block government-led urban renewal projects and instead form their own grassroots campaigns to revitalize city life.

Cannata looked at the city of New Orleans and wondered what happened to the once dominant Catholic parishes that served the city neighborhood by neighborhood. The geographical lines drawn by the archdiocese determined what churches people attended and what religious schools their kids would go to, which served as a way of creating tight-knit communities.

Over the years the Catholic population in New Orleans has fallen off, and the Protestant churches became more and more like they are in the rest of the country. Today, they are large and they

are competing with each other, trying to draw people from across the city to their pews.

Rachelle Garner grew up in a small town in Michigan. She recalls that the church she was raised in was a twelve-minute drive ("eight minutes if you hit the lights right"), but after college she and her husband moved to Montreal. They found a church they liked but it was a forty-five-minute drive from their home. "It just doesn't make sense to do that and not be able to invest in people's lives," she tells me.

That seems to be Cannata's thinking. If people come from across the city to Redeemer, he doesn't turn them away, but he does ask them if they have looked for someplace closer to them. And he emphasizes that all of the work of the church will be to serve the uptown community where it's located. The small community groups that meet weekly, he insists, will only take place within a certain radius of the church.

By becoming a neighborhood church, he believes that people will run into each other outside of church, too. And it seems to be working. Many of the parishioners I interview mention that the people they see in church are the same ones they see listening to music on Saturday nights. Or hanging out in the local coffee shops. Redeemer has created a community, but it has also created accountability. People behave a certain way when they expect they will run into their fellow churchgoers. Will Tabor, a campus minister at Tulane University, says he often sees other congregants during the week. "That is a positive." He feels as if the church has "submitted" itself to the purposes of the neighborhood.

Eileen McKenna is a violinist who moved to New Orleans with her husband, a drummer, a couple of years ago. She actually trains horses during the day and then plays music with him in the evenings. But she insists that the "church scene" is not a separate part of her life. "I see people at my church in my daily life" and at her music gigs as well.

It is probably not a good idea to build a church around a particularly charismatic pastor—what happens when he leaves?—but Cannata has so thoroughly come to embody the theology of place that it's hard to think about Redeemer's success in his absence. His love of New Orleans extends, needless to say, to its food. He has eaten at almost all of the city's seven hundred independently owned restaurants. Literally. In fact, there is a documentary film coming out about him called *The Man Who Ate New Orleans*.

Despite this, Cannata has not packed on the pounds because he also walks several miles every day. In fact, he drives almost nowhere. He lives in a historic house near the intersection of two busy streets and a short walk from a bustling district of restaurants and shops. The office of the church is a few blocks away and so are the coffee shops where he tries to write his sermons.

Marty Garner, Rachelle's husband, tells me that Cannata "does a good job of belonging to this place, contributing to it, serving it, loving it." He has become part of the Mardi Gras parade, joining something called the Krewe of the Rolling Elvi, which is essentially a group of men who dress up as Elvis for the party. They also get together at other points during the year as well to raise money for worthy causes around the city.

While the parade has a kind of wild reputation, the Elvi, and Cannata in particular, want to make sure that people understand it's about more than just a party. It's a gathering of a community. When I visited shortly after Mardi Gras, Cannata mentioned in his sermon that some people at the parade were mocking a young girl who was developmentally disabled. When the Rolling Elvi found out, they offered her a kind of personal apology, staging their own gathering and giving her "throws" (the necklaces that are offered by parade marchers to the revelers along the route).

Also, Cannata's visible presence in the community on a daily basis, says Ashley Marsh, "bridges the gap between nonbelievers and believers." Marsh, who came with her husband, Anthony, to New Orleans from Kansas City, says there are many people in

New Orleans who "do not have Christ in their lives. I think it's excellent to meet Ray as a neighbor . . . you know, a fun guy and then to know that he is a pastor."

But it is not just Cannata who is unique. It is New Orleans. In the aftermath of Katrina, the city has become a magnet for young people looking to help rebuild. Becky Otten grew up in a suburb of Milwaukee and decided she wanted to attend Tulane. She arrived with her family on August 27, 2005. The president of the university greeted the freshman class and then asked them to leave. "We'll see you in a couple of days," Otten recalls being told. Despite her parents' concerns, she did return to the city for the second semester.

Otten grew up in a very religious home. Her mother was a Quaker, and her father was from a Christian Reformed Church. The family attended the latter. She went to a school associated with that church as well until eighth grade and then a public high school. That was when she started to question her faith, or rather, she says, her church. "I felt like everyone else acted like they were perfect. It was a combination of judgment and hypocrisy. I knew there were struggles in my peers' lives and in their parents' lives, but it always came out as, 'You are not good enough. You are not Christian enough.'" Her Christian friends questioned her decision to attend public school. At the same time she was aspiring to the popular crowd in high school, which meant drinking and partying. As her behavior worsened, she felt less and less like she belonged in church. She didn't want to be part of the "hypocrisy" she saw around her.

