Speaking Our Faith:
Using Sacred Conversations
to Build Evangelical Competency
in Post-Boomers.

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For Mary, Jenny, Rachel, Ketlen, and Diane --
the women of FOUR

And for Blake, Cheri, Kelly, Alejandro, Abigail, Lisa, Mike, Julia, and Natalie –
nine courageous men and women who took a risk to speak their faith.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine the church as the place for an alternative conversation. In a society of denial, as the church we speak what we know, evoking resistance and yearning, permitting alternative, authorized newness…the subject of the evangelical conversation is how our life, our bodies, and our imaginations can be weaned from the deathliness of the world to the newness of life in the gospel. It is a conversation to which all are invited.

– Walter Brueggemann in Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe.

On the last night of 2014, at a New Year's Eve party in my neighborhood, I fell into conversation with a couple in their late 60s, members of a large, historic, mainline denomination church in the heart of the city. They have loved their church for more than forty years, been faithful contributors, growing in their own faith and commitment to Christ. And yet, "We're struggling," they told me. "We don't know if we can stay open. Our membership is shrinking and our utilities alone are $80,000 a year. We don't want to close, but we don't know what is going to happen next."

What they are experiencing in their own unique church setting is a phenomenon going on across America, as church attendance declines, church membership drops, and many churches struggle to remain open or even eventually close. "The Rise of the Nones," *Time Magazine* named it in 2012, as data poured in from Pew Research, Barna Group, the Public Religion Research Institute and others, showing a dramatic decline in religious affiliation among Americans, one that is particularly pronounced in the post-Baby Boom generations, those adults under fifty years old from Generation X and the Millennial generation.

Anxiety about these trends abounds in every denomination and in most congregations. Whether that anxiety is fueled by tense congregational meetings, as once-prosperous churches struggle with insufficient budgets, or whether that anxiety is ramped up by bitter blog posts and self-replicating angst across social media, American Christians are wondering what to do about the "nones" and also the "dones" (those once-faithful church members who have simply walked away), and what the future holds for their congregations in particular, and American Christianity in general.

My own angst about these trends, and my struggle with ways to respond to them as a leader of a mid-size, Midwestern Episcopal parish, led me on a journey that eventually resulted in this thesis project: an experiment in sacred conversations with younger adult Christians between the ages of 21 and 40 to see if learning to speak about faith in a small group setting could help to equip them to speak about faith to their peers who do not share their faith.

I launched my thesis project on a cold December morning in 2013, with a World Café gathering of young adults where they began to talk about their faith. And this project launched me as well onto an unanticipated journey into the power of "sacred conversations." From those very first discussions, doodles, and debates it became clear that people want to talk about faith, while at the same time, they are wary of this kind of engagement. The five-week conversation that followed in the winter of 2014 convinced me that safe conversations about faith could be an effective means of fostering the ability for evangelical speech.

As 2015 opened, my passion for cultivating these kinds of conversations continued to grow. Since launching the thesis project, the guided conversations I ended up dubbing

"Speaking Our Faith" have been expanded into the wider membership of my parish. Five leaders learned to facilitate these conversations and forty parishioners have participated in these guided dialogues. Some of them participated in another round – "Speaking Our Faith 2.0" – and others engaged in another offering of the original sessions in Lent 2015.

Speaking about faith is rarely a comfortable endeavor for mainline Christians. It is not taught or encouraged in most mainline churches, and it is often seen to be the provenance of "others" – those "evangelicals" who scare or repel these more mainline Protestants. Through the work of this project and this thesis, I have come to believe that before mainline Christians -- like those in my own Episcopal denomination -- can become effective evangelists, they first have to be comfortable talking about faith within their own faith communities.

And for post-Boomers (those born after 1964) -- who are leading the charge in religious disinterest and disaffiliation – finding their way to faith is going to increasingly depend on the encounters they have in the wider world, not within the walls of a church. Robert Wuthnow, author of *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, describes younger adults' faith journeys as 'spiritual tinkering.' He says that these generations are "piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with friends." (Wuthnow 2007, 135)

Thus, equipping faithful post-Boomers to learn to speak to their friends about faith seemed an intriguing approach for me to take as my little slice of the great challenge of adapting American Christianity to the rapidly changing cultural context surrounding it. This thesis describes how my foray into "sacred conversations" among post-Boomers

illuminates the challenges facing the church in the twenty-first century, and also offers some glimpses of hope for ways the church might begin to address those challenges.

In Chapter One, I outline the challenges facing American churches in the twenty-first century, including the "rise of the nones" and the decline in church attendance among Generation X and the Millennial generation. A review of related literature in social science, theology, evangelism, philosophy, and scripture helps to explain this problem and explore possible approaches to addressing it. This leads to my thesis statement, that *by participating in "sacred conversations," adult Christians under age 40 will be able to develop an authentic language and confidence in speaking about faith. Thus, they will be able to articulate their beliefs and faith to peers, friends, and family members who express no religious preference.*

In Chapter Two, I describe the thesis project, beginning with the large World Café gathering, and the following five-week series of conversations held with nine participants who ranged in age from 22 to 39 years old. I use portraiture, a technique developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot at Harvard University, to frame and present the data that emerged from these conversations.

In Chapter Three, I delve more deeply into three themes that emerged from the conversations -- *vulnerability, not having all the answers,* and *learning to speak one's own truth* -- and I explore how these themes affect the ability to speak about faith. I draw portraits of four of the project participants to exemplify these themes, and then I bring the three themes into deeper conversation with Brené Brown, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Brueggemann, and others whose writings help to cast light upon these themes.

In Chapter Four, I return to my initial thesis statement and analyze how the project demonstrated the claims of my thesis. In three areas, the process of sacred conversations did work as I imagined they might. The participants began to develop an authentic language for speaking about their faith. They all expressed a sense of increased confidence in speaking about their faith. And they all attempted – with varying levels of success – to articulate that faith to another person. I then analyze the implications of this project and offer my reflections on issues for further consideration.

In the concluding section, I take a step back and reflect on my own role in this project and process. Through three aspects of "voice" as it is used in portraiture, I examine my voice as *witness,* as *autobiography,* and in *dialogue*, concluding with some thought for my colleagues in ministry about ways sacred conversations might help to equip all Christians to better articulate and to more effectively share their faith.

I do not believe that sacred conversations are the "magic bullet" that will save mainline American Christianity. However, I believe that my thesis demonstrates the power of these conversations to strengthen and enliven the faith of post-Boomer Christians – and indeed, many faithful mainline Christians – and to begin to give them both the words and the confidence they will need if they are to proclaim the ancient faith of Christ in an increasingly secular age.

CHAPTER ONE

EVERYBODY'S TALKING ABOUT THE 'NONES': SKETCHING THE OUTLINES OF THE PROBLEM

THE PROBLEM – SPEAKING OF FAITH AFTER CHRISTENDOM

When I entered the D.Min. program in 2011, I brought some specific concerns to my studies, and also a goal statement for my own ministry that I believed was pretty clear. My concerns centered around the future of the church, given the Episcopal Church's lackluster attempts at evangelism. We had the Decade of Evangelism … which wasn't. We tried to Gather the Next Generation … and dropped a lot of folks along the wayside. There was the 20/20 Project, which – when viewed with 20/20 hindsight – proved ineffective. I knew that the Baby Boom was the last generation to experience cultural Christendom. All the people coming after that cohort live in an increasingly secular world, one that is growing more indifferent to all religious expression, one that is becoming ever more individualized and fragmented.

As I began the program, my stated goal for my ministry as rector of a midsize parish in a university town in the Midwest was this: to help this community proclaim the gospel with its life and witness in such a way that it would be able to hand on this parish -- its work, worship, witness and ministry -- to the next generation of leaders. But when I shared my goal with a colleague one day, she turned to me and asked boldly, "What if they don't want it? Seriously. What if All Saints, as wonderful as it may be, is not what they want? What will you do then?"

Her question confronted me with the ultimate purpose of proclamation and evangelism. Do we evangelize to build up and preserve the institution of the church,

particularly our own denomination? Or do we evangelize to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to share our faith with others in such a way that they might also know Christ and make him known?

I don't know about the future of the church, particularly the American Episcopal expression of church. But I do believe in the future of the gospel. And so my thinking around this question of the future of the gospel began to focus more intently on exploring how people share their faith. My particular concerns grew out of my sense that the next generations might not be all that interested in the institutional church, but they still might be interested in God. Those concerns were based in my observations and analysis of my congregational context.

All Saints Episcopal Church in East Lansing, Michigan, is considered to be a thriving, healthy parish. With annual Sunday attendance close to two hundred, an almost $500,000 operating budget, seventy or more families with children under age 18 participating at some level in worship and Sunday school, a staff of eight full- and part-time clergy and lay employees, and a reputation in the wider community for being a center of welcome, social justice, and inclusion…one might look at this church and think everything was going just fine.

But my concerns about the wider church originated in my concerns about the parish. As I read through our database, I began to notice how many of the "young adult members" are absent – they are young adult children of active members, but they no longer attend All Saints or any other church. I noted that the highest peak of membership since the early 1960s was during the "baby boomlet" of the late 1980s and early 1990s,

the years when these now-young-adults were in the Sunday School. If that boomlet ended in 1994 (Savage 1995), the last children of that cohort have graduated from high school.

These boomlet children, also called "Millennials," are more unaffiliated from religion than any generation before them – *at the same age*. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported in 2010 that "the large proportion of young adults who are unaffiliated with a religion is a result, in part, of the decision by many young people to leave the religion of their upbringing without becoming involved with a new faith. In total, nearly one-in-five adults under age 30 (18 percent) say they were raised in a religion but are now unaffiliated with any particular faith." (Pond 2010) Anecdotally, I have observed this in the parish; few if any of the young adult children of current members have affiliated with *any* church or attend *any* religious services, whether they live in New Jersey or here in East Lansing.

Despite the thriving, healthy bustle of All Saints' daily life and worship, it remains a parish where two-thirds of our active parishioners are over the age of 50, set in a community where the median age of the population is 21.5; neighboring communities have a higher median age of 38.2 (Data Driven Detroit 2010). Even if my stated goal was to hand this parish on to the next generation of leaders, where were they? That one-third under 50 also includes all the children and youth under age 18. There simply aren't enough adults under 50 to hand the parish on to. Even if that *is* what they want -- this parish in this place. A review of related literature in social science, theology, evangelism, philosophy, and scripture helps to explain this problem and explore possible approaches to addressing it.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since Loren Mead's seminal *Once and Future Church* (Mead 1991), the collapse of Christendom which he predicted has accelerated, and for good reason, as Craig A. Carter has outlined, in a brutal indictment of Christendom in his look at a post-Christendom world, *Rethinking Christ and Culture* (Carter 2006). Diana Butler Bass, who has studied the shifting landscape of American Christianity, contends that the United States "is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation," (Bass 2012, 5) presenting ample evidence in her book *Christianity After Religion* that American Christianity is undergoing a fundamental, seismic shift.

This presents an evangelical challenge to all Christians in a post-Christendom world, but particularly to Episcopalians, who are notoriously reticent across all generations to speak about faith. David Gortner explains that Episcopalians have had a certain discomfort with evangelism ever since the eighteenth century, when the Episcopal Church rejected the fervor of the First Great Awakening and began to identify evangelism solely with foreign mission. (Gortner 2008, 3) Episcopalians were not encouraged by the institutional church or trained by their own parish leadership to share their faith with their neighbors. Thus, generations of Episcopalians have failed to develop an appreciation of -- or the necessary skills for -- the work of evangelism.

Nonetheless, if the faith is to be proclaimed to the generations yet to come, we must equip followers to learn to speak their language of faith more audibly, along with developing their ability to listen to the faith stories of others. The real stakeholders in the

future of the faith are those who are coming after the Builders, Silents and Boomers who built the twentieth-century church -- the GenXers and Millennials.

What would help these post-Boomers of faith -- especially those Protestants, like Episcopalians, who are not from an evangelical tradition -- to become better equipped to speak about faith with their peers? Are there particular social and spiritual hallmarks of these generations that would suggest more effective ways one might speak to them about faith, and assist them to speak about faith in turn? What strategies have proven successful in speaking to these generations, or which strategies have at least been *suggested* for speaking to these generations?

To approach these questions, I will review the literature on faith identity and expression in Generation X and Millennials. This is a massively popular topic, and new research and literature on it emerges daily, much of it beyond the scope of my project thesis. I will also review literature on evangelism, particularly as it might address these post-Boomer generations. I then argue that the literature reveals a gap: nowhere are post-Boomers of mainline faith traditions encouraged to own the task of evangelizing their peers or equipped to become more effective at speaking their own faith. I conclude by exploring some models for speech, dialogue, and conversation that informed my project thesis.

Generation to Generation – A Journey of Faith

William Strauss and Neil Howe introduced the theory of discrete American generations with unique defining characteristics in their 1991 groundbreaking work *Generations* (Strauss and Howe 1991). Strauss and Howe also led the way in beginning to research a cohort they termed "Generation 13" (Strauss and Howe 1993), but which

quickly became known as Generation X. Strauss and Howe defined this generation as born between 1961 and 1980; other researchers suggested the front end of the cohort should be as late as 1964. Tom Beaudoin was first to develop a theological interpretation of Gen X faith, describing it as a lived theology, rooted in pop culture, with some distinct theological themes: suspicion of institutions, including religious institutions; lived experience as a religious context; suffering as source of theology; and ambiguity of meaning in things like gender, reality and faith, which previous generations might have deemed more concrete (Beaudoin 1998). Richard Flory and Donald Miller expanded on these themes, noting that as the first truly postmodern generation -- shaped by pop culture, the burgeoning internet, and an increasingly diverse and multicultural nation -- Xers rejected universal organizing principles, dogmas, creeds, and doctrines. Instead they sought authenticity in religious beliefs, lived in day-to-day experiences. Xers' cynicism arose from a too-frequent disappointment in people and in institutions that failed to meet their expectations for authenticity (Flory and Miller 2000).

Quantitative research into this generation supported these themes. Jeffery Jensen Arnett and Lene Arnett Jensen described Gen X religious practice as a "congregation of one," noting the tendency to combine religious concepts and practices from a variety of traditions in individualized ways, with little to no influence from their parents or religious institutions (Arnett and Jensen 2002, 451-467). David Gay and John Lynxwiler noted that this generation was more likely to be "spiritual but not religious" and less likely to return to religious organizations as they matured, married, and became parents (Gay and Lynxwiler 2013). And Barry Kosmin and Juhem Navarro-Rivera tracked changes in Gen X politics and religion between 1990 and 2008, observing this same failure in Gen Xers

to return to religious institutions as they matured, and noting that Gen Xers' children were growing up in less religious home environments than Xers themselves had experienced (Kosmin and Navarro-Rivera 2008).

The Millennial generation (1981-2000) has become a focus of research in questions of faith because of the rapid decline in religious participation in this cohort. When Rachel Held Evans wrote "Why Millennials are Leaving the Church," her blog post went viral. Her emphasis was on the loss of millennials in evangelical traditions, but it captured the anxiety felt across American Christianity (Held Evans 2013).

Hard data backs up the exodus. "Religion among the Millennials" reveals many of the same trends that a later Pew report, "Nones on the Rise," would show: namely, that young adults are abandoning the faith of their youth at a faster clip than previous generations at the same age, and not affiliating with any other faith. However, their belief in life after death, heaven, hell, and miracles is as strong as their elders', and their level of prayer is the same as young adults of previous generations at the same age, indicating their interest in spiritual things has not dwindled (Pond et al. 2010). The 2012 Public Religion Research Institute study of college-age millennials' values also noted that this group has significantly lower levels of religious engagement than older generations, and only 37 percent of white mainline Protestant millennials said religion was very important, or the most important thing in their lives (Jones et al. 2012). However, a majority of those millennials studied (54 percent) do believe in a God one can have a relationship with, and 22 percent believe in a more impersonal God.

In trying to understand the exodus and the nature of religious faith and practice in Millennials, some have tried to sort these groups into types. In Christian Smith and

Patricia Snell's *Souls in Transition*, they noted the growing tendency of emerging adults (a term coined by Jeffrey Arnett to describe the recent development of an extended period of maturation stretching from high school graduation to around age 30) to abandon religion. They sorted the young adults into six religious types. Forty percent were indifferent to or disconnected from religion or actively hostile toward faith. Of the remainder, only 15 percent were committed to a particular faith. The other 45 percent were selective adherents, who customized faith to fit their lives, or were spiritually open, not professing any faith, but were mildly receptive to spirituality (Smith and Snell 2009). David Kinnaman's "You Lost Me" project of the Barna Group (Kinnaman 2011) explored religiosity in this same age group, sorting those who feel lost into Nomads (who walk away from church but still consider themselves Christian), Prodigals (who lose faith and describe themselves as no longer Christian), and Exiles (who are still invested in faith and church but who feel stuck or lost between culture and church). Kinnaman asserts that the normal faith developmental challenges of these Millennials are exacerbated by conditions of access (increased access to information and other people through the internet and social media), alienation (as a result of divorced parents, blended families, their own later marriage and reproduction, and the failure of institutions to support their maturing), and authority (increased skepticism of religion, where the Bible and religious institutions are no longer authoritative, and questions of truth are fungible in a multi-faith world).

Notably lacking in the literature on Millennials and faith is a theological or spiritual assessment of the faith lives Millennials -- as a cohort -- *do* have, as Beaudoin and Flory and Miller did with Gen X faith. Instead, Flory and Miller, along with Robert Wuthnow

and others, have begun to merge the two generations together. Calling them "post-Boomers," as Flory and Miller do, or "younger adults," which Wuthnow prefers, they find more similarities in the religious lives of people aged 21 to 45 today than they do differences (Wuthnow 2007).

Flory and Miller describe both Xers and Millennials as shaped by five societal forces, which track with Kinnaman's access, alienation and authority: 1) they are children of Baby Boomers, who passed their skepticism of institutions on to their children, and emphasized personal journey, without necessarily referencing institutions; 2) living in a global community leads to tolerance and acceptance of different faiths; 3) the digital world provides rapid, global access to ideas and people with varying ideas of "truth"; 4) the failure of institutions to act ethically (i.e. Catholic sex abuse, Enron, etc.) leads to distrust and cynicism of large institutions; 5) the rise of postmodernism leads to a sense that truth is relative and you can pick what you want to think or believe (Flory and Miller 2008, 7-10). They describe four typologies of post-Boomer believers: innovators, appropriators, resisters and reclaimers, each constructing a faith in relationship with, or in reaction to, these societal forces. They also observe a fifth type emerging – "expressive communalism" – which integrates "spiritual experience and fulfillment in embodied form through community, and through various expressive and experiential forms of their spirituality, both in their personal lives and in public, expressed in some way of "living out" their faith." (Flory and Miller 2008, 17)

In David Gortner's analysis of young adults at the turn of the 21st century (who are now young Xers or older Millennials in their thirties), he found similar societal forces in play, but he included class, educational level and social location as influences as well.

Apart from an emphasis on family/tribe over societal good, and a reduced influence by parents or religion, Gortner found little similarity in young adults' personal theologies. There was no single dominant theology, and no coherence between worldview, theodicy, life purpose and ultimate values. Diversity within each person's set of beliefs led to diversity in personal theologies (Gortner 2013)

Robert Wuthnow is interested in younger adults between 21 and 45 because around age 21 they are embarking on major life decisions and transitions – marriage, children, work and religion. But because of the "emerging adulthood" phenomenon, this period now extends past age 30. The societal forces affecting this generation include globalization and digital expansion, as others have noted, but Wuthnow adds delayed marriage and childbirth, uncertainty in work and career, higher education (for some), and a loosening of societal and community bonds. He categorizes younger adults as a generation of tinkerers, making up everything, including faith, as they go along. This tinkering trend is reflective of the stress and pull of these societal forces, including globalization and consumerism, and it manifests religiously in church shopping, church hopping, looking to music, films, the internet, and other pop culture resources for spiritual guidance, searching for answers to existential questions in many venues beyond churches, and "piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with friends." (Wuthnow 2007, 135) Wuthnow observes that our society often does not supply a single best answer to these questions and needs, and so tinkering becomes a part of seeking. "It becomes not only possible but necessary to cobble together one's faith from the options at hand." (Wuthnow 2007, 114)

<u>An urgent question: "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?"</u>

This passage from Romans 10:14 speaks to the urgency of addressing this rapid apostasy in the post-Boomer generations: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" As more people grow up in secular homes in an increasingly secular society, the opportunities that younger adults have to hear the gospel story and become disciples of Jesus Christ dwindle. The gospel proclamation requires authentic voices if the faith is to be passed along, generation to generation.