Finally at the end of her senior year of high school, she felt things start to come together. She went on a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico. She says the group she went with was "very real about faith and that they had messed up but that was okay. I really had started to feel my sense of purpose." Otten came to school in New Orleans knowing that she wanted to be involved in community service work. The first couple of years here she did things like

gut houses with her friends in the Lower Ninth Ward and act as a teacher's assistant for a fourth grade class. She didn't feel much pull to participate in religious groups on campus. But then she found Redeemer.

In that, Otten is an outlier. Most college students I've spoken with don't tend to feel very comfortable going to local churches unless there is already a critical mass of students there. The campus religious groups are much better at catering to their needs and their schedules. And they are less intimidating.

The campus minister, Will Tabor, believes that college religious leaders are not emphasizing enough the importance for students of joining a real church. He says there are "a billion reasons" why college students don't go to church. They don't want to get up Sunday mornings. They worry they won't have fun in college if they go to a church. They worry they will be condemned by churchgoers if they do have fun in college. They believe they can't ask questions in church—or have doubts about the faith. And they think church is "boring."

Tabor hosts midweek Bible studies, but he sees it as his role to get students into a "true local church." First, because the campus groups don't generally offer the sacraments, and second, Tabor believes, that is a vital part of the Christian experience. He thinks it is important for students to get to meet people from "different backgrounds" who are going through "different struggles" and "not be isolated in your little world of college students." He says he is concerned that "if you're in a college ministry you're around people who look and act and think like you, then how are you going to step into a life that's completely different [after graduation]? Are we setting them up for leaving the church? By making it so easy here in college, are we making it really hard out of college?" Many religious leaders say the answer is yes.

And not all campus religious leaders are as accommodating as Tabor is. For some (as we will see in the case of Muslim campus life) freestanding religious institutions can be seen as competition

for campus faith groups. They may not always be willing to work together to create the kind of faith pipeline that could benefit the larger religious community most.

Redeemer is very close to Tulane. The congregation actually rents space from another church. It's a lovely old building with large windows that stream in light. The pews are old-fashioned wood with no cushions—not particularly comfortable. It has a cozy feel, though, or it would in most months. But there is no heat. So it can get pretty cold in the winter when the temperature dips into the forties.

But the service moves. It has a traditional liturgy with hymns played by the church's jazz band. Cannata gives a Bible-based homily but with a lot of pop-culture references and mentions of New Orleans. He stops at various points in the service to explain the significance of different elements—even Communion. A number of members come from unchurched backgrounds and many more come from nondenominational or non-Presbyterian ones. Cannata has made an effort to be ecumenical. This is not a Presbyterian table, he says, when he is offering Communion. This is a Christian table.

Tabor says he was immediately struck by the music when he first came to Redeemer. "It was amazing." He says the worship service is "high energy," but it still feels like a church service. "They're not trying to hide that." Tabor has been to churches and to campus ministry services that seem more interested in entertaining the congregants than in being a church. At Redeemer, he says, "The music is good and Ray does try to put his best foot forward. But it is also very clear that this is a church."

Tabor is right. Redeemer doesn't feel formal, but it still feels like a church. Congregants bring in coffee with them. There is a range of attire. Most of the women are dressed up, but the men seem more casual in jeans or khakis. There are some babies and toddlers and while there is a nursery, a few of the children stay and make some noise during the service.

When Becky Otten showed up in the spring of 2006, she did not immediately see a lot of college students at Redeemer. There were only a handful of people at the first service she attended. She felt the "genuine sense that people really wanted to know who I was and how I was doing." Still, for a while she didn't become a member of the church. If she missed a Sunday it "wasn't a big deal" to her. But over time her attitude changed. "I feel like I have a vested interest in being there Sunday," she tells me.

Over the course of her time in college, Redeemer became more of a priority. She began to make certain that she came not only to Sunday services but to her community group meeting on Wednesday nights. The community group has come to play a significant role in her life. She does not allow anything to stop her from attending.

After graduation, she stayed on at Tulane for a master's degree. She has since then started working at the Center for Social Innovation at the university. In her current job she helps students "find their identity as a community leader . . . combine their passions with what they're studying to create social change." And then she helps them find internships or resources to help them achieve their aspirations.

The city of New Orleans seems to be busting at the seams with social innovators, including a large contingent of Teach for America fellows and alums. The city has cut a lot of the red tape in education and new charter schools are opening up each fall, which are attracting young teachers.