Transmission of faith from one generation to the next has been a compelling concern since Old Testament times. Deuteronomy 6 tells parents to recite the law to their children and to tell them the story of their Exodus deliverance as a warrant for adhering to that law. Psalm 78 says, "We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (Psalm 78:4-7) The advent of Christianity extended that mandate to the whole world. The risen Christ gives the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

However, with the spread of Christendom, this disciple-making became part of the culture. It was assumed that everyone who grew up in a Christian home in a Christian nation would become a Christian. This assumed cultural context is known as Christendom, which is defined by Carter as "the concept of Western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to Christian faith," and where membership in both is coterminous. This resulted in a world where "the offense of Jesus Christ is watered down, mitigated, and obscured to the point that the world is satisfied that the church is no longer foreign and dangerous." (Carter 2006, 78) Being Christian became synonymous with being a "good person" and a "good citizen."

That understanding of being Christian is collapsing, along with the entire Christendom project. Younger adults know from experience that it is possible to be both a "good person" and a "good citizen" without any reference to a transcendent God, or to Jesus Christ. It is also obvious to any student of history that Christendom has performed acts of great evil in the name of Jesus and behaved in ways that are hardly "Christian" at all. In an interfaith world, younger generations are more willing to accept that other religions have value and wisdom to offer, which then leads them to question the place of Christianity's truth claims in such a diverse theological world. Post-Boomers are the first to be thoroughly reared in the postmodern era, where all meaning is relative and subjective. Articulating a faith that is more than a syncretic mix of ideas one likes or does not like is a challenge – and for many a seemingly unimportant one -- in this context.

And so Saint Paul's questions are incredibly pertinent: how *are* they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how *are* they to believe in one of whom they have

never heard? And how *are* they to hear without someone to proclaim him? The gospel

must be proclaimed, and those who would proclaim it are going to have to start to use

their words.

Our faith is rooted in speech, because our Scripture is rooted in speech, because that

same Scripture proclaims that all Creation is rooted in speech. In Genesis 1, God speaks

the whole world into being. What God says, happens. And it is very good! In the

prologue to the gospel of John (John 1:1-14), Jesus is presented as the Word, the pre-

existent *Logos*, without whom nothing was made. Our very existence rests on the divine

act of speech.

As Jesus moved through his earthly ministry, he taught, he interpreted, and he

preached. But more than that, he talked with people and listened to their stories. In John's

gospel, the pre-existent, now-incarnate Word is active and engaged as Jesus converses--

with Nicodemus (John 3:1-12), the woman at the well (John 4:6-26), and even with Pilate

(John 18:33-38). And in moments of transcendent divinity – in his Transfiguration and in

his resurrection--Jesus talks, conversing with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop (Mark

9:2-8), and with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32).

Evangelizing the Next Generations

And so it is probably not a coincidence that in much of this literature on post-

Boomers and faith, the themes of conversation, listening, and story-telling emerged

repeatedly as means of building faith and connecting these generations to faith

communities. Wuthnow notes -- over and over again -- the power of conversation with

friends to shape post-Boomer faith. Kinnaman says building relationships among the

faithful can help in the process of discipling younger generations. Gortner says religious

institutions need to rethink how they speak to young adults. Flory and Miller note that rational proofs and apologetics do not appeal to these generations, but rather lived experience in a faith community where meaning is constructed together, and then used to reach outward in service to others. Furthermore, I was struck by the similarity of Held Evans's 2013 blog post about Millennials to an article from 1999, "Talking to Generation X" (Hinlicky 1999). Both begged for religious institutions to listen to younger generations and then to respond with the story, the authentic story of Jesus Christ. All of this indicates to me that the gospel is not being proclaimed -- whether by parents, church school teachers, clergy, or religious communities -- in ways that these generations have been able to hear and adopt as their own.

So how might the story be told? Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook has described several successful projects in the Episcopal Church that seem to answer this plea, with "relational evangelism" of young adults, listening to them first, and then sharing authentic stories of God at work in real life, engaging before worrying about converting (Kujawa-Holbrook 2010). Jeff Cloester has also claimed that storytelling--listening to someone's story, then offering one's own about one's own personal journey and life in Christ -- is an optimal way to evangelize Millennials (Cloester 2013).

As Mead's decline of Christendom theory was beginning to percolate through mainline Christianity, Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote a Biblical theology of evangelism in 1993 that privileged story and conversation as the most effective way to transmit faith across generations. Brueggemann says this transmission is fraught with uncertainty and mystery, but by positioning the church as community for a radically alternative conversation, one can share the gospel in a three-

part taxonomy: the victory of God (always off-stage), the proclamation of the victory, then the lived reality now that the victory is attained. This is a conversation into which we are invited, and evangelism results in conversing about the new reality into which we are to live. Conversation is the route evangelism *must* take, in Brueggemann's thinking: "The subject of the evangelical conversation is how our life, our bodies and our imagination can be weaned from the deathliness of the world to newness of life in the gospel. It is a conversation to which all are invited." (Brueggemann 1993, 46)

As postmodernism has taken hold and Christendom has declined, authors continue to grapple with how to proclaim good news in this changing context. In *Evangelism after Christendom*, Bryan Stone applies theological and Biblical approaches to the practice of evangelism, arguing for a wholesale reconstruction of the notion of evangelism, one rooted in the radically different practice of being church, the alternative community of peace, wholesome economics, and justice, a true alternative to the capitalist, individualistic First World society. Speech, for Stone, is just one part of the evangelistic witness. Telling God's story allows one to inhabit it; telling our own story helps us find its place in God's story (Stone 2007). Steve Hollinghurst, writing about postmodern evangelism in Britain, calls for missionary engagement with the spirituality already being expressed in the culture one seeks to evangelize, in a two-way listening between the native culture and tradition that is more familiar to those who do foreign mission work than in our own society (Hollinghurst 2010). David Gortner, writing specifically to help Episcopalians transform evangelism, outlines core assertions for evangelism in this 21st-Century context, naming evangelism as a spiritual practice of expressing gratitude which is the work of every generation. In this context, it needs to be de-institutionalized and

given back to individuals. They must be taught to listen with open hearts to stories of God's presence in the people they meet, and it will involve verbal exchange and action, leading to transformation of both individuals and communities. (Gortner 2008).

Speaking of Faith – Equipping Post-Boomers to Articulate their Faith

Throughout this literature, many recommendations are made to churches, to religious institutions, to religious leaders, to "pay more attention" to the spiritual needs and lives of younger adults. The emphasis is on how existing faith structures and religious communities can reach out to these generations and how they can better proclaim, listen, invite and include post-Boomers. These recommendations sound very dualistic, very much insider/outsider and us/them, without considering that post-Boomers – the majority of whom are *not* "nones" and *do* believe in God – might be the ideal evangelists to people in their own age group. However, neither the generational literature nor the evangelism literature speaks about specifically empowering and equipping members of this age cohort to evangelize their peers. After all, Wuthnow says repeatedly that "talking with friends" is an important part of the ways these spiritual tinkerers construct their faith. How might faithful, mainline Christians between 21 and 40 learn to speak of faith in such a way that their faith might inform some of these "conversations with friends"?

In a post-modern world, where everything is relative, how can one begin to articulate faith? The various theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, a 20th-century Russian philosopher and literary critic, provide some underlying structure to my wider questions about conversation. Bakhtin developed a concept some call "dialogism" (although Bakhtin himself never used that word) that places all knowledge of self and other in the context of dialogue. For Bakhtin, "'self' is dialogic, a *relation*. And because it is so fundamental a

relation, dialogue can help us understand how other relationships work…relationships such as signifier/signified, text/context, system/history, rhetoric/language, and speaking/writing" (Holquist 1990, 19). Bakhtin and his colleagues believed that meaning is created in communication between people, "in such 'between' relations that speakers and listeners restructure formalized meanings, thus reformulating them, giving them their own unique and immediate significance as to 'what it was we talked about'" (Lock and Strong 2010, 88). Meaning and reality are constructs that emerge through the dialogue between different voices, different individuals, each with his or her own perspective, truth, vision, understanding and needs.

Bakhtinian theory identifies the central assumptions in the current interest in dialogue, conversations, and 'the art of hosting.' Organizational consultant Margaret J. Wheatley claims that conversation can help one navigate the complexities of a postmodern world. Her description is almost Bakhtinian: "Because we live in different parts of this complexity, and because no two people are physically identical, we each experience life differently…. To be curious about how someone else interprets things, we have to be willing to admit that we're not capable of figuring things out alone….When so many interpretations are available, I can't understand why we would be satisfied with superficial conversations" (Wheatley 2009, 35). Her description might also be considered Pauline: **"**For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." (Romans 12:4-6) Christ, who is the Word, can bind us to one another in conversation.

Organizational consultants Juanita Brown and David Isaacs co-created a conversational process called World Café, which has been widely used in a variety of educational, corporate and charitable settings since it was devised in the 1990s. Brown and Isaacs draw on the work of evolutionary biologist Humberto Maturana and cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, whose research shows that humans are language-embedded creatures, "and in the sophisticated coordination of actions that language makes possible, we bring forth a world through the networks of conversation in which we participate. We embody and share our knowledge through conversation. From this perspective, conversations ARE action" (Brown and Isaacs 2005, 18). They have learned that "when people care about the questions they are working on and when their conversations are truly alive, participants naturally want to organize themselves to do what has to be done, discovering who cares about what and who will take responsibility for next steps" (Brown and Isaacs 2005, 38).

Where Next on the Generations' Journey of Faith?

Coming of age in a multicultural, multifaith society…with ready and rapid digital access to knowledge, culture, conversation and ideologies…formed by postmodern ideas of the relativity of truth…delayed in making major life transitions like marriage and childbearing…suspicious of institutions that fail to live up to their stated identities and ethics…post-Boomers have been shaped by a variety of societal forces unknown to previous generations. Existing research shows that while the majority of post-Boomers still express some kind of faith, it is not necessarily sustained or housed in traditional faith communities. Deep questions of faith and meaning are still pertinent; belief in God, heaven and hell, life after death, and the power of prayer still endure. But as spiritual

tinkerers, these younger adults no longer necessarily find spiritual answers or ultimate meaning in traditional faith expressions. They are not assembling their faith only from their religious upbringing – if they had any – but they are also using pop culture, the Internet, music and movies – and importantly, conversations with friends – to shape their faith.

Evangelism literature suggests some ways faithful people might approach the work of sharing faith with others. In a post-Christendom, postmodern world, where truth is relative and institutions are questioned, these evangelistic methods focus more on thoughtful listening and speaking out of one's own lived experience, the ultimate source of truth for the post-Boomer generations. In *The Practicing Congregation*, Diana Butler Bass noted that postmodernism has created a movement of "detraditionalism" across many cultures, nations and religions. (Bass 2004, 30) Because trust in traditions and institutions is declining, individuals now assess, critique, appropriate, and re-appropriate these traditions for themselves. Bass believes that individuals and congregations are simultaneously de-traditionalizing and re-traditionalizing themselves in this rapidly changing context. Any approach to evangelism with post-Boomer generations will necessarily involve this dual movement – critiquing, analyzing, and assessing the received tradition and faith of Christianity while also appropriating and re-appropriating it, so that "Christian faith may be a way of life embodied for post-traditional Americans – a generation looking for authentic and purposeful ways to order fragmented and individual existence." (Bass 2004, 32) Furthermore, a particularly Episcopal approach to evangelism with these generations can draw upon the Anglican ethos of engaging both Scripture and tradition with reason, allowing for a post-traditional assessment and re-

appropriation of the tenets of Christian faith. Theories about dialogue and conversation can further inform this approach to postmodern evangelism.

Because current research and writing on how to evangelize post-Boomers has neglected to explore how one might form these younger adults to speak their own truth about faith to their peers, this is an area deserving of further research and exploration. More systematic research on helping post-Boomers to evangelize their peers would help to eliminate some of the "us/them" approach to evangelizing this age cohort and would help to shape a context where all might speak their faith and listen to others' stories in a way that can help these spiritual tinkerers shape their own fully-formed faith.

"SPEAKING OF FAITH" – HOW TO APPROACH THE PROBLEM?

My project is designed to address this gap. It is not a statistically significant sampling of methods and practices that can help to answer this question. Rather, it is an initial probe, the testing of concepts and issues that have emerged from the literature and which can be applied to this gap in knowledge, drawing upon the people and resources available to me in my context -- a mid-size, Midwestern, Episcopal parish set in a university town. It uses "sacred conversation" as one practical theological method that might help to construct a particular, contextual response to the gap between theory and *praxis*.

The practice of conversation continually emerged in the literature as an important way to explore and build faith in these generations. As I considered this practice, I recalled a sermon preached in 2013 by the associate rector at All Saints, himself a Gen Xer. He described a period in his life when he was not interested in religion. He said, "During the time when I was away from the church, I met many people, both religious

and non-religious, and had chances to think many things about faith, life, and God. In fact, I found many non-religious types utterly fascinating, and in many ways more accepting. Church seemed to be full of rules to obey and follow. Why would I want to go to church early Sunday morning to hear a long sermon? Could I not go to church and still feel enlightened?" (Shirota 2013) The answer to his dilemma came in conversations – he called them "sacred conversations" – with people of faith. He learned that he had no problem sharing what he did not believe, but when he had to state what he *did* believe, he struggled to find words to describe it. Over time, as he talked with believing friends, he found new perspectives on God. He stopped passing judgment on religious people, and was drawn into faith by exchanging different ideas with them.

My project tests the usefulness of "sacred conversations" with people in this age group as a method of helping them articulate and communicate their faith. It engages Christians under 40 in conversation with one another to help them explore both the Christian faith as they have received it in their upbringing and life of spiritual formation, as well as the Christian faith as they have understood and claimed it for themselves; then, to articulate that faith in ways that may make them more comfortable speaking about faith and sharing their faith with their peers. It is shaped by this thesis: *If Christianity is to be passed on to future generations, the ability of young adult Christians to talk comfortably about their faith with their peers will become crucial as Christendom fades and our culture becomes more secular. People who do not know how to express their beliefs in their own words will not be able to talk comfortably about their faith with others. Since the act of talking about faith is essential to the work of bringing others to know Christ, I think that by participating in "sacred conversations," adult Christians*

under age 40 will be able to develop an authentic language and confidence in speaking about faith. Thus, they will be able to articulate their beliefs and faith to peers, friends, and family members who express no religious preference.

CHAPTER TWO

SPEAKING OF FAITH: A PORTRAIT OF A GROUP

It was a cold Sunday afternoon on January 12, 2014, when nine Christians between the ages of 22 and 39 gathered in the church library for the first session of this project, the "speaking of faith" group. They took their places around a central square table, framed by a wall of books – Bibles, Prayer Books, prayers and theologies, old commentaries and new devotionals – and two walls of windows looking out onto the houses of Grove Street, where Michigan State students walked past, huddled in thick jackets against the bitter cold. A colorful, quilted wall hanging dating from the 1980s cheerfully exhorted, "This is the Lord's Day. Rejoice and be glad."

Blake -- at 39 the oldest of the group -- heaved into a seat, rubbing his short, almost shaved hair. His wife has regularly brought their two daughters to church over the years, but Blake himself was not a consistent churchgoer -- until this year, when he lost his job. By a series of serendipitous events, Blake ended up as a cook at the Second Sunday Breakfast and a leader of the youth group. When I asked him to introduce himself to the group and explain why he committed to it, he answered, "I want to think about what faith means to me, and there've been some other things that pulled me into the church in the last year, so this is kind of an extension of that journey."

Next to Blake, on the other side of the table from me, Natalie sat very straight as she considered the other participants with wide eyes. At 22, on the younger end of the Millennial cohort, Natalie was the youngest participant. Her modish dress and shoes -- along with her close-cropped, bottle-red hair -- evoked a sense of style that reminded me that her graduate research focuses on religious women and fashion. Natalie descends

from a long line of Presbyterians, and has worked for the Presbyterian campus ministry. This created a conflict when she came out as queer a few years ago. "Being in the Presbyterian Church and working in it for so long, I have been steeped in a faith that's very Calvinist, and in my research I work with Adventists, so I have these two very different traditions," she said.

Natalie was one of four students in the group. Lisa, another student, sat next to her. A quiet young woman with short brown hair and glasses, she was not as gregarious as Natalie. A 27-year-old lesbian who identifies as cisgender female, Lisa had recently begun studying information technology at the local community college. "I rarely talk about faith, or it's been very one-directional: someone tells you what to believe and that was it, and the conversation ended."

Alejandro and Abigail, the other two students, came to the group as a team. Friends from the same graduate program at MSU, Alejandro had joined All Saints at Abigail's urging. They were an unlikely duo – Alejandro is a 26-year-old Latino gay man, and Abigail is a 32-year-old straight woman of Chinese descent. But they had both come to the Episcopal Church out of conservative religious backgrounds. Abigail was raised culturally Catholic in the Philippines, but wandered through evangelical, Pentecostal, reformed and Wesleyan churches before landing at All Saints. "I have been on a journey," she explained, "and I wanted to be with other people so that I can learn or steal nuggets of things that can help me describe and explain things that I've been feeling and doubting or kind of exploring. So for selfish reasons I'm here, because I want a journey with other people." Alejandro is the son of prominent evangelical missionaries in Peru; his journey into America and into his own sexual identity brought him into conflict with

much of his religious upbringing. He said, "I think that I need more spaces to engage in conversations about faith and what God has to say for us or for me. I'm going to take this time and make it more purposeful than just a church service. This time is dedicated for doing that."

Julia, a first-year ecology professor, bridged the gap between the students and the young marrieds in the group. New to the university, still single, and seeking community, her sense of disconnection in her new life made her seem younger to me than her 35 years. "I've been involved with lots of different types of faith communities, so trying to understand where the common threads meet the uncommon threads is the next step for me," she said, brushing back a strand of her long, ash-brown hair.

The other participants were straight, married, and parents of young children. Cherie is a 35-year-old, second-generation All Saints member, a marketing manager, and mother of two pre-school daughters. Her curly brown hair, sparkling eyes and ready laugh livened the uneasy first moments of the group's conversation. Why did she agree to participate? "I feel like in the last couple of years I've done a good job finding ways to be close to God in myself, and I feel like I made some good progress. Now comes the next step … you can only do so much inside yourself without talking to other people and hearing from other directions."

Mike, a tall, bearded 33-year-old, was the 'preacher's kid' in the group. His father had been a UCC pastor, and Mike grew up in the church. In worship, he frequents the rear of the church, gently tending to his 3-year-old daughter's needs. An advertising professional by day, his passion is singing shape note music in a small group of like-

minded amateurs. "My job is fulfilling work, but it is also draining work," he told the group. "I don't really have a place in my life to talk about faith, so here I am."

Kelly, a 38-year-old mother of three, brought a nervous energy to the table, tossing her long blonde hair and engaging eagerly, but somewhat anxiously, in the conversation. Trained as a biologist, she is currently a stay-at-home mom. "I have strong science background, and meshing that with religion has always been important to me," she said. Although her actual Sunday church attendance is sporadic, she told the group that she participates in two weekly Bible studies, including one at a conservative local church.

These nine post-Boomers had committed to come to this room every Sunday afternoon for five weeks, to speak about faith with one another under my guidance. When the sessions were over, they agreed to have a conversation about faith with someone they knew -- but who did not share their faith – and to report back to me about that experience. By creating a safe space, a holding environment that would, as Ron Heifetz describes, "serve to keep people engaged with one another in spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive work" (Heifetz et al. 2009, 305) – I hoped I would help these younger adults learn to articulate their faith more clearly and become comfortable enough speaking about it with each other that they then might begin to share that faith with their peers.

The "Speaking of Faith" project – a conversation-based approach to evangelism

As I began to design the project that would explore my research question – whether post-boomers of faith could be helped to better share their faith by talking about it in a small group of their peers, through facilitated conversation – it became clear that, with the small size of participants in the conversation group and with the lengthy and intense

conversations they had, a quantitative approach would not provide the level of detail needed to fully answer the question or understand the effects of in-depth conversations over time. I have chosen to use qualitative design rooted in the interpretive sciences, because the project is fundamentally designed to explore processes – the process of meaning-making, the process of dialogue, the process of coming to ideological consciousness, and the process of learning through conscious vulnerability to others. As such, I used qualitative data collection methods: participant observation, recorded interviews, recordings of all conversation sessions, questionnaires with open-ended questions, and collection of related ephemera, including drawings, prayers, homilies and emails.