There are new nonprofits popping up all the time to help get the city back on its feet. But there is also a fledgling group of people trying to start businesses. Coffee shops are filled with freelancers of all sorts working on their laptops, meeting to discuss venture capital funding. In the spring of 2012, the city saw its first tech incubator open. The program designed to support early-stage tech startups is just a sign of how much the sector has grown in recent years.

New Orleans right now is attracting exactly the kind of people that most churches would kill for. They are young, they are socially responsible, they are innovative, they are into networking, and they like community service. And they are spilling out of the pews at Redeemer. On the Sunday I was at Redeemer, I would estimate that close to 90 percent of those in the congregation were in their twenties or thirties.

When the young people at Redeemer talk about social justice, I found, they are rarely talking about political action. If the boomer generation liked the slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally," the young men and women I met at Redeemer seemed to think locally and act locally. Very locally. As Otten tells me, "Being at Redeemer makes me take a critical look at the life I'm living every single day." She tells me about one of her friends at Redeemer who found out that another one doesn't have laundry facilities in her home. So instead of letting her take all of her kids to the local laundromat, the friend invites her over to do laundry. The kids all play together. Says Otten, "I think everyone finds out how they can be that representation of God in their neighbors' lives." Another one of her friends recently went to a seminar on becoming a foster parent. She's only twenty-three.

Kim Thompson came to New Orleans originally on a mission trip. After college, she worked as an intern at Campus Crusade bringing students down to the area. Six years later, she's still here. Some of her closest friends are people she met during the rebuilding effort. She lived with the other people on the team and recalls that even a year after the storm, theirs was the only house for blocks with lights on at night. "There were no grocery stores, no McDonalds. There was nothing. It was really important to have the community of people at our house to go through the struggles of living in a devastated area and do the work we were doing. I think my faith was really in community."

Marty Garner echoes this sentiment. He says when he first came to Redeemer, he did not initially connect with anyone. He tried

another church and had the same problem. Finally, he emailed Ray Cannata. "I remember feeling like I was drowning, like I was the only person in the world." They met for coffee and Cannata encouraged him to return. When he did, he fell in with a group of guys who had gone to the University of Virginia together. Garner seems surprised that although they were from wealthy suburbs of Washington, D. C., "They were nothing like the suburban rich kids that I knew."

What Garner realized, he tells me, was that "I need community around me in order for my faith to burn more brightly. Not having that made it really difficult for me to have a private faith."

Cannata has continued to resist programming at Redeemer. He says that twenty- and thirty-somethings value "authenticity." And a number of people tell me that they like the fact that Redeemer has no "gimmicks."

Cannata wants everyone at the church to feel like a full-fledged member. At other churches, he notes, there seem to be different levels. You're only really in the church if you are a part of such and such a group. He wants to avoid that, and only recently did the church even decide to have a group of "elders." These were chosen, in part, so that Cannata does not decide on his own salary and so that other financial matters are not entirely left in his hands.

Every once in a while someone will suggest having a singles' group, and Cannata rejects the idea every time—which is not to say he doesn't want the members to find their matches. When people have been dating for a while, Cannata asks them what they're waiting for. Single people do seem to feel comfortable in the church, though. A group of women—both married and single—regularly go out to lunch or dinner together. Cannata tries to acknowledge the struggles of singles without making them feel inadequate for not being married yet.

Though he doesn't want to provide specific programs for different types of people, he does feel there is value in dividing up the church of two hundred or so people into smaller groups of about

a dozen people each. The community groups meet once a week in someone's home (another reason it's important that people live nearby) to discuss the biblical passage that is being read that week. (The church sticks closely to the liturgical calendar.) The Redeemer members I spoke with were generally very enthusiastic about these groups. More cross-generational exchanges take place in these groups than in the Sunday church service, and by having the meetings in people's homes rather than in the church, a greater sense exists that neighbors are welcoming each other.

Redeemer has been growing steadily since Cannata took over, and the church is now preparing for the next phase. If the church gets past 250 members or so, a group will break off and form a new church, with the associate pastor, Shane Gibson, at its helm. The new church will be in an adjacent neighborhood and its mission will be to serve *that* neighborhood.

Just as dividing up people by age or sex or marital status has its disadvantages, so can dividing them up geographically. To wit, more than one of the members I meet complain that there is not much racial or ethnic diversity in the church. The city, as everyone learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, is very much divided along racial lines. And so if you announce that your church is only going to serve a particular neighborhood, then it is only going to serve the residents of that neighborhood, even if they're mostly white.