To structure my data collection, interpretation, and analysis, I adapted the method of *portraiture*, as developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot. Portraiture is a method of qualitative inquiry that blends both aesthetics and empiricism to capture the complexity and subtlety of human life. It focuses on goodness, not pathology. It seeks to use language beyond the academic style, rich in metaphor, anecdote, and symbol. It is holistic, considering the entire context in which the human subjects live and move and have their being. It seeks the central story that resides within the act of research, searching for and illuminating emergent themes. It also listens for the "counter-voices" that speak in dissonance with those themes. The person of the researcher and her own voice are present in these portraits. And the portraits are written to illuminate larger, universal patterns. "The scientist and the artist are both claiming that *in the particular resides the general*." (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 14)

In fact, this chapter may be considered a portrait of the group as it changed and developed through the five weeks of the project, using the guidelines outlined in *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 261-274). In this group portrait, I note the overarching movement from struggle and incoherence to speech and clarity. Using a narrative sequence that arises from the structure of the sessions themselves, I weave in the dominant emerging themes of *vulnerability, not having all the answers* and *speaking one's own truth* to create a coherent portrait of how the individuals in this group grew and changed through this project.

The project began with a preliminary exploration of how young adults might talk about faith in a World Café gathering on December 7, 2013. Café creator Juanita Brown developed this interactive method of gathering -- in a comfortable setting, around small tables, with groups rotating from table to table to discuss carefully honed questions -- as a means of creating community, developing practices of collaborative learning, and helping people move from conversation to action (Brown and Isaacs 2002, 2). I had used Cafés before to discern directions for All Saints ministries, and I hoped this one would work as well.

Out of that gathering of twenty-four individuals, nine participants offered to participate in the research project itself. I sent preliminary questions to these participants by email on January 6, 2014. The ninety-minute conversation sessions began on January 12 and ran weekly for five weeks, concluding on February 9. Participants were then asked to have a conversation with someone they already knew about faith and return to me for a concluding one-on-one interview. The interviews were completed on May 1,

2014. The remainder of this chapter outlines and describes this research project in more detail.

The Faith Café – recruiting participants, identifying themes

The nine conversation group participants had self-selected themselves into this project at the end of the Faith Café, a "World Café"-style gathering I had held the previous December. I hoped that by gathering a large group of people in my targeted age cohorts to begin to have substantive conversation about faith, I would then be able to identify themes to explore in depth in my project. I also hoped that the lively morning of conversation would help me recruit project participants, people who enjoyed this sort of conversation and who wanted to dig deeper.

For the Café, I identified forty-six people between the ages of 21 and 40 who were All Saints members, adult children of members, or friends of members, and sent them an invitation by email at the beginning of October. From that invitation list, almost half responded yes and attended the Café.

The stated purpose of the Café was "to bring together people of faith under age 40 to explore questions about faith that can engage and deepen conversations about faith." Three questions were explored during twenty-minute conversations:

> *-- What's important to you about God, and why do you care?*
> *-- What hinders us from talking openly about faith in God, or questioning faith*
> openly or   *exploring issues of faith with other people?*
> *-- What could possibly change the way we talk about faith in our everyday lives?*

At the end of each twenty-minute period, participants stood up and moved to another table, with different people, for the next question and next conversation period. When the

table rotations ended, participants did a "gallery walk" -- looking at the butcher paper

tablecloths and all the comments and doodles written on them, making notes of themes

and questions on sticky notes. Finally, the notes and themes were "harvested" into a

summary conversation that gathered all the conversations of the morning into common

areas. Five themes emerged (Appendix A):

> *-- Vulnerability and safety*
> *-- What does it mean to not have all the answers, re: God*
> *-- Talking without judgment*
> *-- Being able to articulate our faith, the ground on which our faith stands*
> *-- Cost and promise: the courage of living in the tension*

Over the course of the morning, the participants spoke honestly of their struggles –

their struggles to believe or make sense of the Christian narrative; their struggles to speak

of God without feeling identified with evangelists or fundamentalists; their struggles to

find acceptance and speak without judging in a world growing more religiously diverse,

while more vocally strident and divisive; their struggles to be "out" as Christians in an

increasingly secular society. These struggles -- and the themes that undergirded them --

became the basis and guide for the five conversation sessions that formed the central

structure of my project. The themes of the Café developed into the three primary themes

emerging from the conversation sessions: *vulnerability, not having all the answers*, and

speaking one's own truth.

Where do you start from? Preliminary questions explored

A week before the conversation sessions began, I contacted the nine people who said

they wanted to participate and asked them a series of open-ended questions by email

(Appendix B). The questions began by asking about their current state of faith, then

followed up by inquiring if they talked about their faith with others, with whom and under what conditions, and what might help improve their ability to talk about their faith.

The replies generally reflected active faith lives among the participants. "I'm in a place of comfort and stability with my faith," "My relationship with God and Jesus grows stronger every day," "My relationship with God is strong." But responses also included a sense of *not having all the answers,* of questions and struggles about the exact nature of God or Jesus, and how one might describe God or have a relationship with Jesus: "I don't really know how to characterize my relationship with God right now (or Jesus)." "There's still a closeness, but I haven't done much to nurture it lately." "I have very undefined beliefs about my religion." "I have a lot of questions about who 'God' is."

While all of them said they did speak about their faith with others, there was a divide between those who were willing to engage colleagues or casual acquaintances in faith conversations, and those who kept their faith talk within the boundaries of family, close friends, or church settings. The four who were graduate students or professors were more open to speaking about faith (although they also said that being a person of faith in the academy was challenging). Natalie's research with religious communities often sparked dialogues on faith with her colleagues, and she said she even enjoyed explaining how she could possibly be an "academic of faith." The others were simply willing to be open in "safe" settings with colleagues when the topic of faith arose randomly. But they were cautious about bringing the topic up independently, for fear of seeming to proselytize, or if they did not know the religious faith or openness of the colleague or faculty member they spoke to.

The other five outside the academy were much more reticent to speak about faith. They kept such conversations within the church or home, not speaking beyond these settings out of discomfort, or seeming pushy or proselytizing. "My relationship to God is mine, and is very private. I do not like to put my beliefs on other people," Kelly wrote. An underlying *vulnerability* would emerge as the root of this reticence among the participants.

When asked what might strengthen their ability to speak to others, very little clarity ensued. Having a safe space, a community, or a shared platform would help them improve their ability to speak, some suggested. But others replied as simply as, "I have no idea." Some felt their own confusion about faith or fear of seeming "judgmental," "right-wing" "evangelical" or "proselytizing," prevented them from speaking freely, even when they wished they could say more. They longed to *speak their own truth.* Blake wrote, "I wish I could do a better job of showing how the Gospels encourage me to support equality for women, equal rights regardless of sexual identity, and respect for all faiths." Natalie felt judged by others: "I would love to be able to wear a sign around my neck that says, 'I'm a Christian, and I promise I don't suck!'"

As the conversation sessions approached, and as I reviewed comments from the Café in tandem with these responses to my questions, I began to see how these young, open-minded, generally faithful Christians felt trapped. On one hand, although their faith in God was real, their theology was often undeveloped, or else it was in radical transition. They were unsure precisely what to say about God or Jesus or redemption, and they felt uncomfortable speaking about faith when that faith was unformed and in flux. On the other hand, they were completely terrified by the prospect of seeming like a "know-it-all"

fundamentalist trying to save souls for Jesus. Whether or not they had experienced a more fundamentalist Christianity – and four of them had – all of them dreaded angering people, making people feel judged, or worst of all, being perceived by others as right-wing Evangelicals, dooming people to hell. They weren't sure what to say about God, but they knew they didn't want to say *that* sort of thing, and so they often said nothing at all.

Setting the Tone – the first session

The group that gathered for the first conversation session was amazingly diverse, considering its small size. Five of the participants were Millennials, born between 1981 and 2000, and four were Gen Xers, born between 1964 and 1980 (although my top age limit of 40 meant that the Xers were in the younger half of their cohort). Five were single with no children, and four were married with children. Three were LGBTQ, and six were straight; three were men and six were women. Two were international students at Michigan State – one of Chinese descent, the other from Latin America. Four were full-time students (one in community college, three in graduate school). Three were employed full-time, one was unemployed doing temp work, and one was home with young children. The majority of the group was European-American – apart from the international students – and middle class.

Before beginning this first conversation, we sat in silent prayer for five minutes in order to center ourselves. This mode of prayer seemed to embody what we all felt as we entered into this project: mute, silent before God and one another, waiting for the word that would open us into speech. After the silence and introductions, I spoke of the themes that had emerged so strongly from the Café conversations: vulnerability, not having all

the answers, speaking without judgment, being able to articulate what one *does* believe, and living in the tension of all of it. I explained the parameters of the project, emphasizing my commitment to confidentiality and ethical use of the material. I also had each participant sign a consent form (Appendix C) that reiterated these points.

I then invited the group to outline norms or ground rules for its time together, drawing on the Café themes of vulnerability, safety and being able to speak without being judged. (Appendix D) Most of the norms described how disagreements might be dealt with (respectfully, without jumping to judgment) and what was expected in terms of confidentiality. But I believe the most powerful norm the group developed was "no interrupting; let someone finish his or her whole thought." Over the five sessions, this norm resulted in lengthy "utterances," in a Bakhtinian model – where the boundaries of each utterance are determined by a change of speaker (Bakhtin 1981, 71). Less a conversational dance or talk-show style debate, these conversations were rooted in utterances that became essays in the basic sense of the word – each speaker essayed a thought, a belief, an emerging concept. The room slowed down as participants waited thoughtfully and listened compassionately while each speaker took a turn.

After developing the group norms, the only questions for the remainder of this first session were, "What are your hopes and expectations for these conversations? What are your fears and uncertainties? What do you want the group to know going forward to make this a valuable experience for you?"

Blake jumped right in, with a statement of *vulnerability* that would be the hallmark of his participation in these conversations. "For me this is an interesting time in my life, because I'm in a career transition. A year ago I had a job I thought I would do for thirty

years, and I lost the job. I've had a series of temporary jobs. I was a teacher; I just got a temporary teaching job, and a lot of the discussions I'm having here are around the existential challenge for me… like, what am I gonna do now, after June?"

Other group members spoke of a desire for change. "Something may change in me; something will change in me, in what ways I don't know." "I hope to be more active in my faith journey." "I think Jesus is super cool and I love Jesus, but in my head I can't seem to get there…I want to see what my relationship with Jesus can grow into."

Natalie described her position as a queer woman of faith in the academy. "There are all these apparent contradictions in my identity that people see, and they seem to need to interrogate that. One of the things I want to think about in these sessions is how to articulate my identity as a Christian person and even as a Presbyterian person … am I cobbling together the faith of others to fashion my own, or do I really fit into the tradition I've been raised in and that's in my blood?"

And then Kelly brought up her struggles with reading the Bible as a woman and a feminist and a scientist, and the group members began to offer their own disagreements with Scripture and all the ways it has been used to oppress women, people of color, liberal Christians and others. They all wrestled with their own tendency to simply refuse to deal with Scripture when it proved too difficult. "I'll be honest, I'm just like, I'm just not going to read it. I'm just going to read something else. Because it's hard to get like, to God sometimes in that for me." "If someone says, 'the Bible says,' I'm like, 'fine, I don't want to talk to you.'" "I've definitely experienced that. Just to shut down."

And these initial comments about the difficulty of dealing with the Bible gave me the opening to see where the next session might go. Because I decided to design this research

in an interpretive tradition that allows meaning to emerge and structure to form iteratively, I planned to let the first conversation shape the subsequent discussions. The issue of Scripture inspired me to start in the same place a philosophy or systematic theology course might start, with the question of epistemology, or revelation, or authority. How do we know what we know about God, and what is authoritative for us when we begin to think about God?

I closed the first session with a guided meditation using Joyce Mercer's "River of Life" exercise (Appendix E). Participants were asked to imagine their lives as rivers, with rapids, pools, twists and turns, and to draw that river of life, looking for places where God was present. I invited them to continue to work with the drawings in the days ahead, and we ended with prayer.

How do we know God? – The second session

When the group assembled the next week, I opened the session with a "Lambeth" style[1] Bible study using John 1:1-14, "In the beginning was the Word." Through meditative group engagement with this text, I hoped to connect them with Scripture from the beginning of the session, in a way that would also surface issues of Word, God, and Enlightenment. I purposely did not record any of their prayer reflections as data, choosing to set intentional prayer time outside the bounds of research and leave it simply as a time to connect with God.

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[1] This is an adaptation of *lectio divina* for groups. It involves reading a passage of scripture aloud three different times, by three different people. After each reading, participants reflect in turn on 1) a word or phrase that stood out, 2) where the passage connects with their life or the world today, and 3) what they hear God calling them to do or be in the reading.

I led off the discussion with the River of Life exercise. "The Bible is people trying to figure out what God is doing with them," I said. "In some sense your life is your scripture as you look back on it and try to figure out what God is doing with you."

Julia opened by saying that God had often come into her life through other people and their messages, which was something she was trying to let go of in order to connect to God on her own. Kelly related that to her own spiritual awakening when her children were born. "God has always been with me, but I wasn't as open as I am now, because how many times in my life now do I go, 'Please, help me!'" Lisa found God in a *vulnerable* moment, when she came out to her parents. "I knew I had to tell my parents, and one day I was driving home and I got this inner strength from, I don't know where, and it filled me, and I was like, OK, I can do this." Abigail said she found God particularly in times of pain, even the pain of a relationship ending. "I remember being so *vulnerable*, being helpless, but then feeling this immense sense of *strength and power* because I know that He's with me."

Natalie spoke of God's absence. "So often in times of turmoil and doubts it's been like, 'Hello, where are you bro? Any time now. If you could come imbue me with that strength, that would be awesome." But no dice." Alejandro said that while he was learning to accept that he was different from his evangelical family he experienced a "void of God … God wasn't answering." Mike added that there were times when he wanted God to stay away, times when "I cannot pay any attention to God. I have to make things right on my own … Yeah, that didn't really work."

So I asked them -- as they looked at their lives, what resources they used to interpret these experiences of God's presence or absence. Where did they learn to recognize

whether it was God or not? Some mentioned growing up in church and being able to talk

to their parents or good friends about God. Others said nature, or music or poetry, or even

Paulo Friere or liberation theology. Some talked about thinking their way to God, or

listening to the sense of obligation that is their conscience. I observed that none of them

had mentioned the Bible. "The Bible is one of the ways we know God," I said, "and we

have talked about nature and music and friends, but I haven't heard any of you say you

go to the Word. So when is Scripture helpful, and when is Scripture not helpful? What

kind of authority is it in your life, and does it help you understand who God is?"

While Abigail was quick to identify the link of music – psalms or words of Scripture

set to music – as helpful for her, the rest of the group immediately owned up to struggling

with the Bible. For a book that seems to offer so many Christians answers, this group

found it more challenging. Kelly said it felt overwhelming. Cherie, who was raised in

Sunday School and took a Bible as Literature class in college, still felt lost. She said, "I

can't just pick it up and just be all like 'this is nice.'" Lisa mentioned the bad images of

God she received through a Catholic education, images that blocked her path. Blake said

he read the Bible only so he could follow Jesus better, but not as a sacred text.

Julia, Alejandro, and Abigail – with roots in more evangelical traditions – had all read

the entire Bible at least once in their lives. But Julia struggled with how the Bible had

been used against women and so she, like Abigail, turned to music and the words of

scripture set to tunes. Natalie confessed to reading Scripture as a "salad bar Christian."

"All right, I'll take the carrots – I'll take your Christ. He's pretty cool. I'll take your

peppers. I like those ideas of social justice. Not the feta cheese. I don't like the God of the

Old Testament. You can take your feta cheese. It's disingenuous not to acknowledge that there are bits in which I see my God and bits in which I don't."

Knowing that Robert Wuthnow has categorized these post-boomers as "spiritual tinkerers," who assemble their faith from a variety of sources, and who say that personal experiences are better than church doctrine for understanding God, (Wuthnow 2007, 135) I concluded the session by asking them to think about what tools are on their spiritual workbench. What resources informed or sustained their faith: lines of songs, hymns, artwork, books of the Bible? And I asked them to bring an example the following week.

Who is the God That We Know? – the third session

The group reconvened for the third session without Julia and Kelly, both of whom had been held up out of town by brutal winter weather. My goal for this session was to lead the participants to articulate their own ideas of God and what their current relationship was with God. The group members began the conversation time by sharing some of their "tools on the spiritual workbenches" of their lives. There was a folk song by The Mountain Goats, a prayer by Thomas Merton, a picture of the Sea of Galilee, the words to "Amazing Grace," art books of Italian Renaissance paintings, a verse from Psalm 27, and mentions of things that were sustaining (gardening, a devotional book) and also things that were challenging (thinking about Jesus).

"So," I segued, "drawing on all these resources, I thought today we might talk about – not what we don't know about God, but what you *do* know about God out of your own experience and life and knowledge." Cherie jumped right in. "God is love."

Then there was a long silence. Mike said, "God understands me more than I understand myself." More silence. "God is patient," Lisa offered. "God doesn't necessarily take away my suffering," Blake said. "But he gives me strength to endure, and I think sometimes God means for me to go through trials." Natalie added, "God is present in other people." Abigail said, "It's hard for me to disengage or separate God from Jesus, so I understand God through Jesus. But at the same time, I also acknowledge that God is in a lot of things that do not have the label 'Jesus' on it or 'Christian' on it. I think that's what I know now," she concluded, in almost a whisper.

And then there was a very, very long silence. "You're almost asking for our personal theologies that we've built up," Mike said. "I don't know if I could define that quickly, or easily, or clearly even. So …" his voice trailed off. While they were able to begin to *speak their own truth*, they were stymied by *not having all the answers*. To help them find their way to words, I began to use open-ended questions: some I had pre-planned, and others emerged as the conversation proceeded: "What else might one say about God?" "Who is the God you pray to? What's the nature, the qualities of the God you pray to?" "Let's talk about Jesus a little. How does Jesus fit into your image of God?" "Do you all believe God damns people to hell?" And finally, "We haven't even talked about the Holy Spirit, who always gets left out of these conversations."

Their personal connection with God was the first aspect they began to tackle, how one knows God in interactions with other people, or in the sense of presence or absence in prayer. "I think I know that I am known by God and that God *knows* me," Abigail said, in a quiet, hushed voice. "It's an exposed feeling, being known, and that's … that's … that's … what I know about it." Lisa and Mike both experienced God as multi-faceted.

"There's almost a scale of how God can touch us, from the really transcendent to the very basic, fine-grained, personal, approachable," Mike said.

The group continued to struggle with the difference between the vastness of the transcendent, powerful God of the Universe and the particular, embodied person of Jesus. Jesus seemed too narrow to Cherie, and to Blake, too much to blame for so many evils done in history. Alejandro mentioned that Jesus couldn't have shared every human experience, because Jesus was never a woman. And even though some felt close to Jesus, the entire group struggled with the exclusivity of the Christian message, that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. This is a common sticking point for post-Boomers in a global society of many faiths, as Richard Flory and Donald Miller – and also David Kinnaman -- have observed (Flory and Miller 2008; Kinnaman 2011). But the group also expressed a sense of envy about the certainty and fervor of people who believed Jesus was the only way to heaven.

And so Abigail asked if we could talk about hell. "Maybe damnation and hell isn't … you know… what is it really?" The group members trod the line between Blake who *spoke his truth* quite clearly: "I don't believe in hell," and Alejandro who struggled with the strong messages about hell from his youth. "I grew up with the pinnacle of heresy is not believing in hell, right? And when you get to that point, it's like you've abandoned everything, right? You know, you're a heretic type of Christian because it's so connected to God's justice, right?"

Finally, the group turned to the Holy Spirit. Blake said, "When you say Holy Spirit and what do I believe, one of the first things out of my mouth is 'I don't have a clue.'" But Cherie felt that the Holy Spirit was so present to her that it was clearest part of God.

Abigail and Alejandro shared an encounter at a pie shop, where they spoke so deeply together about what they were experiencing in this group that they had almost a vision, a true experience of each other that was so full of "the presence of God which I would name the Holy Spirit," Alejandro said. Abigail added that it was "that force, that experience, the part of God that helped me understand him *in the moment.*" Mike shared an image of the Holy Spirit as female, which Blake concurred with, while Lisa said that for her, the Holy Spirit is "hope – hope and understanding that all this may seem insurmountable, what you're going through right now. But there's always hope that you'll get through it."

I ended the session by talking about kataphatic faith and apophatic faith, hoping to help them feel more comfortable with *not having all the answers*. I explained the difference between theology that attempts to describe God and theology that acknowledges that God is beyond words. "Apophatic lets you experience a God beyond language. But at some point, you have to lay out your markers, to do something kataphatic. You can't know everything about God. God is too big. But you can know some things, or you wouldn't be here." I sent them out with a homework assignment: to draw their faith as a house or building. "What's it built on? Where are the scary little rooms, what are the big rooms? Where's your faith right now?"

At the end of this third session, I was concerned about Julia and Kelly's absence. They missed some substantive conversation, as well as their own chance to articulate their understandings of God. I wondered how this would affect the outcome of the project. I emailed both of them the digital file of the day's recording, but I was not convinced they would take the time to listen to it. But I also left inspired and joyful. The

participants kept expressing how much they enjoyed these conversations and how they hated thinking about the end of this time together.

Faith in Action, Practices and Ethics – the fourth session

The group members entered the room chatting easily. There were other absences: Lisa was out sick, and Julia was not present again, but hers was an expected absence. Kelly was back, however, and when everyone was seated, we began with people sharing their "houses of faith." (See Appendix F)

Natalie's was colorful and cartoon-like. She said she wanted to draw "a very cool, Frank Lloyd Wright house, but then I remembered that I have zero visual aptitude." She went into lively detail about each room, starting with the study, where all her books on faith lived, and ending with an attic, where doubt, trauma, and other scary things were kept. When she ended, I asked, "What's it built on?" She said, "Gut feelings, and like that height of embodiment of the Holy Spirit that I witness and that I feel and experience in my spiritual life." I asked, "What holds it together?" And she said, "I feel like people around me who are the 'God with us' are what hold me together." Cherie engaged with her process, and probed how Natalie thought this through. "I was thinking about what it symbolized, like why do I want a house like Frank Lloyd Wright, well I have kind of like this kind of postmodern, weird faith that people don't really understand," she replied.

Cherie then admitted that the process of drawing a house baffled her, so she set her faith in the structure of her real house where she lives with her husband and children. From the doorways, through the kitchen, to the piano where she plays hymns, to her bedroom, where the sun rises through the big picture window, Cherie connected each

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room and setting to an aspect of her faith. She said her house had a deep spiritual feeling for her, one she had felt from the first time she entered it, and that doing this exercise tapped her feelings about it.

Kelly drew a castle, with no windows, which was sloppy inside, strewn with parts of her spiritual life that she picked up and cast off. "There's a huge disparity between my spiritual life and my real home," she said, describing her castle as a walled-off sanctuary with a cranky woman at the door saying, "No soliciting! What do you want?" in a hostile voice.

Blake drew a massive foundation with pillars and stones. The pillars were things he was certain of, like a sense of community in church, the Lord's Prayer, communion; the stones were things he was less sure of, like salvation, hell, and miracles. It was surrounded by questions, like "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus?" and prayers like "Carry me." And a sun marked "God's Holy Spirit" outshone the drops of rain marked "Rainy Days."

Abigail's house was a floor plan with a swirling hall in the center that represented her core. A living room represented community, and a study stood for her encounters with Scripture. There was a garden for her free, organic side: "I feel like my faith is, I just don't hold onto or like I have to understand something before I can feel it or believe something. I'm noticing that I'm just like "Wheeeee! Let's enjoy the ride," or "Ooooh, butterflies!"

Alejandro struggled to reconcile his outer self and inner self as he constructed his house. The bedroom was for his intimate, personal relationship with God, and it was a little bare. The kitchen was for spiritual nourishment like church attendance, and the living room was a space where his faith could be in contact with other people. And he

wondered "what it's going to look like when I get to the point where I'm ready to be able to share, to be able to work with others, and to be able to serve."

Mike struggled with the exercise. In a statement of *vulnerability,* he confessed to the group that he currently owns two houses, with one headed for foreclosure. "I feel a lot of guilt and shame and bad emotions around the house, and so my spiritual life as a house is not a good metaphor for me." He did say his spiritual house would be in the city, one house among many, and it would be older, part of something that had existed for a long time. "Sometimes it's been vacant. I've moved out of my spiritual home for a while, but I've come back, and sometimes I've ignored it for a while."

(The following week, Lisa brought a small sketch of a house as a series of cubes representing rooms -- one a library with spiritual books, a room for private prayer, a space for devotion through gardening, a room to include science, and a music room. Two rooms had statements of faith: "My beliefs are the sum of the parts of my past and room for what is to come," and "I believe in all paths to God. There is no one right way.")

The group was very engaged in the process of describing and sharing their houses of faith, with much laughter, as well as follow-up questions, as each participant thought about what the others had presented. The process of thinking metaphorically about their own faith seemed to help them give shape and language to where their faith life stood at that moment, and to begin to *speak their own truth* about that.

It took almost 45 minutes before we turned to the topic I had originally thought would take the bulk of our time: ethics and practices. Diana Butler Bass has long been interested in Christian practices as a way to ground people in faith and keep churches vital. She has written extensively in books like *Christianity after Religion* about the ability of practices

to connect the "spiritual" and the "religious", making faith intentional (Bass 2012, 168). I offered a list of practices from the Baylor University School of Social Work (Garland et al. 2009) to the group (Appendix G). It included: attend weekly worship services, Bible study, evangelism, study history of the church, prayer, confess faults to others, forgive and work on healing relationships, encourage others, give financially to the church, provide hospitality to strangers, volunteer time, participate in social justice activities, discuss Christian response to social issues.

The first few practices group members offered were things like reading devotional books or prayer or Bible study. But then Abigail told a story about realizing the role played by the house she rented with other students. The international graduate students who shared her home were never homesick or lonely, and they realized it was the result of life in that house. "And it reminded me that I have that sort of mission in my life, or calling in my life, to be about healing myself and others and extending it. And when I welcome people who need healing, who will say 'yes' to my invitation, and that's through community as well." "So the practice of hospitality?" I asked. "Yes, exactly," she replied.

Blake talked about being an indifferent church attendee, but how cracking eggs at the Second Sunday Breakfast strengthened his faith – the practice of volunteering time to help. "I feel like I'm worshipping God when I'm scrambling eggs every second Sunday at breakfast. I love second Sunday breakfast. I'm part of the church community, and I'm welcomed."

Natalie got energized by the thought that studying church history could be a practice. She explained how important it was to her that her family had generations-long roots in

the Presbyterian Church, something that connected her to a very distant cousin when she visited Scotland. "I had no idea that was part of practice, and not just belief. Those bonds and that lineage are so vital to me, and such an important part of my faith. And that's awesome. It's just mind-blowing."

Mike talked about the practice of hospitality connecting to his goal of living with integrity in his work life, upholding Christian values in a competitive, capitalist work world. "I think, as a Christian practice, to welcome other people means to be honest with them and to be open to them and have open communication with them, even if it's not in your best interest from a business standpoint." He paused for a long time. "I don't know why that seems strange to talk about as a practice, but it does feel strange to me."

So I probed further, asking the group if their faith affected how they lived their lives or made choices – if they felt their paths were different from their peers because of their faith. Alejandro explained that his upbringing caused him to feel uncomfortable drinking alcohol or dancing. As a release valve, he said drinking or even watching TV could be dangerous, if it was taking the place of finding rest and release and refreshment in God. Blake and Kelly said their faith directly affected their political thinking. Abigail and Kelly both spoke about the practice of forgiveness. Some talked about money in relationship to faith – the practice of giving money away. Mike also said he would not take a high-paying job simply for the money, and he and Alejandro both agreed that gambling was not something they would do -- because they were Christians.

At the conclusion of this penultimate session, I sent them off with a sheet of paper. (Appendix H) On one side was the Baptismal Covenant from the Book of Common Prayer, divided into two parts: the Apostles' Creed -- which describes the nature of the

God proclaimed by the church, the God we are in relationship with -- and the five questions that outline what the Episcopal Church believes one must do to live a life in relationship with this God. On the flip side of the page, there were two sections: "Who is God? What can you say about God, your understanding of who God is … today … knowing that any description of God can only be partial – and always culturally and personally contextual – but in a description that is YOURS." And "What is required of you as a person in relationship with this God? As a child of this God, or a follower of this God, or as a beloved of this God? What practices, commandments, moral imperatives or commitments does this relationship require of you?"

In a sense, this assignment was the capstone of the sessions, the chance for each participant to articulate for him or herself a statement of belief and practice. My intention in this assignment was to help each participant be able to *speak his or her own truth*, giving voice to the many ideas, questions, clarifications, and images that had circulated among them over the preceding sessions. I hoped that by thinking through their own creed and ethics that they would have some words and thoughts about God that they could draw upon when they had a conversation with another person about faith.

This I believe – the fifth and final session

As the group gathered for the last time, the sun shone outside the windows, sparkling and dancing on the snow and casting a golden light around the room. Alejandro and Abigail burst into the room with a bag from the local pie shop – the very place they had encountered that 'Holy Spirit moment' with one another. Energy was high as people scurried about, looking for paper plates and forks, then started slurping fruity slices of

pie. Mike was late again – Mike was always late – and when he arrived, there was nothing left to eat the pie with but a plastic knife, which he gamely plied to shovel pie toward his mouth.

"So you had this little assignment," I said, wiping sugary juice off my fingers. "About thinking about God and what your response to God should be, and I wonder how was the experience of actually doing this kind of thinking?"

"It was so much easier than I thought it was going to be," Cherie said. "There's some core stuff that's down here and I'm OK with it and it's good. So, I think this group has helped me get there. If I had written this before, I don't think I would have been in the same place, so thank you to all of you."

Blake agreed. "I think from hearing other people share how they mentally worked through their thoughts, it created like a language for me." Abigail said it was a summative experience. "Like it was summarizing or crystallizing some of the things I've been saying." Kelly worried that her statement was too conventional, "stereotypical, everything I've been spoon-fed kind of thing, you know?" But Mike worried his statement was too unconventional, as if he was only making things up.

"Were there places where the traditions of our faith were helpful to you? I asked, "Or places where you struggled with them?" And Alejandro explained that he had interrogated the Apostles' Creed. "I began to think about … well, what does this really mean? You know, God the Father Almighty, what does that mean? Magical powers? So I asked more questions and more questions and I feel like I engaged with it. Because of these conversations we've had in this group, I've been able to raise some of these questions." He had become more comfortable with *not having all the answers*.

When I asked who wanted to share their paper, Blake went first, as he typically did, with a confession. "I lost my paper. But I read it before I lost it, so I still thought about the questions." The main points he emphasized were: Being a Christian is about what you do with your faith; nothing is pre-ordained and we have free will; part of faith is wrestling with God; he identifies as a Christian, even though he wrestles with the idea of Jesus; and answering God's call means finding something to do to bring about God's Kingdom.

Mike described God as "the source of all being and all meaning, author of the world, but standing outside and above it. More real and true and beautiful than anything we could hope to be or imagine. God loves each of us so intensely, that God took on human life to participate with us in its joys and despairs, even death and abandonment." And the actions required to be in relationship with this God are: to see each other as God sees us, loving each other. Being mindful of God's presence in prayer and worship. Resist selfishness, exploitation, violence, cynicism and emptiness, and "To share the good news. That the universe is not cold and uncaring, but filled with wonder and love."

Abigail spoke of God as friend and lover, singing over her as she awakes every morning. Of God as Creator, Preserver, Healer, authoring a play that is open to co-creation with the actors. And of God as Graceful Judge, one whose justice might be beyond human comprehension. "There's that law, that principle He governs by that I just don't understand, but in the end it's about grace." She spoke about required actions as embracing what one must do because of the friendship with God. "And delight and duty is then in the caring of creation, the caring of people and the healing of people and others."

Kelly struggled -- with long pauses and "ummms" between her words. There was a sense that she was unhappy with what she had written, and yet, it was what she believed. God as father, always watching and making sure one behaves a certain way, powerful but full of grace and loving. She cleared her throat. "But yeah, like I said, I feel like my views are very much culturally based, you know?" Required actions are prayer, behaving as God would wish, "you know, loving thy neighbor and being kind and full of grace as much as I can," she laughed nervously, "and forgive as Christ forgave, like I say to my kids all the time." And although she said she felt her statement was very stereotypical, at the end she tackled the second and third commandments and *spoke her own truth* about the exclusivity of God. "I really feel like, ummm … that spirituality's important for everyone, and just because I believe in one God doesn't mean that everyone has to believe in that God."

Lisa was typically brief. "Who is God? The force that holds everything and everyone together. The light in the darkness. Pretty much what I got there. What is required from this relationship? To treat others how you want to be treated. Love, kindness, gentleness, understanding. Then understanding that people believe differently from how I do and that doesn't make them any less in God's eyes."

Cherie showed her Sunday School roots by unpacking the Trinity: God as Life Force of unfathomable scope. Jesus connecting divinity to humanity, walking a mile in our shoes to bring us close to the unfathomable God. The Spirit connecting humanity to God and creation. Required actions were all grounded in maintaining a connection to God and creation, a sense of oneness that gave birth to all ethical behavior. "It is this struggle of forging connection and reducing estrangement that lets us build relationship with God,

and that is the morality we've been charged with—does it bring us closer or farther from God?"

Alejandro got a laugh when he said, "I don't have a lot. I spent too much time analyzing this." But he summarized God as both Trinity and Lord of the Universe. And for required actions, he said, "I have a responsibility to pursue a relationship with God," because that leads to more godly relationships with other human beings, and -- undergirded by prayer -- right behavior can be discerned within the community of faith.

Julia said, "I am in a period of my life where I just feel very confused, and I'll probably get a little emotional about this." And she was able to describe God as mystery, Jesus as healer and suffering servant, and Holy Spirit as the stage hand putting everything in play behind the scenes. But then she let herself be *vulnerable* to the group, and she got tearful as she described her struggles with God as Father. "A lot of that is because of my own father. So when I think about God as Father, I think about somebody who's like, waiting to whack you as soon as he sees like, this chink in your armor." What is required? Prayer, Sabbath rest, encouraging each other, breaking bread together, and to "live with integrity, live in a way that's like, internally congruent."

Natalie spoke of God as a "thing or being that gives me a gentle cosmic shove in the right direction." She too struggled with the Father image – because of her own parents, and also because of her issues with gender concepts. "For me, God is genderless, and I constantly have to work against culture, and against teachings, and work even against the Bible." And what's required is what a former boyfriend told her once: "Love God. Love other people. Don't be a dick."

So I asked them what they were able to say about God now that they couldn't have said before the sessions began. Everyone said that the experience had been helpful. Some comments related to *speaking one's own truth*. Blake: "I've learned a vocabulary." Kelly: "It's nice to know that everyone's at varying stages and points and places with their spiritualness." Others were more comfortable *not having all the answers*. Lisa: "What's been nice is to hear all the doubts people have." Cherie: "I feel more confident in what I think, even if it's something that I doubt, I'm just more comfortable with it because we've been talking and thinking more." Alejandro: "I feel more comfortable being able to talk about the parts of my faith that are not as clear, that are not as black and white."

And then I asked, "If you were to say what is the Good News, the thing, the one thing you know about God that makes it all worth it …?" Natalie said, "You're not going the Wrong Way." "God is still speaking," Alejandro said. Julia said, "He is making all things work together for good. You know we don't necessarily know what that good looks like, and it doesn't always maybe feel good every step of the way, but to think that all things in the universe are working for His purpose is pretty cool." Kelly: "We're all where we're supposed to be. Maybe we don't know why, but there's a reason, and that's comforting." Abigail added, "I just know that I am deeply loved. That is what sustains me." Lisa said, "Every day I wake up is a good day, and that's part of that gift from God, finding beauty in the mundane." Blake: "Christian fellowship has healing power." Mike said, "I think two things: One is God's presence and the experience of the presence and knowing that experience has been real in my life. The other is one of the last verses in the Bible, 'Behold, I make all things new.' God is saying -- at the very end of things, I'm making it new again, and whatever happens in our world or to our world, or in our

relationships or our lives, that piles up brokenness and ugliness and hurt and bad things, God can still make it new."

And then, right there near the end, as we were talking about the hope of redemption, the hope of all things being made new in Christ, Cherie began crying -- hard. It was a personal issue, a family issue, which had opened her up in that safe space, where after five weeks, these nine people had learned to trust each other with the most *vulnerable* questions of faith, hope, and love. Cherie started to tell the group what was going on in her family, and as she spoke, I reached over and shut the recorder off.

"Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel" – What happened next

The group dispersed with instructions: have a one-on-one conversation about faith with someone they already knew. It could be any kind of conversation they wanted to have, with anyone they knew, of any length that felt right to them. Over the next ten weeks, as they completed their faith conversations, each participant met with me individually for a concluding interview, drawing on a series of open-ended questions (Appendix I). Each participant succeeded in talking to someone about faith, and the results of these conversations – along with the information from the concluding interviews and also the subsequent actions and speech of some of the participants – will be discussed and analyzed in more detail in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW MIGHT WE SPEAK ABOUT FAITH? DRAWING OUT THE THEMES

From the first exchanges around tables at the World Café, through to my final interview with Mike -- as he spoke about how difficult his one-on-one conversation with a friend had been -- it was clear that these younger adults face a number of barriers in speaking about faith. Some of these barriers relate to being post-Boomers, living in a postmodern, multi-faith society, where truth is considered relative. Some of these barriers are not age- or cohort-driven, but relate to their lives as educated, mostly European-Americans, living in the Midwest, with all the attendant cultural strictures in those social locations against being "rude," "intrusive," or "not nice," and also to their lives as fairly conventional members of a mainline Protestant church, where evangelism has been neither valued nor taught.

As the group moved through the conversation sessions, into their dialogues about faith with a friend, colleague, or family member, and on to the final interviews with me, some of these barriers become something other than barriers; they became themes related to speaking of faith, themes that danced, and wove, and interlaced themselves through all of these discussions: *vulnerability, not having all the answers,* and *speaking one's own truth*. This chapter explores these themes in greater depth, bringing them into dialogue with Brené Brown, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Brueggemann, and others whose writings help to cast light upon these themes. Beginning with a consideration of some of the barriers to speaking of faith, it then explores the three themes, using portraits of some of the group participants to illustrate how the themes play out in a real human being's

experience, and how the practice of "sacred conversation" might help one move to deeper faith, clearer articulation of that faith, and the courage to proclaim it.

What Affects the Ability to Speak About Faith?   Natalie's Portrait

I could hear Natalie coming down the hallway toward my office, her high-heeled ankle boots clicking with confident strides. She always dressed stylishly, and this day was no exception: her blue polka-dot dress was insufficient for the chilly, early spring weather, but a purple wool coat with a peplum skirt provided added warmth. She seated herself at my conference table with a lithe grace as she prepared to answer the questions in the final interview session.

At first glance, Natalie would seem to be an articulate spokesperson for faith. Although she was the youngest member of the conversation group, she was an active and eloquent participant right from the beginning, using humor and metaphor to illustrate her thoughts. Faith and religion were woven through all aspects of her life; her graduate research focuses on conservative religious women and fashion, and as an undergraduate, she had worked for the Presbyterian campus ministry--until the chaplain began disparaging queer people. "I quit my job theatrically because I happen to be queer myself," she had told the group in an early session. "I came out of the closet, quit my job, and went through a whole year off from the church. And now I've been reintegrating myself back into that, and also into the queer faith community to see if can connect with the queer power of my religion."

Mike had invited Natalie to participate in the Faith Café, and although she was not Episcopalian, her deep roots in another mainline denomination created struggles that

were similar to those named by the Episcopal members as they tried to speak about faith. "While we went to church every single Sunday growing up – and we were related to half the congregation – we didn't talk much about it at home, and my parents didn't really extol Biblical virtues at all." Like Episcopalians, Presbyterians also have traditionally aligned church with culture and de-emphasized the need to speak about personal faith and to evangelize. So Natalie shut down after an unexpected and hurtful encounter in grade school with fellow students who were from religiously conservative backgrounds. "They were spouting off values that I did not want to emulate … values I saw as intolerant or hateful. And so because of my condemnation of religious intolerance, all my classmates in high school thought I was an atheist. They were really surprised when they found out I went to church twice a week."

As time passed, and Natalie began to claim her sexual and political identity, her speech about faith focused on social justice and LGBTQ acceptance in the wider church. And when she did "come out" in her hometown as a faithful Christian, sometimes the response was harsh: "'what church would *take* you?' That hurt and also was kind of exciting, to see that I was breaking that assumption for them." And so she adopted stereotype-busting roles: *Queer Person of Faith*. *Feminist of Faith.* Even *Academic of Faith*. But at the same time, Natalie knew that she was speaking about her roles, and not about her self, not about her own faith and relationship with God. She joined the conversation group because she wanted to better articulate her identity as a Christian. "When I talk about the tenets of my faith, I might as well be Jewish." She wondered if she was creating a faith in opposition to others', picking and choosing among theologies and Biblical texts as if she were cruising a salad bar.