The neighborhood where Redeemer is based is mostly middle and upper-middle class. That being said, I did go visit a couple of members at their homes on the outskirts of the neighborhoods, and the area did not look well-off. Some of Redeemer's members appeared to be gentrifying pioneers, though I'm sure they wouldn't think of themselves that way.

Perhaps the biggest problem in New Orleans these days is the crime rates. It has the highest per capita murder rate in the United States. While most of these incidents are concentrated in the lowest-income areas, there are definitely places near Redeemer

where I wouldn't walk alone at night. So it is not as if the community has removed itself from the real problems the city now faces. Most neighborhoods in the city experienced destruction from Katrina to one degree or another. But for a generation that places a high value on diversity, the theology of place may be a problem.

Jessica Carey ran into Shane Gibson, Redeemer's associate pastor, one day at a park near her house and his. She was playing with her son, and it began to rain. They ran under a shelter where her son started playing with his three children. One of them was named Jude and another was named Deacon, so Carey asked whether Gibson was religious. The two chatted for about forty-five minutes, and Carey later Googled him and learned more about Redeemer.

The two met for coffee, whereupon she told him her life story over the course of two hours. Carey grew up with little in the way of religion. She went to art school in San Francisco but didn't finish. She started traveling the country working for bands, unable to figure out what she really wanted to do. And she kept running into the man who eventually became her husband. The two had a son and decided to move to New Orleans. He had a job where he could work remotely, so they found a place where the cost of living was lower than on the East or West Coasts.

When he lost his job and couldn't find another one, things started to go south. And when he got a job in Philadelphia, they separated. It was then that she met Shane. At the end of their conversation, she recalls, "He was like, 'Well, I have the answer.'" And she said, "Great. What is it?" And he said, "God."

That was not, Carey tells me, what she wanted to hear. Carey had spent the better part of the past ten years in therapy. So as little as she thought of Gibson's "answer," she says, "It was still interesting enough to have someone give me an answer. I'd been going to therapy so much. And when someone just listens to you, you think, *How do you fix your own mind with your own mind? You can't.*"

Intrigued, Carey started seeing Gibson a lot. Carey met Gibson's wife and came to their house a few times. But it was at least two months before she actually visited Redeemer. She says she had always thought of "love as [her] religion." She tells me that she knows that sounds "cheesy"—though it is probably not an uncommon sentiment among unaffiliated millennials—but when she met Gibson and Cannata and the other parishioners, she said, "That is what they embody as human beings, the way they act. You could paint any sign outside Redeemer," but what matters is the way people act. The pastors have told her that "their purpose on earth is to love other people." Carey says, "That's something almost anybody could get on board with. And I certainly do."

She started coming to church with her son regularly and asked Shane to give her a class on Christianity. She said she knew nothing "about Jesus or God." "I don't know anything about religion because I have specifically ignored it. It's still daunting." She still doesn't feel comfortable praying in front of other people and only recently started taking Communion. She says her community group is "great." "I always sit in church on Sunday, and I want to raise my hand and ask questions." But many of those are answered for her in the community group.

Redeemer has also offered her a real community. "I have eight hundred friends on Facebook, few of whom I actually interact with in real life. When you're in college, you have built-in community." But once her husband left, Carey had no one.

Her life, she says, is better now. "I've got a clean slate as far as Christianity is concerned." And she has also begun to piece together her marriage. Her husband has sought out a church near him in Philadelphia. And when he comes down to visit, the two have been counseled by Cannata and Gibson.

And now Carey is on the road to reconciliation. She expects that she and her son will be joining her husband up north in a couple of months. She seems nervous, among other things, about finding a church in her new home. "I'm not going to drive thirty

minutes on a Sunday to go to church and then drive back home. That doesn't feel like this."

Carey is symbolic of two major challenges that Redeemer faces. First, as Cannata tells me, "My number-one biggest struggle in this church is mobility." It has been the same struggle for the past six years, he notes. "Last year we took in sixty members . . . That's extraordinary for a church our size. But we lost forty members because almost a third of the church moved away."

Part of the theology of place is putting down roots, says Cannata. "I want them to stay, and I have this whole big spiel I give people about why it's the greatest place in the world to live." He acknowledges that not everyone might agree, but what he wants is for people to commit to a particular place, even if it's not this place. "I'll tell somebody, honestly, if moving to Portland means you'll put down roots there and live there for the next fifty years, I'd rather have you in Portland for fifty years than in New Orleans for two and Seattle for two and Illinois for two. Go somewhere and put down roots."

And when they do, what will they find. Will there be another church like Redeemer? Another pastor like Ray Cannata? It's possible. But Carey is right to worry. Redeemer has a lot going for it, but it may not be easily replicable. For better or worse, it may be a product of its time and a place.