The Bible was a struggle for her, as it was for many members of the group. "I tried to read it cover to cover and got twenty pages in before I felt so oppressed as a woman that I quit. Well. Yeah. I tried. Gold star … I made an honest effort." Her liberal, mainline church stopped youth formation programs after confirmation, and Natalie felt out of her league, with a sixth-grade Sunday School education … going up against Biblically literate, Biblically literal, fundamentalists who used the Bible to condemn her for her sexuality.

She also connected her reluctance to speak about faith with her Millennial individualism. When the GenXers talked about community in the group sessions, Natalie said, "There's a rift between your folks' generation and mine. Because I know mine was always told you are unique and beautiful snowflakes, there's no one like you, there's no one who came before you like you, there's no one after you like you. It's very individualistic, right? It's very selfish, and that's what isolates us and makes us not want to join the church, right, because we don't recognize the importance of being a part of the community."

Natalie was also quick to name vulnerability as a hindrance to speaking freely about the faith that touches her in her heart, which differs from her outward willingness to connect her faith to social justice/LGBTQ advocacy. She has deep wounds -- she "outed" herself during the group as both a survivor of trauma and as someone who struggles with depression and anxiety. And in her "house of faith," there is a room upstairs for "storage, where I keep all the tough crap that I don't want to see the light of day like doubt and anxiety and boxes of guilt and depression and trauma and broken bonds and things that I don't want to touch." Natalie fears the risk of self-exposure.

So when the time came to speak to another person about faith, it was someone she

trusted, a former boyfriend – an atheist – who came over to help her get her car unstuck.

They began talking about deeply personal things, and that conversation became a safe

space where Natalie could speak about the group, and about herself, and about God. "It

felt very *vulnerable* and that was uncomfortable, to like *lay* everything out there. I began

thinking 'all right, I'm doing this once because I have to do it for the group,' but the point

I ended, it was like 'I could talk about this with someone else too.'"

What she *didn't do* was talk about how the church and gender politics intersect.

Instead, she talked about how she knows God. "Explaining to him how I see God and feel

a calling that … that idea that we're all called to a priesthood of something. I feel called

to priesthood through what I do and trying to listen to that voice as I'm blindly groping

around in the dark, asking, 'Where is God in all this?' How I witness God in

interpersonal interactions, and in transformative social justice feminist and queer

pedagogy, and in those moments of darkness and terror, where I see God."

Because Natalie hears such strong voices of judgment in her own head ("Oh, you're

silently judging me right now, because I still go to church and you might think I should

be beyond this.") the non-judgmental, receptive listening of her friend was a good

outcome for her. Evangelism is not the same as conversion, as Gortner notes. Conversion

is the work of the Holy Spirit. "Evangelism *is* about listening for and proclaiming stories

of God's transforming message of love and delight – it is *not* about what happens as a

result of our sharing these stories. We do not measure evangelism by outcomes or

results." (Gortner 2008, 42) But since her friend received her story so well, Natalie took a

risk in a subsequent conversation. She was meeting with the chair of her thesis committee

– a secular, quantitative scientist -- and she spoke about her faith again. "It came very naturally. It's like divine intervention. I believe in that cosmic shove. That's what was happening, like God was saying, *you need to remember and keep in mind what I am doing in your life and not be ashamed of it or shy about it.*"

Natalie said the conversation group helped: by offering questions that made her think about things in new ways, by creating a space where she could be vulnerable, and by giving her a sense of courage and confidence in speaking. To be with other people struggling with these questions reminded her that she is not alone, a solitary snowflake dancing in the sky; she is part of the flurry of flakes that comprise the Body of Christ. "It's a very vulnerable and isolated position to be in – the token academic of faith. But I would like that to be known, I think. Especially if I can be in a position to dismantle stereotypes and make people more comfortable. I don't like proselytizing, but I would like them to have it in the back of their minds: 'Well, Christians don't suck. Natalie's here.'"

What Gets in the Way? Barriers to Speech about Faith

Natalie's story exemplifies most of the barriers to speaking about faith that other members of the group named:

-- **A lack of experience in speaking of faith and a lack of support for doing so.** Natalie grew up with regular church attendance and a complete lack of conversation about faith at home. She described her family as only "moderately religious, but with perfect attendance." Others who grew up in traditional churches -- where faith was supposed to come through membership in the church and through living in the wider

culture, without further discussion -- experienced the same disconnect. "In my life," Lisa said, "It's all been very one-directional. Someone tells you what to believe and that was it, and the conversation ended."

-- **Difficulty reading, understanding, and accepting the Bible as sacred scripture.** Natalie approached the Bible like a salad bar, picking and choosing the parts she liked or could believe. This topic erupted in the first session, when Cherie asked group members how they figured out "what parts to keep" from the Bible. For the next ten minutes, the group unloaded their deep struggles with scripture and women, scripture and science, and scripture and fundamentalism, a discussion that carried on well into the second session.

-- **A desire to be open-minded,** leading simultaneously to a clear rejection of exclusive Christian fundamentalism but also to a deep confusion over how one might claim one's own faith without shutting out other people for their faith or lack of faith. "I don't want to offend anyone or lose any friends, but I think that impedes my ability to be convincing about my own faith journey," Natalie said. And Abigail talked about having a Muslim boyfriend and the differences in how the two faiths consider Jesus, "and I'm like, OK, if he's not the Son of God for you, fine…" she laughed breathily. "And that's really fine for me, but I can't deny [that role of Jesus] for myself."

-- **Doubts and struggles with their own faith,** whether that was over the role of Scripture, the existence of evil in the world, the place of science, the nature of sexuality and faith, or the gaps in their knowledge of Christian teaching and tradition, combined with a fear that 'real Christians' had figured all of this out and that if they spoke, they would be exposed as outsiders to the faith. Natalie took a year-long break from church

after she quit her campus ministry job because the faith expressed by the campus minister made her feel excluded as a queer person, and she had to figure out what she really believed. For Cherie and Blake, just to tell the group that they had an uncomfortable relationship with the person or idea of Jesus felt like a risk, they said.

   -- **The longstanding cultural taboo against discussing "politics, sex and religion"** in polite company. Although Natalie could be a *provocateur* on these three issues, she was much less willing to expose her tender spiritual relationship with God or even sometimes to be "out" in the academy as a person of faith. And when Mike described the awkwardness of his one-on-one conversation with a colleague, he said, "It was as if I had asked him about his sex life."

   These barriers became woven into the three larger, emerging themes of *vulnerability*, *not having all the answers,* and *speaking one's own truth.* The group members spoke whole-heartedly to one another about the depth and reality of their experiences with God and their understanding of God's love and power and presence in their lives. But they were shy about taking such risks of self-exposure with people outside the safe space of the group, because their faith came out of such a deep and tender place, and also because their doubts and questions, their struggles with Scripture, and their desire to be open-minded and not to offend someone else by speaking of faith might expose them and leave them *vulnerable* to attack or rejection. This same desire to be open-minded, along with their struggles with Scripture and their doubts and questions, revealed to the participants that they did *not have all the answers*, making it difficult to speak coherently and confidently to others about faith when so much was still unclear in their own minds. Faced with the inherent contradiction between a faith that makes profound truth claims,

and their own post-modern sense that all truth is relative, participants struggled to resolve the tension between the two and expressed a concern that if they did not have their faith sorted out in their own minds, they could not comfortably speak about it with anyone else. Finally, the cultural taboos around speaking of faith, combined with their own inexperience in doing so, and the lack of support for evangelistic speech in their own faith traditions and upbringings, made it difficult for them to *speak their own truth*, even as the conversation sessions opened up the possibility that they might become able to do that. I now turn to a deeper exploration of these three themes.

Kelly – A Portrait in Vulnerability

How did she get here? Kelly's presence in the project was surprising. She began attending church three years ago, after an invitation by another young mom in the congregation. Her life was intense … her husband was finishing law school, while continuing to work full-time, work which often took him away from home for the entire weekend. Kelly, as an at-home mom, juggled the schedules of three children and was the only on-site parent for most of the time. Still, she and her husband participated willingly in baptism preparation for their three children, as well as for Kelly's own baptism. Their thoughtful reflections in the baptism class moved me deeply and gave me a sense of hope for the future of their family life as Christians.

But I did not see Kelly regularly at church much after that – the demands of their life meant it was just simpler for her to stay home most Sundays, rather than wrangle the three children to church by herself. For Kelly, like many of her generation, attending a church service has become just another activity to be squeezed in among other competing

demands. So when I put out the request for the Faith Café, and she said she was unable to attend, I was not surprised.

I was surprised, however, when she called me at home a week later to say how sorry she was that she could not be part of the Faith Café, and was there any other way she might participate in my project? I invited her to be part of the "Speaking of Faith" group, and again … I was surprised when she said yes.

From the outset, Kelly was not interested in speaking about faith outside of very closed, very safe environments. "I feel that religion is extremely personal and private. My relationship to God is mine and is very private. I don't like to put my beliefs on other people," she replied to my preliminary questions about talking about faith. When I asked what would strengthen her ability to speak with others about faith, she answered, "Oh my. I have no idea. I think I would have to be in an altered state. I feel very strongly about keeping it personal and private-intimate."

While this reticence might be considered typical of Kelly as a Gen Xer -- raised in an increasingly diverse, multi-cultural, multi-faith, globally interconnected world, where any truth is relative and open to question -- it came out of a much deeper space for her. Like many in her generation, Kelly was the child of divorced Boomer parents. Her father, a rigid Southern Baptist, and her mother, an atheist, divorced when Kelly was very young. Her mother did not provide Kelly with any religious upbringing beyond sporadic attendance at the Unitarian Universalist church, and she was always quite clear to Kelly that she did not believe in God. The disconnect between her parents' divergent approaches to faith kept Kelly from finding her own way to God until she was a young adult.

Surprisingly, it was her college courses that opened Kelly to God. She read studies about the power of prayer in healing, and studies that showed that people with belief systems have better outcomes in happiness, health, and intact marriages. She had always felt a connection to God since childhood, but these studies opened up the possibility that God was real, "just these little things that were kind of like, you know, how can there *not* be [a God]?" She has been trying to fill in the gaps in her Christian knowledge ever since.

But her upbringing kept her from wanting to talk about her faith with others. Kelly was the group member whose 'house of faith" was a fortress with a giant moat and a crabby woman peeping out of the door, saying "What do you want??? Go away!!!" As Kelly explained, "That castle's there for a reason." Kelly's father always condemned her mother for her atheism, and after they divorced, he would tell his young daughter that her mother was going to hell for not believing.

Kelly began to cry as she told this story in the concluding interview. "I don't know why he would do something like that. But I was always like, my thing was, how can there be a God that condemns good people?" She paused to wipe her face and eyes with a tissue. "So that was a very deep-seated fear, and you know, at the time, it was just my mom and me. I'm an only child. So that was terrifying, and still is, I think."

So it was surprising to me that Kelly chose to have her faith conversation with her mother. The minute she began telling me about the conversation, Kelly started crying again. She said she wished her mother didn't feel so isolated as an atheist in a predominantly Christian nation. And she also thought it might be scary for her mother that Kelly had chosen this different path, this path of faith. So even though Kelly had

planned to have her conversation with an atheist friend, one day her mother started asking Kelly about her faith.

"You know my mom has wondered … how did I come to this? But my mom is still … you know … I think if she would sway any way, she kind of believes in Native American [spirituality], like believing in the earth. But we were together and my mom just got real serious. It felt like it might be a juxtaposition in our relationship, and I felt like I had to navigate it carefully. She asked me if I've been a believer for a long time, and I said, 'I think I have. I remember praying as a child. So I think it's always been there but now I have the time and courage to kind of explore it and figure it out.'"

Kelly's act of evangelism was small, but true. It fits into Brueggemann's taxonomy of evangelism. Who God is, how God came into Kelly's life, happened off-stage, quietly but powerfully enough to convince her to follow Christ. But then the moment came to proclaim God's work in her and to live in whatever reality followed that proclamation. (Brueggemann, 1993) She practiced evangelism as Gortner describes it, "Evangelism is naming your own journey to love with the living God, wherever it takes you, and naming the presence of the Holy in the journeys of other people you encounter." (Gortner 2008, 34)

They talked a long time, and Kelly's mom was concerned about what she might say to her grandchildren, who are being raised in a Christian home. "My mom was like, 'If they ask me, I'm going to say my beliefs, I'm going to be honest.' Which is kind of, you know, scary." And at the end of the conversation, Kelly felt that her mother knew that Kelly did not condemn her for not believing. "And that's a concern I have about talking

to any of my atheist friends about religion. I'm very tight-lipped about it. Because the first thing I think comes to people's minds is that they're going to be judged."

Then, just a few days after the conversation, Kelly's mom was talking to her granddaughter, Kelly's middle daughter. The little four-year-old was saying something about God, and her grandmother said, "Where is God?" or "How do you know?" And the granddaughter replied, "You know, Deedee … in your heart." Kelly started crying again as she told this story. "And my mom is like, 'That makes sense to me. That God's in your heart.' My mom was like, 'I can buy that. You know. Just in your heart.' My mom has always had to take care of herself, and I always feel like she has a wall up, even towards me. So it was neat that my four-year-old was able to infiltrate that a bit for her."

Kelly stands poised between a number of forces at play in her spiritual life. She is still new to faith, sporadically attending an Episcopal church, while also "church hopping" -- as post-Boomers often do -- in two other Bible studies, including one at a theologically conservative church. Her own Christianity is still evolving, and her statement of faith to the group, as she noted, was conventional, with "not very much of my own input in terms of how I view Him or see Him." Still, in the end, she said that "just because I believe in one God doesn't mean that everyone has to believe in that God." Kelly's greatest shift from participating in the group conversations was through hearing everyone's unique stories and realizing that "we are all on different points in our journeys. There are no set rules to how this plays out. It's OK to be not following the rules exactly or to let go of the judgment that I feel so much of faith has. I just hate that piece of it."

Her parents and their very different spiritual paths – particularly her mother's atheism – have made Kelly afraid of doing or saying anything that might sound judgmental. She

does not want to condemn her mother, or anyone else, for a lack of faith, or to believe in a God that might condemn her mother to hell -- even as she longs for her mother to connect to God, even as she hopes her mother will accept Kelly's own journey of faith and not condemn her either.

Vulnerability – The Cost and Promise of Speaking of Faith

One of the themes that emerged most clearly in this project, from the Faith Café through to the concluding interviews, was the theme of *vulnerability*. Vulnerability appeared as graffiti on each Café tablecloth, along with notes like: *It's hard to put into words. How does one talk about faith? I'M DEFENSIVE. The stakes are so high -- the danger of reaching out and bringing people into your safe space. Conversation stops when faith used as sword or shield. People don't like to disagree, and there's lots to disagree about…vulnerability…warlike rhetoric…staying quiet, retreating, shutting down.* There was a sense that speaking about faith might open one to attack, with not only the attendant discomfort of conflict, but also with the very real feeling that it would not be one's ideas under assault, but one's very self. Damage might be done: to relationships, to the other's opinion of the believer, even to the believer's own sense of self-worth and security. The cost of speaking of faith -- only to expose one's vulnerability -- was a major obstacle to Café participants' interest in talking about faith.

So vulnerability emerged immediately in the conversation group as an issue of concern. The group worked carefully to establish ground rules that would protect the dignity of each participant and make the sessions a "safe space." And vulnerability continued to crop up in the dialogues that followed. Brené Brown is a research professor

at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (and also a faithful Episcopalian!). She has spent the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame, and out of her research, she has defined vulnerability as *uncertainty*, *risk,* and *emotional exposure*. (Brown 2012, 34) She claims that vulnerability is at the core of all human emotion, and that our fear that the costs of exposure may be too high is what makes people close off and shut down. She says we reject vulnerability because we associate it with bad feelings: fear, shame, and disappointment.

Brown started out studying shame, and she learned that vulnerability is the flip side of shame. She says that shame is fear of disconnection … that what we've done or failed to do can make us unworthy of love or connection. It is an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." (Brown 2012, 68) Julia, another group member, even brought up Brown's work in the second session, connecting it to her realization that, "when I'm feeling unstable or disconnected, when I'm doubtful that God loves me – that's when I feel most reactful to hurtful things people say to me."

Many of the comments around vulnerability in the group related to the fear of experiencing shame: the shame of being *exposed* as a person of faith, the *uncertainty* around one's faith and the inability to articulate it, the *risk* of caring that much about God and one's spiritual life, as well as the *risk* of being labeled as one of "those"-- evangelists, street preachers, judgmental authority figures, conservatives, haters. To feel shame is to feel disconnected, Brown says, and the desire to stay connected, to feel loved, to feel like we belong, causes us to fear and avoid shame. It causes us to create great fortresses with deep moats and cranky doorkeepers, so that we might stay safe and unassailed.

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The feeling of vulnerability in the group was compounded by some of the very forces in play upon post-Boomer spirituality. The five forces identified by Flory and Miller -- 1) their upbringing as children of Baby Boomers, who passed their skepticism of institutions on to their children; 2) their membership in the global community, which leads to tolerance of different faiths; 3) their lives in the digital world, which provides rapid, global access to people with varying ideas of "truth"; 4) the failure of institutions to act ethically, which leads to cynicism; and 5) the rise of postmodernism, which leads to a sense that truth is relative and you can pick what you want to think or believe (Flory and Miller 2008, 7-10) – created a sense of *uncertainty* and anxiety in the group members. If all points of view might be true, what if your point of view is no truer than anyone else's? What if the church is a corrupt institution based on a fantasy, and you are a fool for belonging to it? What if Buddhists, Muslims, Wiccans, and atheists are all on equally valid paths to God? Then what does that say about the validity of the Christian way? What might one say about Jesus -- the Way, the Truth and the Life -- when you believe that there are many ways, many truths, many lives?

To speak about faith is to *risk* a truth claim – in a world that questions whether there is any one truth. It *exposes* a believer. Cherie said to the group, "It's *so* different growing up where you're constantly talking with people and trying very hard to sincerely value what they're saying and believe, that sometimes when you get down to something as specific as Jesus, all of a sudden you're putting your own markers down and saying, 'Here we are… here's what I'm saying.' Sometimes it gets a little tense."

It did get tense for Kelly when she laid down her markers and exposed herself as a person of Christian faith. She risked an encounter with one of the most influential human

beings in her life – the woman who birthed and raised her, an only child with a single mother. And *juxtaposition,[2]* the word Kelly used to describe the moment when her mother asked about Kelly's faith, captures this tension. It was a placing of two things side by side – Kelly's faith and her mother's atheism – and it would reveal whether this relationship would stay the same or become different. That word acknowledged the power of the gospel to disrupt relationships, as Jesus says in Matthew 10:32-36. Acknowledging Christ before others can bring not peace but a sword, can set a daughter against her mother, and can even make foes of the members of one's own household.

Instead, Kelly's risky moment of vulnerability created a connection around this question of faith. She was able to describe truthfully where she was on her faith journey while empathetically accepting that her mother would be honest about her own lack of faith. Brown describes connection as an antidote to the disconnection of shame: "When we reach out and share ourselves—our fears, hopes, struggles, and joy—we create small sparks of connection. Our shared vulnerability creates light in normally dark places." (Brown 2012, 159) It worked because the relationship between this daughter and this mother could bear up under the risk of vulnerability. Brown says, "When it comes to vulnerability, connectivity means sharing our stories with people who have *earned the right to hear them*—people with whom we've cultivated relationships that can bear the weight of our story." (Brown 2012, 160)

Brown also holds that there is a spiritual aspect to connectivity. She said in a video interview, "I don't think you can do this without spirituality. For me spirituality is this deeply held belief that we are inextricably connected to each other by something greater

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[2]The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines *juxtapose*: "to place (different things) together in order to create an interesting effect or to show how they are the same or different." http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/juxtapose?show=0&t=1406296466 (accessed July 25, 2014).

than we are, and that is love and compassion…and to me, that's God." (Brown 2014)
And following Brown's simile -- that these small moments of vulnerability linked by a
fundamentally spiritual connectivity are like "twinkle lights" of love and hope – then
surely the next tiny light on the strand was the moment when Kelly's daughter, that four-
year-old evangelist, told her grandmother that God lives in your heart, and her
grandmother said, "I can buy that." As Gortner writes, "We as children and grandchildren
are also evangelists in our families–to our siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, and
uncles...Children, youth, young adults, and young parents are often powerful witnesses to
God the Lover of humanity." (Gortner 2008, 59)

When You Don't Have All the Answers – Alejandro's Portrait

As a child, Alejandro used to go with his parents around the streets of his city in Peru,
knocking on people's doors and telling them how to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved.
He used to preach; he used to teach in church. His parents had him earmarked as a future
pastor in their Evangelical denomination.

Then something went awry. He entered high school, then college in the United States,
and he began to come to terms with his sexual identity as a gay man. "I stopped talking
about faith. I wouldn't talk to people about faith issues, because my own faith was
becoming more different than the church I belonged to, and I wanted to respect people in
their faith communities or whatever philosophy of life they had, and I just didn't want to
engage."

It was a traumatic time for him, changing the smooth, easy-flowing river of his life
into a torrent of rapids, with one great big waterfall – right at the end of his undergraduate

career. "The Holy Spirit in my life did not look like the people around me, right? And obviously that meant that something was wrong with me. And God wasn't answering." And so Alejandro went over the falls, and his life was forever changed … including his life of faith. "I know there was a place for God, but first he was there in the way I am supposed to understand him, and then he wasn't there in the way I was supposed to understand him. And so now I'm trying to figure out if he was really there, and I'm asking questions."

Alejandro had been attending the Episcopal Church for about a year when the Faith Café was held. Abigail had encouraged him to join the choir -- where she had found spiritual community -- and Alejandro had been warmly welcomed by a group of people of various ages, ethnicities and sexual orientations. It was a faithful, welcoming, non-judgmental group – a safe place to land for someone whose childhood faith was in tremendous flux. "I don't really know how to characterize my relationship with God right now, or Jesus," Alejandro replied to my initial question about his current state of faith. "It's not that I don't have one, just that I don't really know how to describe it."

And then he attended the Faith Café, and things began to bubble and shift. I walked through the church building that day, an hour after the Café ended, and Alejandro and Abigail were huddled in a corner, their dark heads bent together, still talking intensely. "Oh Pastor Kit, you have started something now," Abigail said as I passed them. They looked up at me, and both had tears in their eyes.

Later, Alejandro told the conversation group that his Café experience helped him see that it was time to tell his parents that he was attending an Episcopal church. "We had these conversations at the Café tables about the Episcopal Church and reason, scripture

and reason. And hearing other people talk about faith in a way that was expressed differently from how I was taught growing up. There was a lot of 'yeah, I might have been taught that at one time, but that's not what I think now.' In my tradition, a Christian looks in certain ways and talks in certain ways and believes certain things and acts certain ways, so having that opportunity to hear other people talk about different ways…" gave him the impetus to begin to speak about faith and challenge the theology of his past.

Much of that challenge went on within Alejandro himself as the group conversations developed. It was a powerful experience for him to hear people with such a wide range of life experiences and a wide range of beliefs that ranged from liberal to conservative theology. "In some ways I think maybe mine was the most conservative," he said later, in our concluding interview. "And I felt good about that. Because when there were people who would say things that didn't resonate with me, or when my first instinct was to disagree, that gave me an opportunity to self-reflect. Why do I disagree so strongly? What are my bases for disagreeing? What do I believe about those bases?" He was simultaneously supported by the other LGBTQ participants and their own struggles with faith, while also challenged by the more liberal participants who struggled with the very person of Jesus. When they said things like, "I don't relate to Jesus," Alejandro went back to his student group house ruminating on these questions of belief -- so that when he prayed, he was much more conscious of whom he was addressing in prayer. "Like why would I sit down and say, Jesus, Lord Jesus, or Father? Why would I do that?" It helped him to encounter the Trinity more deeply, he said.

The challenges of the group also led Alejandro to interrogate the Apostles' Creed for the assignment at the end of the sessions. He approached it thinking it would be easy …

"I believe this, you know?" But then he looked deeply at it and began to think, "Well what does this mean? And I feel like I engaged with it. So while yeah, my beliefs are these, what's written there, I have a better understanding of what those words mean to me. Because of those conversations in the group, I've been able to raise some of those questions…what does that even *mean*, Creator of Heaven and Earth? What does it mean that He's Creator, and like, in His role?" And while his beliefs ended up classically Trinitarian, he left with more questions than he had at the outset – about good and evil, right and wrong, sinfulness and repentance. And he realized these questions can only be worked out in Christian community. "Resisting evil is something that – as I understand God, with my community of faith – then I can understand what evil is, and what resisting evil means."

When it came time to have a conversation with someone who does not share his faith, Alejandro took this same inquiring disposition into the conversation. Riding to a conference in Cincinnati with his housemate, a Muslim from Sumatra, Alejandro said, "We never talk about faith. I have never really known what you believe. I know you're a Muslim, but you're not like the other Muslims I know."

Alejandro, who had learned to listen for subtleties and differences in Christian theologies in the group, now listened to his good friend talk about the subtleties in his Muslim theology. He listened to the similarities between his friend's ideas of God and the ideas about God offered in the group – that God is a loving, caring, supreme being who isn't interested in sending people to hell. His friend must be on a very liberal extreme of the Muslim faith, because he believes that the rituals of Islam and the rituals of any other faith are equivalent ways to connect with a deeper essence, a universal God that

encompasses all faiths and redeems all people. That was a sticking point for Alejandro, who still holds the idea that there is justice and judgment for good and evil deeds. "I was like, well, what about people who still do bad things? And who gets to define what is good and bad? Like for some people, the way I express my love is bad. So we talked about that."

So Alejandro -- who was once a child who had all the answers and was quick to tell people how they could avoid hell and get to heaven – has now become a young man who has many questions and who has learned to listen to and appreciate others' journeys of faith. Even his parents' – "as a result of the group, I can be less 'oh, they're so close-minded' and be more 'this is how they understand faith. This is their understanding,' and it doesn't need to be all bad. It wasn't all bad. It was positive for many people who found solace and refuge. But it was very, very exclusive of someone like me, which was bad." In the postmodern model of cross-cultural evangelism that Steve Hollinghurst advocates, Alejandro is now more likely to embark on two-way listening and two-way conversation between another person, another faith, another culture, and his own. (Hollinghurst 2010).

In the spring, the bishop came for confirmations, and Alejandro knelt before him, received the laying on of hands, and claimed his identity as an Episcopalian, someone who relies on the three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition and reason, someone who now values questioning, inquiry, and comfort with ambiguity. When the bishop met with the confirmands prior to the service and asked, "How many of you think you might one day have a call to ordination?" Alejandro answered that question clearly. He said, "I do."

Not Having All the Answers – A Path to Ideological Consciousness

Alejandro came into the group unclear about his relationship with God. But he thought he might find more clarity through these conversations about faith: "Something may change in me, something will change in me, in what ways I don't know, but it's the experience that matters, when I get to reflect and talk and learn from others." He came, as the others did, willing to engage in dialogue and conversation that could turn out to be transformative in how they might understand their faith and how they might then speak about it with others.

In the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and his colleagues, dialogue is the place where self emerges. For Bakhtin, self is by nature "dialogic," and meaning emerges as different voices and different ideologies encounter and dance with one another along the boundaries between speaking and listening people. Tzvetan Todorov quotes Bakhtin -- *I achieve self-consciousness; I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another, and with another's help* -- as he explains how Bakhtin develops a theory of self-awareness through dialogue, a self-awareness which is created both in our external communication with others --who help us create a fuller picture of ourselves--and also in our internal communication with the voices, people and teaching we carry with us in our mind and memories. (Todorov 1984, 95-97)

There is also another journey in this dialogical process, a journey to ideological consciousness. Writing in the essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin observes that one of the problems with discourse between people is that there is another level of discourse going on at the same time: discourse that emerges from--and is in conversation with--a pre-existing background of voices, contradictory opinions, points of view and value

judgments. That background hangs in the mind of each listener as the speech of another approaches him. That background hangs in the mind of each speaker as she forms and speaks a thought. (Bakhtin 1981, 281) It complicates conversations before a word is even spoken, creating a unique *heteroglossia* in each person, a layered language informed by history, social location, culture, personal experiences, and prejudices.

Coming to ideological consciousness through discourse means bringing this internal language into conversation with others' speech in order to listen to this internal language, test it, and claim it for one's own. "The topic of a speaking person takes on quite another significance in the ordinary ideological workings of our consciousness," Bakhtin writes, "in the process of assimilating our consciousness to the ideological world. The ideological becoming of a human being, in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others." (Bakhtin 1981, 341) There are two categories of speech in play as this selective assimilation happens: the authoritative word--which is the word of religious, political, and moral systems, the word of a father, of adults, of teachers—and the internally persuasive word "that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not by public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code." (Bakhtin 1981, 342) The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these two sorts of "words" determine how an individual's ideological consciousness develops.

For Alejandro, it was the authoritative word that shaped his early life. In his conservative, evangelical upbringing, truth was fixed and unchanging: there was God and the devil, good and evil, redemption and sin, salvation and damnation. He knew himself, through his salvation in Christ, to be solidly on the "plus" side of this ledger. It was only

when he hit the whitewater rapids of adolescence and went over the waterfall--discovering his sexual identity and claiming it--that Alejandro had to question the terms of this ledger at all. For if this fixed and unchanging truth was, in fact, true, then he had landed equally solidly on the "minus" side of the ledger. Bakhtin describes the authoritative word as fixed, closed, and magisterial. It demands we acknowledge it. We encounter it with authority already fused to it. It is located outside of us, coming towards us from the past, a past that is felt to be higher. "It is so to speak, the word of the fathers," Bakhtin writes (Bakhtin 1981, 242), and for Alejandro it literally was *the word of the father,* his father: the preacher, the missionary, the well-known exemplar of the Christian life.

Many of the group participants felt the weight of the authoritative word in their lives, and it emerged in the conversations. As they struggled with the authority of Scripture: "The thing that makes me the most defensive is when people say, 'The Bible says …'", was a frequent refrain. As they explored the question of whether there is a hell and eternal damnation: "Maybe damnation and hell isn't…you know… what they've said it is." As they stretched to make room for other faiths, or even lack of faith, in their theological worldviews: "I have a Jewish friend who's one of the kindest, most giving people I know, but do I have to believe she's damned forever if I believe Jesus is the only way?" And as they reacted to their own religious histories, even if they were not as clear-cut or as conservative as Alejandro's: "I went to Catholic elementary school and there were two images of God, the wrathful, vengeful God that knows when you sin and can come get you and punish you, and the God who created nature and is good like Jesus, and that's God too. And how do you reconcile the two?"

But Bakhtin says that the ideological discourse of others can help break the logjam in ideological consciousness created by the authoritative word. The words of others engage with our internal dialogue, awakening the voice of the internally persuasive word so it may test the "truth" it has received against the ideas and words of others and begin to shape its own truth, its own sense of what is good, what is true, how to be, and whom to worship. "When someone else's ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up. Such discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness." (Bakhtin 1981, 345) Bakhtin says that consciousness begins to become independent, experimenting and discriminating as it first separates internally persuasive discourse from authoritarian, enforced discourse, then begins to set aside the accretions of discourse that don't matter. Over time, one's own internally persuasive discourse begins to emerge. "One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse…A conversation with an internally persuasive word one has begun to resist may continue, but it takes on another character: it is questioned, it is put in a new situation to expose its weak sides, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object." (Bakhtin 1981, 348)

As the group interviews concluded, many of the participants expressed an acceptance of not having all the answers. "What's so nice about the world is that we're so different and on our own journeys," Kelly said. Cherie said as people talked about their relationships with Jesus, it helped her think about how she might explore that relationship over time without having to make a bold, immediate statement about Jesus as her best

friend. Julia said that seeing other people go through this process of spiritual re-evaluation made her more accepting of her own uncertainty and that even with uncertainty, she can still talk about her faith. Abigail said her faith was shifting as she explored all these questions. "There is still the core, the core of Jesus, but everything else like what the Bible is or what about homosexuality, it's like moving ground for me. So what's next for me? Can I ever be judgmental again?"

This process of coming to ideological consciousness is not immediate. It happens over time. When it happens in regard to specifically religious ideological consciousness, this process is also profoundly Biblical: the journey of faith is described as "coming to believe" in both John (John 6:69, 20:29 and 20:31) and in Paul's epistles (I Cor. 15:2, I Cor. 15:11 and Gal. 2:16). It is a process of coming and becoming, one that Bakhtin says carries even greater weight when it moves into the realm of theological discourse because "the primary subject of this discourse is *a being who speaks* (italics mine) …mythological discourse does not, in general, acknowledge anything not alive or not responsive." (Bakhtin 1981, 351) The authoritative word about God, about faith, about the Bible, or about salvation, may seem static and inert. But the God about whom one speaks is neither static nor inert, something the internally persuasive word can come to honor and acknowledge.

This process also was described in parallel fashion by John Westerhoff, as he asked the question, "Will our children have faith?" (Westerhoff 1976) In an abbreviated diagram devised by Maren Lilja (Appendix J), the process is depicted as a series of concentric circles, with the first stirrings of experienced faith at the center, surrounded by affiliative faith, for those, like Kelly, who need the clear support of a community with

strong, authoritative teachings in order to begin to be grounded in faith. But apart from

Kelly, the remainder of the group was actively working through that stage Bakhtin

describes, where the authoritative word and the internally persuasive word come into

conversation with the discourse of others, the stage Westerhoff describes as searching

faith, which is the next circle outward. People in this circle are testing the faith as they

have received it, questioning it, bringing it into conversation with others, with the world

around them, and with their own experiences. This is the circle where one does not have

all the answers, where one has questions and doubts, and one's faith is in flux. This is the

arena where ideological consciousness emerges, according to Bakhtin. This is the circle

that can lead outward, to a fully owned faith, according to Westerhoff.

When the power of the authoritative word begins to wane and to be incorporated

along with the internally persuasive word into a person's emerging ideological

consciousness, then there is room for questions, toleration for not having all the answers.

As Alejandro listened thoughtfully to his Muslim friend, he said he was "making

connections by myself," as his friend spoke, listening for the similarities and differences

in their beliefs, not trying to convert him to Christianity. Instead, he told his friend about

his past history as a child evangelist, and instead of saying it was a bad experience – as he

might have done prior to the conversation group – he said that it wasn't all bad, and that

church was a positive experience for many people. He became more interested in seeing

the gradations between the black and the white boundaries of his early faith. He also

awoke to the need to pursue the questions he did have about faith, but not desperately. "I

know I'm not going to get an answer today or tomorrow or the next day, but my faith is

about the pursuit of the knowledge of God, or closeness to God, and I feel like that definitely was a big change from the group [experience]."

And he articulated his own, new understanding of the word "witness," a significantly different understanding from the one he grew up with: "Witnessing for me is a way to share my testimony, like where I have come from. Where I have been, and where I am now, and where I want to be. And if somebody asks me about my faith, if there's an opportunity to talk about what faith means, I can do that and acknowledge the things that I don't know, the things I'm still questioning."

Speaking One's Own Truth – Blake's Portrait

From the moment he joined the conversation group, Blake spoke with a kind of direct honesty that touched and challenged the other participants. In the first conversation session, he told the group that he had lost his job as a high school teacher and had been unemployed for the better part of a year. He didn't know what might happen to him next. For the remainder of the sessions, and on into his life in the congregation after the project ended, Blake struggled – with his past, his present, his self, his beliefs, and even with God – to speak his own truth, even as that truth developed and grew over time.

A year prior, I would not have imagined Blake wrestling with his faith so honestly along with other people from All Saints. He had found this Episcopal church for his family five years ago, when he and his wife – "two pro-choice, pro-labor, pro-women's rights Christians," as he put it – no longer felt comfortable in the Catholic church. But after his family joined, Blake started to hang back, even as his wife dove right into church membership and church activities. I challenged him on it one day at a parish Christmas

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party: "Where are you on Sunday mornings when your wife is bringing your two children to church?" And he told me then of his debilitating insomnia, his long journey of trying to find relief for it, and how Sunday mornings were often his only time to catch up after a week of nights with only three or four hours of sleep. I should have realized then that honest speech was one of Blake's defining characteristics.

It was only after he lost his job that Blake became more engaged in church life, tackling a variety of building projects around the parish and becoming one of the cadre of men who cook breakfast once a month. And with a little prodding from his wife, he signed up for the Faith Café, and then for the conversation group, and he began to really think about what his faith meant.

But he didn't want to talk about it outside of the safe space of the group, or outside of the intimacy of conversations with Episcopalians he knew and trusted. In the very first conversation session, he explained that "from my earliest religious experiences to today, the amount I talk about it to other people has declined. I talk about it less to people at this point in my life than at any other time. I basically never discuss it."

Blake told me more about this early experience in our concluding interview. His big frame shifted uneasily in his chair, and his almond-shaped, brown eyes gazed down at the table as Blake told how--in his childhood--he had an intense, evangelical conversion experience. His agnostic parents did not attend church, but they didn't mind Blake going off with friends to a Baptist church, where he was 'saved.' "At first, it was like an amazing experience. I felt a spiritual experience. I felt connected. I was talking to people. I was worried that everyone I knew who didn't go to church was going to go to hell. It was like this fervor. I'm like seven years old."

But then he went to church camp, where people tried to re-convert him. "Everyone wanted me to be saved, even though I said I had been saved. But they didn't care. They needed as many notches on the belt, and as many times as you wanted, you could re-live this. And it made it feel phony." They also told him his mother was going to hell, because she wasn't going to church. And that put him off Christianity entirely.

Blake describes it with words of shame: "I made a fool of myself. Because I was so excited about this thing called Christianity, and then I came to see it as something like a joke, which made me feel like a joke." These painful feelings return when he feels "the urge to evangelize. That old emotion comes up. I feel like I'm always cautious against that now." These feelings cohere with Brené Brown's definition of shame: *Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.* (Brown 2012, 69) The pain of shame can create a deep desire to avoid those painful feelings in the future, so it is to Blake's credit that he came back to Christianity again, slowly, and very much on his own terms.

Blake joined the group as a Christian who does not pray to Jesus. He was very clear about that. "I pray to God. I consider myself a Christian because I wish to try to live the life that Jesus encourages me to live in the gospels." But as the weeks passed, he started to question this stance. He began to think about Jesus in different roles. He wondered why he does not just say, "Hey Jesus, it's Blake." His "Jesus issue," as he described it, appeared in the drawing of his "house of faith." In the drawing, Jesus has a tiny house next to Blake's big house, and a stick figure Jesus is walking toward Blake's house, even while under "MAJOR Questions," Blake has written "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus?" "I've been in turmoil over my thoughts about Jesus," he told the group, as he shared his drawing.

He also joined the group wondering if his individual, idiosyncratic relationship with Jesus and Christianity made him somehow not a "real Christian." He thought of himself as a "humanist who would like to be Christian, who likes the Christian story, but I'm not a 'real Christian.' I don't have the feelings and experiences that 'real Christians' have."

But being part of the group changed that for Blake. Hearing other Christians share their doubts and struggles made him feel that his doubts did not exclude him from Christianity. That his struggles with Jesus ("I'm in love with the Jesus story, but I don't know what to do with Jesus.") might actually be drawing him closer to Jesus. "Our group made me uncomfortable with that. I don't know if that's my permanent state, or if it's pushing me toward being where I could pray to Jesus."

It also made him feel uncomfortable with his silence about faith. In the last conversation session, I asked the group "what is the good news?" Blake later said that made him feel angry, because he had created a faith for himself where he never needed to evangelize, and my question challenged that assumption. After he lost his theology of hell and damnation, he lost his driving force to speak about faith. But the group conversations stirred him up. "I've kind of had what I would call a spiritual resurgence, and that's made me think that there's a good news that needs to be passed on. Enough that it makes me feel uncomfortable that I don't like to talk to people."

So, like Kelly, Blake chose his agnostic mother to speak with after the sessions were over. His father died when he was ten, and he said that his mother had been a lifeline for him his whole life. But while she has always been tremendously supportive of Blake's family's participation in church, she has never shown any interest in religion herself. When people tried to talk about faith with her, when her own parents were dying and in

hospice, she took it very badly, saying, "You want them to do this song and dance at the end? They never believed it in life. You're saying they need to believe this to have their lives validated?" Faith was a touchy topic in their family.

But Blake made an attempt. He was at her house, painting a room, and they spoke for about a half an hour. For the first time, instead of just talking about what went on at church, Blake spoke about his actual religious beliefs, what the group had meant to him, where it had led him. She listened without criticism, but Blake left the conversation feeling bad about himself. He felt bad because he didn't ask his mom about her own thoughts on religion, and he left with no more insight about her faith or lack of faith than he ever had. He also felt bad that he somehow couldn't bring himself to invite her to church. All those old feelings returned, and the same words of shame popped back up as he described this conversation, including the word "foolish" in three separate comments.

But Blake did not let this experience silence him. Something had shifted for him after the conversation group ended. He took on a major role as a lay worship leader of a new 5 p.m. service I started last winter, leading portions of the liturgy in conjunction with Alejandro and another parishioner. He also volunteered to coordinate the homilist schedule, and one week, when he could not find a homilist, he stepped up and did it himself. The text was John 4:6-26, Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Blake stood there in the small chapel, clutching a few sheets of paper tightly. He read quickly, but earnestly. He began to tell his story, speaking his own truth. He told about participating in the conversation sessions, he told about the conversation with his mother and how hard it was to speak about faith, and he told about his sense that he is not a good

spokesperson for Christianity because of his doubts and his dry periods. "Surely," he said, "There are Christians more qualified than me to spread the word."

Then he told about encountering the story of the Samaritan woman, a completely unlikely candidate to speak on behalf of any faith. "Nevertheless, this is the woman that Jesus has sent to deliver his message. One of the things that amazes me is that when she goes to the village, she is still not certain Jesus is the Messiah. Her message boils down to: *here is a man that I met and he might be the Messiah* – she is still not sure but invites everyone to come see for themselves."

Blake blinked as he looked up and around the room, at the sixteen or so people gathered in the candlelight around the communion table. "I find this woman speaking to me today," he said. "She is reminding me that we don't need to be experts in Christianity to spread the good news, and even in the face of my substantial doubts, I can be a Christian messenger. My prayer for today is that God will allow this woman's story to inspire us to follow the example of this remarkable woman. Through her, Jesus is calling us to spread his word. He does not care who we are. All that matters is that we have had an encounter with Christ, and we are willing to speak with others about our encounter. If we can do this much, Jesus will do the rest."

Speaking One's Own Truth – The Power of Testimony

Blake was the oldest member of the group, but at 39, he was solidly in the middle of the Gen X cohort, and his faith reflected many of the qualities that researchers into Gen X religion had observed. While not based in that rich engagement with pop culture typical of many Xers, Blake's theology exemplified some of the themes Beaudoin had noted in

this cohort: suspicion of institutions, including religious institutions; lived experience as a religious context; suffering as source of theology; and ambiguity of meaning in things like gender, reality, and faith. (Beaudoin 1998) And, as Arnett and Jensen discovered in other Gen Xers, Blake was really living his Christianity as a "congregation of one," combining concepts and practices from a variety of traditions in individualized ways, with little to no influence from his upbringing or the formal teachings of any of the religious institutions he had belonged to. (Arnett and Jensen 2002)

His idiosyncratic Christianity sometimes bothered him. "I feel like I'm making stuff up sometimes. A lot of my beliefs are just stuff I've thought up in my head, and I feel like those ones aren't as good. My best beliefs are ones that make sense in my head, but someone else thinks it too." And Blake felt challenged by my question to the group, "What is the good news for you?" because his idiosyncratic faith did not encompass a need for evangelism. But his core commitment to honesty extended to himself as well, and he never let his beliefs or his motives go unexamined. "That question made me have this feeling that, OK, there's something I have to share with people, but I don't know … I'm still working out what it is I need to share."

When Blake stood before the small 5 p.m. congregation that night and talked about the Samaritan woman and our Christian call to speak about our encounters with Jesus, his honesty--his ability to *speak his own truth*--moved into the realm of testimony. Testimony is a Christian practice, described by Diana Butler Bass as "the most democratic—and empowering—of all Christian practices." (Bass 2006, 134) Bass describes the testimonies she heard in the thriving mainline congregations she studied, which were not the formulaic, "I was sunk deep in sin and Jesus took me in," but instead

were unique, unrehearsed, deeply personal stories of how God had gotten all involved in a person's life. This kind of testimony, she writes, "is not about God fixing people. Rather, it speaks of God making wholeness out of human woundedness, human incompleteness… [it] is not a spirituality of arrival, of the certainty of securing eternal life. Mainline testimony is the act of getting there." (Bass 2006, 141-142)

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann writes of the importance of testimony in the new, postmodern world, where the "construal of the world *without reference to God* is intellectually credible and socially acceptable as it never has been before in European-American culture." (Brueggemann 2000, 19) When ancient Israel had to speak the truth of God in de-privileged situations far more extreme than the indifference of our own postmodern era – in slavery under Pharaoh or in exile in Babylon – Brueggemann asserts that it used the genre of testimony (as bid for assent), not proclamation (on an assumption of universal consensus), and testimony not in a Calvinist or revivalist manner, but as in courtroom testimony, where truth is contested and witnesses who may be profoundly contradictory each have a story to tell in the search for the 'truth of the matter.' (Brueggemann 2000, 20) The conversation group participants could be seen as de-privileged witnesses, aware that their construal of God's reality would be measured alongside other construals of reality, each with its own adherents and points of credibility, as Brueggemann describes it. Some of those other construals came from Christianities the group members did not want to be identified with. Some of them came from people of other faiths or no faith at all, people whose lives and opinions were sincerely valued by the group members. So as the participants prepared to speak to others

about faith, each knew him or herself to be one voice among many, one witness for God in a world that has no consensus understanding of God.

It is this de-privileged position that characterizes the Old Testament practice of testimony, Bruggemann writes. Offered by a community of nomads, peasants, and exiles, far from seats of power, Israel tells an outsider's tale that does not mesh with the vision of the powerful. Instead it tells of that strange and irascible Yahweh, who causes barren women to give birth and slaves to be freed, who sends bread from heaven into wilderness hunger, who causes kings to rise and fall, and who cares for the widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land. Israel sometimes offers this testimony to the nations, more often to its children to transmit the faith to a new generation. "Most regularly," Bruggemann writes, "this testimony of alternative truth is offered to members of the community by the community," to sustain and nurture one another in sustaining this contrary vision. (Brueggemann 2000, 22)

Bruggemann says the risk of this kind of testimony is that it comes as a truth "from below" in the face of a stronger, hegemonic truth. And in that de-privileged position, it has particular characteristics. It is: *"Fragile.* It depends upon the nerve of the teller. *Local.* It makes no sweeping, universal claim but appeals to what is concretely known. *Persuasive.* The rhetorical casting aims at winning the jury. *Contested.* It dares utterance in the presence of other claims that may be more powerful and more credible. *Fragmented.* It is only a bit of a narrative that brings with it a whole theory of reality that is implied but left unexpressed."(Brueggemann 2000, 21)

And so Blake stood in a de-privileged position--as a person plagued with doubts and dry spells--and identified himself with the Samaritan woman, someone also in a

societally de-privileged position, but who was able, nonetheless, to speak her own truth about the man she had encountered, a man who *might* be the Messiah. Blake spoke as a member of the community, to the gathered community, as God's children have done for millennia. He gathered his fragile nerve, told his own concretely local story, aimed to persuade the listeners that all of us could take up this same practice of testimony, spoke while knowing others were more qualified than he to speak, and then offered his own fragment of reality for the congregation-jury to ponder.

In almost all of the one-on-one conversations the group participants had after the sessions ended, there was an element of testimony, of *speaking one's own truth*. Blake and Kelly both told their non-believing mothers that not only did they truly believe in God, but they also each expounded, at least a little bit, on the aspects of faith they held to be true. Natalie told her ex-boyfriend that her faith wasn't only about busting down walls of gender inequity, but it was really about her sense of God's presence and God's call to her. Lisa told a friend how her faith undergirded her support of marriage equality, in a conversation she said she never would have had without the group experience. Cherie told her Jewish friend how important her life of prayer was for helping her get through each day. Julia explained to her agnostic fiancé that when she looks at Renaissance art, she sees the Christian story, and told him how that made these artworks not just art, but also vehicles to prayer. Abigail and Alejandro each spoke with Muslim friends, mostly listening thoughtfully and empathetically to how their friends experienced faith. But Abigail at one point explained the Christian concepts of repentance and grace, taking the story about the woman anointing Jesus' feet, which her friend knew from another context, and using that to explain the centrality of Jesus for Christians. Of the nine, two

did not give testimony: Alejandro, because he was listening intently to his friend, and also listening to his own internal discourse as his friend spoke, and Mike, who tried to connect with a colleague through conversation but spent ten minutes "kind of batting around the edges of the subject and trying to get into it, and it was difficult."

These acts of testimony, of *speaking one's own truth,* require an acceptance of *vulnerability* and also of *not having all the answers*. Testimony requires stepping away from the fear of possible shame into a stance that Brené Brown calls 'whole-heartedness,' which "at its very core is vulnerability and worthiness, facing uncertainty, exposure and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough." (Brown 2012, 29) It requires that we "remember that our worthiness, that core belief that we are enough, comes only when we live inside our story. We either own our stories (even the messy ones), or we stand outside of them—denying our vulnerabilities and imperfections, orphaning the parts of us that don't fit in with who/ what we think we're supposed to be, and hustling for other people's approval of our worthiness." (Brown 2012, 132)

Gortner says this is where the heart of evangelism lies: "Speaking our own stories and hearing others' is the first and most basic element of the spiritual practice of evangelism." (Gortner 2008, 170) These stories of God working in individual, ordinary lives – de-privileged, halting, fragile, and fragmented as these stories may be – are the essence of testimony: unique, unrehearsed, deeply personal stories of the truth about one's life and encounters with God.

CHAPTER FOUR

EXAMINING THE WIDER LANDSCAPE: HOW MIGHT POST-BOOMERS BE STRENGTHENED TO SPEAK ABOUT FAITH?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:1-4)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15)

From the outset, the questions that prompted this project were rooted in speech, specifically speech that proclaims the εὐαγγέλιον -- the good news of God's love for the world and redemption of the world in Christ. My questions were rooted in speech because in a deeply theological and Biblical sense, speech is what binds it all together. All of creation is rooted in speech -- the divine speech that calls the world into being. Our

faith is rooted in speech -- the spirit-infused speech that calls the church into being. The future of that faith is rooted in speech – the evangelistic speech that can call the good news forward, into the future, to generations yet unborn.

The future of our faith (as well as our churches!) is in the hands of these postmodern generations, the post-Boomers, the Generation Xers and Millennials. And as research indicates, this is a time of crisis for the future of faith. One-fifth of the U.S. public and a third of those under 30 are now religiously unaffiliated, and those numbers are increasing rapidly. And of those religiously unaffiliated, the vast majority – 88 percent – is not interested in finding a faith that would be right for them. (Pew Forum 2012, 9-10) How the good news is sent forward—if it is sent forward at all--to those generations that will be born into this increasingly indifferent world will depend on not only what post-Boomer Christians do in their lives of faith, but also on whether – and how -- they will speak about their faith.

So I turned to speech, to guided conversations, as a way to test whether adult Christians under age 40 could develop an authentic language and confidence in speaking about faith, and thus be able to articulate their beliefs and faith to peers, friends, and family members who express no religious preference. The project was designed as an experiential learning opportunity as outlined by Laura Joplin, according to her five-stage model (focus, action, support, feedback, and debrief). (Joplin 1995, 15-19) Specifically, the "action" aspect of the experience was based in speech, in guided, "sacred conversations" that were designed to help participants articulate their own faith in such a way that they would gain comfort and confidence in speaking about their faith with others. From the first exchanges around butcher paper-covered tables in the Faith Café to

the final private interviews I had with each of the "Speaking of Faith" group participants, conversation was the method I used to try to help a small group of Midwestern, mainline Protestant, post-Boomer people of faith to develop this language and confidence. And conversation was the method they then assayed in their own individual dialogues with people they knew who did not share their faith.

As an exploration into ways that evangelistic speech can be nurtured and fostered in post-Boomers of faith, this project demonstrated that an intentional process of sacred conversation can help people develop the capacity for articulating faith and speaking about that faith with others. Because it was only an exploration -- a probe -- into this issue, and not an evangelism training program, it does not begin to answer all the questions about how post-Boomers of faith can become better evangelists to their peers. However, the project did provide a deeper look into the barriers experienced by this group as they considered how to speak of faith with others, even as it helped participants to overcome these barriers in their own speech about faith. It also raises issues for further consideration on how to proclaim the good news to future generations, issues that become more pressing as these post-Boomers of faith come into full maturity here in the early years of the twenty-first century, at the dawn of the post-Christendom era.

The Power of Speech – Testing the Thesis

My thesis statement proposed that: *If Christianity is to be passed on to future generations, the ability of young adult Christians to talk comfortably about their faith*

with their peers will become crucial as Christendom fades and our culture becomes more

secular. People who do not know how to express their beliefs in their own words will not

be able to talk comfortably about their faith with others. Since the act of talking about

faith is essential to the work of bringing others to know Christ, I think that by

participating in "sacred conversations," adult Christians under age 40 will be able to

develop an authentic language and confidence in speaking about faith. Thus, they will be

able to articulate their beliefs and faith to peers, friends, and family members who

express no religious preference. For this small group of post-Boomer Christians, this

conversation process began to do for them what I had hoped it might. They began to

develop an authentic language for speaking about their faith. They all expressed a sense

of increased confidence in speaking about their faith. And they all attempted – with

varying levels of success – to articulate that faith to another person.

Developing an authentic language

As they began to speak and to listen to one another in the conversation sessions,

developing their own authentic language of faith, the conversation group embarked upon

a process of constructive theology. Rather than exploring systematic theologies, with

doctrines neatly explicated and laid out for generations to ponder and debate, the group

headed out into uncharted terrain: its members' own embedded and unarticulated beliefs,

where doctrines and traditions from childhood and adolescence collided with lived adult

experience, with twenty-first-century American culture, and with each individual's own

struggle to live as a person of faith in a religiously incoherent, post-Constantinian

context.

In *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, the Workgroup on Constructive Christian Theology describes this approach to theological inquiry. "Our goal is to be constructive. We are not interested in merely describing what theology has been; we are trying to understand and construct it in the present; to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today's world. In doing so, as with any construction job, we are attempting to build a viable structure. In our case, that structure is an inhabitable, beautiful, and truthful *theology.*" (Jones and Lakeland 2005, 2)

The Workgroup describes an individual's beliefs as a sort of internal countryside, as "the complex, mental world of our deeply-held beliefs about God – a rather large territory, to say the least. Next, try imagining this world of beliefs as a landscape -- a vast and complex terrain holding within its borders all those images, stories, concepts, practices, and feelings that make up the sum total of 'what we believe in.'" (Jones and Lakeland 2005, 9)

In the discussion sessions, the participants became a theological cartography team, helping each other to define and delineate a "calculable form upon a messy, indeterminate terrain and thereby impose enough order that [they could] reflect on it." (Jones and Lakeland 2005, 12) In the Workgroup's metaphor, doctrines are theological maps that describe and make sense of this inchoate terrain. While the participants did not create a comprehensive, systematic outline of classical doctrines, each member did produce a personal statement of faith at the end of the conversation sessions. Drawing on the Apostles' Creed and the following five questions in the *Book of Common Prayer's* Baptismal Covenant, these statements required each participant to write first, a description of God as that individual understood God at that moment in time, and then, a

series of statements that indicated what kind of life was required of that person in order to follow and be in relationship with the God he or she described.

This practice of exploring and critiquing the tradition while standing within the Christian tradition was recommended as a theological strategy for Gen Xers by Tom Beaudoin, writing at the end of the twentieth century. He challenged Xers to recover a renewed sense of religious tradition as a check on the urge to create an individual, customized faith. Beaudoin asserted that "tradition does not trample us; rather, it engages us intimately and personally…Xers must continually return to the resources of their inherited or freely chosen religious traditions, bringing them into the light of their own experiences of living in culture." (Beaudoin 1998, 153) As they presented their own faith statements, the group participants concurred that the sessions had helped them to begin to chart their faiths, and that these statements, as their own rudimentary theology maps, were constructed with the voices of the other group members, as well as the authoritative word (as Bakhtin would name it) of tradition echoing in their heads.

Increasing confidence in speaking of faith

The participants also expressed an increased sense of confidence in speaking about their faith with others. Both at the end of the sessions and also in the concluding interviews, participants said things like, "I feel a lot more ready to have a conversation with people who aren't Christian," or "It helped me to be more aware of whether or not I am talking to people about my faith," or "I was given some tools to think about it in the group and to begin to ponder and formulate, well what will I say, how will I do this?" And more than six months after the sessions ended, Lisa wrote in an email: "Before the discussion group, my faith felt like a weight, very heavy, like it was holding me back.

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And since then I feel more a part of it, and feel that it is a part of me, as opposed to before, where it was something that I did and something that I was expected to do. I haven't sought out conversations on faith, but when it comes up, I am more willing and able to talk about it." Natalie reported six months later that as she dated new people, she was excited to talk with them about her faith and how important it was for her. "I think that the faith group really helped me to think critically about this, and to feel more comfortable sharing in situations that I otherwise wouldn't have shared in."

Sometimes, just practicing something makes it easier. Music teachers and coaches know this, and it can also be extended to the practice of speaking about faith. In *Transforming Evangelism*, Gortner recommends that people practice talking about faith by talking to themselves about God. "With a faith that stresses the incarnational reach of God into the gritty nature of creation itself as a habitation, talking about God should be as easy as talking about an apple, or bread, or a friend. We simply need practice." (Gortner 2008, 139-140) The act of talking to other human beings in the safe space of the group provided practice sessions for the participants. I tried to construct these sessions to be as holistically kinesthetic as possible, considering that people were sitting around a table talking. I varied the prayer techniques at the beginning of each session, from silent centering prayer to group *lectio divina*, to the monastic office of None. I used exercises that activated both the right brain (the River of Life and drawing faith as a house) and the left brain (bringing in artifacts and creating personal statements of faith). And the activity of listening – ears open, mind focused – and speaking – lungs moving air through vocal chords, tongue and teeth and lips shaping words – along with both laughing and crying, all brought the bodies of the participants into play. The process was as much kinesthetic

as it was intellectual or spiritual, working the practice of talking about faith into participants' muscles, organs, and neural pathways.

But speaking about faith is not the same as talking about an apple, or bread, or a friend, as the participants revealed when they talked about the barriers that they felt impeded their ability to speak about faith. The possibility of experiencing shame, rejection, and disconnection from others was a very real deterrent to participants. Some of the group members, like Blake, felt as though their faith was not valid, that they were not "real Christians," because they did not profess a well-structured, orthodox Christianity, and that therefore they were not adequate to the task of speaking of faith. The experience of participating in these group sessions helped to reduce these barriers for participants, particularly the barriers related to *vulnerability* and *not having all the answers.*

The participants' move from the silence of shame to a willingness to speak indicated a shift into a more whole-hearted stance, as Brené Brown would put it. She explains that "there are many tenets of Wholeheartedness, but at its very core is vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough." (Brown 2012, 29) Accepting uncertainty or ambiguity is so key to this whole-hearted approach to life that it is number five in Brown's list of guideposts for wholehearted living: *Cultivating intuition and trusting faith: letting go of the need for certainty.* And through her research, she "quickly learned from the interviews that faith meant … *a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty."* (Brown 2010, 90) Sharing their uncertainty, understanding that none of them had all the answers about faith, and

realizing that all of them had some doubts or struggles was very reassuring to participants. The practice of speaking and being heard with non-judgmental acceptance helped them to know that it was possible to experience these kinds of conversations without being shamed or rejected. And the ability to create their own statements of faith gave them a place to stand, even as they accepted the ambiguity that surrounded those statements. Furthermore, most of the participants also stated that the process strengthened their faith in God, using terms like "spiritual awakening" or "deepening" to describe the experience. Thus, they walked into that place of mystery where they could believe in what could not be seen, and they let go of their fear of uncertainty, just as Brown described it. Having explored and accepted their *vulnerability* and inability to *have all the answers*, they developed the confidence necessary to begin to speak about faith.

Speaking of faith with others who do not share that faith

Finally, in addition to expressing this increased confidence and deepening faith, every one of the participants succeeded in having some kind of a conversation with another person about faith. Gortner writes that evangelism requires three spiritual practices: "I will remember my own wonder, joy and gratitude. I will speak; I will tell my stories. I will meet other people listening for the Holy in their lives." (Gortner 2008, 48) As they entered into these conversations, some remembered, some spoke, some simply listened attentively to others' description of the holy in their lives. There were no guidelines or outcomes or goals set for these conversations, apart from the simple direction to have a conversation about faith with someone who is known to you, but who does not share your faith. The purpose of these unstructured conversations was to build up participants'

comfort in having conversations about faith, and also to test if the experience of speaking in the group helped when it came time to speak with others.

Some conversations were lengthy, like Cherie's exchange with her Jewish friend from childhood, which helped to add a deeper layer of knowledge and trust to an existing relationship. Some were fraught with tension, like Kelly's and Blake's conversations with their non-believing mothers. Natalie even tried it twice, drawing on the confidence from her first conversation with her ex-boyfriend and risking a second conversation with her thesis adviser. And some dialogues just never got going, like Mike's conversation with his co-worker: they both agreed it was good for people to have a religious life, but they could go no deeper or farther than that. An interesting twist occurred in Abigail's and Alejandro's conversations with Muslim friends. They used the non-judgmental listening techniques that they had practiced in the group, encouraging their friends to speak about their faith, and listening with kind regard to their friends' faith stories, much as they had listened with kind regard to the faith stories of the conversation group members, without doing too much speaking themselves.

While the shape of my conversation project was different from the process Gortner outlines in *Transforming Evangelism*, there were some similarities. Participants explored their own spiritual stories through the River of Life, Spiritual Workbench, and House of Faith exercises and readily connected their experience of God to times in their own lives when God had supported and sustained them. They also learned to listen with honesty, curiosity, and openness to the thoughts and experiences of others in the group, even when – as with Alejandro – they disagreed with what another person said. This is an example of what Gortner terms "evangelical listening," which is "deep and respectful listening to

the life stories of others and seeking out signs of the presence and work of the Holy

Spirit." (Gortner 2008, 133) While Gortner recommends a community organizing

approach to this sort of listening, asking people about their everyday concerns and

perspectives, the group participants who approached their friends with a "listening"

posture asked directly about the faith journey, experiences, and beliefs of the other.

Alejandro remained in this listening posture, but Abigail and Cherie had moments in their

conversations where they *spoke their own truth* about their prayer life or the importance

of Jesus to them in their own faith.

The group participants naturally embarked upon what some describe as "relational

evangelism." In Kujawa-Holbrook's article on a variety of relationally evangelistic

programs, she refers to the Diocese of Massachusetts' definition that relational

evangelism is "a life-long spiritual practice that is the ministry of *all* to recognize the

power of God in Christ to transform our lives and communities, and then being willing to

share those stories of God's grace in others." (Kujawa-Holbrook 2010, 18) This practice

also involves listening, getting to know another well through hearing his or her stories,

and then offering one's own story in turn. Like Steve Hollinghurst in Britain, Kujawa-

Holbrook sees this kind of relational evangelism as crucial for young Americans as well,

who are also living in an age of religious pluralism. "Rather than deny religious

difference, relational evangelism equips young adults to be secure enough in talking

about their own faith to engage actively and authentically in interreligious dialogue and

community action for the common good." (Kujawa-Holbrook 2010, 21)

The most successful conversation entrées for group participants were statements that

relied on existing relationships, like, "I have been part of this group at my church and I

have an assignment, will you help me? I need to talk to you about faith." Or "You know our culture is so strange. We talk about so many things, but not faith. Would you talk to me a bit about your relationship with faith?" Approaching a friend, family member, or colleague with a stance of *vulnerability*—of needing help with a conversation about faith, or of wondering honestly about another's faith--proved to be disarming and inviting, opening up the conversations of Natalie, Cherie, Alejandro, and Abigail. For Julia and Lisa, it was as simple as naturally introducing the topic of faith into ongoing conversations about art or marriage equality. For Blake and Kelly, their ongoing and intimate relationships with their mothers created a deeper layer of tension, although they bravely pushed through that layer, each to articulate a faith position. But for Mike, none of these strategies was effective, and the conversation dwindled.

Enduring effects of the "Speaking our Faith" project

After the conversation sessions were over, most of the participants exhibited new behaviors and understandings of their faith, which they traced to their participation in this project. Blake, Alejandro, and Abigail became worship leaders at the new 5 p.m. service, and both Blake and Alejandro gave homilies at that service that indicated both an ability to *speak their own truth* and also an acceptance of *not having all the answers*. Their *vulnerability* in those homilies served as a model that inspired other lay homilists to use personal testimony in their own homilies, as well. Abigail and Alejandro also expressed a deeper longing for more theological study, and I sent Abigail off for the summer with an approachable systematic theology text, while Alejandro spent the summer reading Doug Frank's *A Gentler God,* "which has certainly thrown me for several loops," he wrote in an email, "as it helps me frame many of my Evangelical root beliefs into cultural, historical,

and theological perspectives. It has helped me make my spirituality be real and present in who I am - not just in things I do or things I know."

Julia left the group still hungering for a way to reconcile *not having all the answers* with a desire to *speak her own truth*. She joined a small group of younger adults from church that dubbed themselves "recovering evangelicals," to seek support in developing new understandings of God. Cherie became inspired to deepen her involvement with the Sunday School and asked to learn to tell Godly Play stories, specifically so that she could practice them at home, sharing her faith with her young daughters this way. Lisa said her faith was strengthened; it feels like it now belongs to her. And she has been far more regular in attendance at worship. Natalie has started talking frequently to her friends and dates about her faith and how it undergirds her work in the academy and in the church. And Mike and Alejandro agreed to be trained as conversation group leaders, to start small groups around these same conversation sessions as I expand this project into the wider parish. Kelly is the only member of the group who has not demonstrated an increased commitment to her faith life. She has been moving houses, keeping children out of the way while her husband prepares for the bar exam, and she reports that she is too busy to do anything more than that.

In many ways, the effects of the project were as far as one could imagine from that "saving souls for Jesus" and "getting notches on your belt" approach to evangelism that Blake described from his youthful experiences. No participant knowingly made a Christian out of anyone or even invited someone to attend church. But the project did bear out the claims of my thesis. Participants did begin to develop authentic language for speaking of their faith – their doubts and questions, as well as their convictions and

beliefs. They all expressed and demonstrated a higher level of confidence in speaking about their faith, as well. In their conversations with others, not all of them were able to articulate that faith coherently or successfully, but an interesting development I had not foreseen was the growth in listening skills. Open-minded, non-judgmental listening is one of the keystones of relational evangelism, and as the project helped improve participants' ability to speak, it also improved their ability to listen. Of the barriers to speaking about faith that participants identified –a lack of experience/discomfort with the Bible/wanting to remain open-minded/dealing with doubts and struggles/cultural taboos against speaking about faith – almost all were addressed by the project, with the exception of Scripture. The conversation sessions surfaced participants' struggles with Scripture, but the sessions were not designed to address the wide scope of ways that one might make peace with this large, ancient, and complicated body of text.

My thesis also did not anticipate the power of this kind of conversation to awaken spiritual longings, deepen faith, create connections, and inspire engagement. The participants expressed transformative joy in what they learned and how they grew, in the depth of their relationships with one another, and in their desire to learn more about God and be more engaged with the life of the church. There is power in this kind of safe, non-judgmental, guided conversation. It can open the way for Christians of any age to deepen their faith.

The outcomes of the conversations with this group demonstrate the urgency for the church to find models that will equip all of its people with the confidence to *be* the church now and going forward. For a long time in Western Christianity, the standard evangelical model was the old "carrot and stick": the carrot of eternal salvation and right

relationship with God, combined with the stick of the threat of eternal damnation … and during Christendom's peak, of living outside the dominant religious culture. The "stick" no longer plays well in American society of the twenty-first century, which has become increasingly secular, tolerant, and pluralistic. The push for greater justice and equality in society – for African-Americans, women, LGBTQ people, non-believers, or followers of other faiths – has created a parallel in people's religious understandings. Why should God condemn people whom a growing majority of the American public is coming to see as worthy of equal treatment and respect? So if the "stick" of eternal damnation is no longer a motivator in secularized, interfaith, post-modern, twenty-first-century America, Christian evangelism in this context will have to focus instead on the "carrot": the promise of joy, resurrection life, and sense of life's purpose that comes when one becomes a follower of Jesus Christ. People will want to know the truth of God's redeeming love -- not that *I am so bad, and I need to be saved from eternal condemnation.* But *I am loved. I am connected. I have a purpose in my life. I was put here for a reason. I am not alone. My struggles will be redeemed*.

Helping Christians discover that joy, understand the power and promise of resurrection life, and deepen their sense of life's purpose is the work of the church in the future. But, as Walter Brueggemann observes, this is risky business. "Evangelism is no safe church activity that will sustain a conventional church, nor a routine enterprise that will support a societal status quo. Evangelism here as understood is an activity of *transformed consciousness* that results in an altered perception of work, neighbor, and self, and an authorization to live differently in that world." (Brueggemann 1993, 129) The desire to speak the good news thus begins first in one's own heart, as one's

consciousness is transformed and one understands this Word to be truly Good News. Evangelical speech therefore must be deep and true. It requires the ability to be vulnerable and also to be shame-resilient. It can no longer be speech about "saving souls for Jesus," but about "sharing souls in Jesus." And that speech is best done in safe, open-minded, whole-hearted conversations.

The conversations among group members in my project began to do this important work. So much so, that it became clear to me that anyone in my congregation could be strengthened by participating in sessions like these, and that they need not be limited to a certain age cohort. The outcomes of the conversation sessions inspired me to launch these sessions in the wider parish, with trained lay leaders taking small groups through the five weeks of conversation about faith. Five members of the parish agreed to be trained to lead these sessions. Two of them were participants in the conversation project – Alejandro and Mike.

Implications for the Future and Issues for Further Consideration

Mike's interest in facilitating these kinds of conversations grew out of his experience in the group and his growing understanding that post-Boomers are responsible for the future of the church. "We the people under 40 gathered in that room, we are the next generation of leadership and evangelism and potential for the church," he said in his concluding interview. "The church is constantly renewing itself with each generation, and we are either part of that renewal or part of standing back and letting it fall. So it almost feels like a trust fall exercise for the church. The church is constantly falling into the arms of the next generation of people who are catching it."

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As the church takes its trust fall into the arms of that next generation, the numbers of arms extended to catch it are dwindling. The rapidly changing American religious landscape is one of increasing ignorance of and indifference to Christianity, and all the research points to post-Boomers as the primary contributors to the numbers of the ignorant and indifferent. It is clear that "sacred conversations" will not prove to be a magic bullet to solve all the evangelical problems of the twenty-first-century mainline churches; however, these guided conversations on faith with this small group of post-Boomers helped to surface both challenges and opportunities for proclaiming faith into the future, as that future now falls into the arms of those Xers and Millennials who do believe.

Challenges in developing a post-Boomer evangelism

Challenges that face the post-Boomers of faith (particularly in the more liberal, mainline denominations like the Episcopal Church) as they learn the spiritual practice of evangelism are both cultural and internal. The conversations in my project revealed that the taboos against publically speaking about faith are strong, emphasized by both the wider secular culture, and also by denominations that have neglected to foster and teach evangelism. The growth of the Evangelical movement over the last thirty years -- with its cable television networks, high-profile preachers, conservative political activism, and megachurches -- only serves to crush any desire among mainline, liberal Protestants to evangelize, because they fear becoming identified with that aspect of Christianity. The influences of the secular, postmodern, multifaith culture also deter evangelistic speech in post-Boomers. The forces noted by Flory and Miller -- including skepticism of institutions, tolerance of other faiths, rapid global access to a variety of ideas and

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"truths", and a postmodern sense that all truth is relative (Flory and Miller 2008) – were actively in play in the group participants' faith lives, and the research on these generations indicates that they are typical among their peers.

But the internal challenges are also powerful, and are, perhaps, more difficult to identify and address, partly when the topic of faith is perceived as so personal and private, and is kept unspoken and unaddressed. Members of the group either observed or personally experienced the ways that Christianity can be used as a club: Kelly's father telling her that her mother was going to hell for being an atheist; Natalie's neighbors saying "What church would *have you?*"; Julia's lingering image of God as an ever-vigilant father figure like her own father, waiting to "whack you" if she messed up; Blake's Jewish friend being told she was going to hell for not believing in Jesus; Lisa's religious school training that presented an almost bi-polar God who was either "nice like Jesus" or about to punish her for sinning. The shame of being judged by other believers and found wanting, or the shame of possibly being identified as a judgmental Christian, or the shame of being exposed as a person of faith, when that faith was deep and tender, unspoken and often unformed – all created a sense of profound *vulnerability* in the participants when it came to speaking of faith. Any approach to evangelism training with this age cohort must address this vulnerability and fear of being shamed, and must offer ways to build the "shame resilience" Brené Brown describes as necessary in order to live as vulnerable people.

This sense of *vulnerability* was also fostered and influenced by the anxiety of living in a postmodern, multi-faith world. Group participants wanted to remain accepting of their peers of other faiths, or no faith at all, without insisting that the eternal salvation of

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these peers was dependent on whether or not they became Christian. Thus, articulating Christianity as a truth claim seemed closed-minded and judgmental to them. At the same time, participants described their own Christian faith as important to them, but they did not know how to express it for a variety of reasons: fear of making exclusivist claims, discomfort with and ignorance of the Bible, and their own doubts and struggles with their faith. Participants from more evangelical backgrounds (Abigail, Alejandro, and Julia) were more able to articulate the tenets of Christian faith, but much of their understanding of that faith was under massive revision and reclamation as they moved into a more liberal Christianity. Participants from mainline traditions (Natalie, Cherie, Laura, and Mike) or little to no religious upbringing (Kelly and Blake) had the most difficult time figuring out how to articulate their faith, even when it turned out that they were better-grounded in Scripture and Christian theology than they had believed they were.

Catechesis is thus a crucial element in helping to form post-Boomer evangelists. But catechizing and forming these generations is a challenge. They no longer grow up in a single denomination or faith tradition. Church-hopping and church-shopping, as Wuthnow describes, (Wuthnow 2007, 114-116) they are exposed willy-nilly to a variety of understandings of Christianity. Increasingly, they grow up in no faith tradition at all, and they may somehow stumble into it as they mature--like Kelly and Blake--with no real background in the teachings of Christian faith. Yet this is the same generation that is leading the rapid decline in church attendance (Barna 2014); therefore, reaching and catechizing post-Boomers through traditional church classes and sermons is becoming more difficult. It is possible they would actively seek education and formation – either in church or through books or online sources -- if they knew what to seek, and if they were

hungry enough for the knowledge. And so having an active and engaged faith, a sense of the presence of God, the longing for a closer relationship with God, and personalized catechetical support could motivate post-Boomers into seeking a deeper knowledge of the Christian tradition. Thus, to begin with those post-Boomers who are already engaged with a faith community – to help them nourish their own faith, sense of God's presence, and longing for deeper connections to God – is a logical starting point for any long-term catechetical or evangelical strategies with these generations.

Opportunities for developing a post-Boomer evangelism

This is where "sacred conversations" like my project can help. The project started farther back, as it were; it did not begin by teaching of the tenets of Christian faith or the texts of Scripture. Instead, it began where the data tells us post-Boomers live in regard to faith, whether or not they are churched: in their basic connection to God and their struggles to discern how God matters in their lives and how their lives might matter to the world. The majority of post-Boomers are still spiritual, still believe in God, still pray, and still want to explore the difference between good and evil. (Pond et. al. 2010) But before you can catechize, you have to awaken the hunger for more knowledge, and the project did that. It aided these post-Boomers to explore the faith they already held, helping them develop a sense of God's presence in their past and in their present, an awareness of their faith as something alive, growing, and developing, and also a language to express that faith whole-heartedly, so they could rise above their fear of shame. In the process, they experienced the presence and power of God, the support of Christian community, and a desire to engage more fully with their life of faith and with the life of the church. It was a process of fanning the sparks of faith already glowing inside these post-Boomer

Christians, so that those sparks might begin to burn more consistently and intensely. It might also provide a model and a direction forward in working with seekers, spiritual tinkerers, and skeptical Christians who feel a hunger for the divine, but whose faith is still unformed, inchoate, and contingent.

It is important to begin farther back, because we cannot assume that most of our church members are mature Christians, grounded in their faith, deeply engaged with the worship, preaching, and teaching of the church they attend. Barna Group offers a sobering discovery:

Although people cite their primary reasons for attending church as growing closer to God and learning more about him, Barna Group finds such closeness is a rare occurrence. Fewer than two out of ten churchgoers feel close to God on even a monthly basis. Additionally, while almost two-thirds of those who value church attendance go to learn more about God, fewer than one in ten (6 percent) who have ever been to church say they learned something about God or Jesus the last time they attended. In fact, the majority of people (61 percent) say they did not gain any significant or new insights regarding faith when they last attended. (Barna 2014)

People are attending church without feeling a connection to God and without learning something about God or Jesus. (One wonders why they come at all …) The need to awaken all of the faithful, help them connect to God, then lead them to catechesis is important. But it may be particularly crucial and challenging for post-Boomers, who all too often are not likely to be rote attendees at churches that do not inspire or educate.

We might also expect post-Boomers to be far less comfortable in the inner circles of the Westerhoff model. (Appendix J) While they might appreciate the acceptance and love

of a faith community that is characteristic of *experienced faith*, their distrust of authority, combined with a sense that truth is relative, will mean that they might not want a "faith community with a clear sense of identity and authority." This will make *affiliative faith* a difficult posture to sustain. The post-Boomers we find in more liberal, mainline churches will be far more likely to move quickly into the place of *searching faith,* where doubt and critical judgment are characteristic, and people are testing the community's faith-story and practices. For Xers and Millennials already practicing their own, internal "religions of one," combining religious traditions and teachings for themselves, (Arnett and Jensen 2002, 451-467), the faith stories and practices of all kinds of faith communities are already on trial.

Rachel Held Evans's viral blog post, "Why Millennials are Leaving the Church" outlined post-Boomers' frustration with the rigid, authoritative teachings of evangelical churches. Her list of complaints reflected a generation already working within the circle of *searching faith*:

We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against. We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers. We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation. We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers. You can't hand us

a latte, and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. (Held Evans 2013)

How a Christian moves from *searching faith* to *owned faith* is important. But it becomes increasingly important for these post-Boomer generations, which will not rest for long in the early circles of developing faith. These "spiritual tinkerers" will build their own faith that matters uniquely to them if they do not discover their faith awakening and growing in traditional Christian communities. David Gortner describes an evangelical process that begins in remembering joy and gratitude, speaking and telling stories of that gratitude, then meeting people and listening for the Holy in their lives. (Gortner 2008, 48) All Christians, but particularly post-Boomers, with their questioning, idiosyncratic spirituality, need to do this remembering with one another, under the leadership and guidance of individuals familiar with the tradition. If these post-Boomers are already in the stage of *searching faith,* then they are coming to ideological consciousness, as Bakhtin outlined it. They need dialogue and conversation. They need other voices to help them distinguish between the authoritative word of everything they have been taught or experienced and the internally persuasive discourse emerging in their own consciousness in dialogue with others. This is no light task but "an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values." (Bakhtin 1981, 346) This is the struggle in which post-Boomers of faith find themselves in this pluralistic, relativistic, secular society.

The faith communities where they have found spiritual connection are where these conversations need to happen. And this is why evangelistic speech must eventually lead to an invitation to join such a community. Gortner distinguishes between the danger of viewing a specific church -- with its building, people and programs -- as a promised land and the potential of seeing it instead as a refuge, a way station, a spiritual outfitter that can support and strengthen Christians who are on their own pilgrimages through life. The invitation of evangelism can then be not "join my church—it's so cool," but "come with us on a journey to learn and experience more on the Way, to see God with others who are seeking." (Gortner 2008, 149) But any church can only be as powerful a guide or teacher as the people who comprise it. Therefore, it is vitally important for congregations to create a strong "holding environment" where existing members can make their own journey from *affiliative faith* to *owned faith*. It then becomes equally important for role models and faith mentors who exhibit *owned faith* to be trained and equipped to facilitate these kinds of conversations in actual congregations.

This is an opportunity for the Episcopal Church to create these kinds of mentors in these sorts of faith communities. In many ways, this denomination is well-equipped to provide the kind of spiritual outfitting that post-Boomers are seeking on their pilgrimages. The Episcopal Church affirms and teaches the faith of the ages—in 2009, the General Convention even enshrined it in the Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation[3] -- while still inviting inquiry and independent thought. To invite post-Boomers into a pilgrim's journey in the Episcopal Church is to invite them into a tradition where they can discover the scaffolding of tradition and Scripture upon which to

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[3] The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation may be found at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/
default/files/downloads/formationcharter_8.5x11_f.pdf

stand as they build their own faith -- using their reason and experience to construct that personal credo they will insist upon, yet building it upon the teaching of two thousand years of Christianity. However, even with these inherent strengths, the Episcopal Church will not be able to meet the challenges of evangelizing and catechizing these post-modern seekers without also building communities where a significant number of members – regardless of generational cohort -- have moved to *owned faith*. Congregations made up in large part of people comfortable in an *affiliative faith* will not be able to support the enquiring and complex spiritual development of post-Boomers.

In faith communities where many members have an *owned faith* – along with fellow spiritual travelers who are already deep into their own pilgrimages, and who can act as guides and mentors – post-Boomers engaged in sacred conversations can, in essence, evangelize themselves as they learn to identify the Holy in their lives and identify it with the particularly Christian vocabulary and theology that will help them understand and name these experiences as God, Christ, or Spirit working in their lives. Only by talking it through, listening to one another and also to the movement of the Holy Spirit binding them into the Body of Christ, can they become, as Gortner describes, evangelists "like the early Christians, who were passionate about Jesus, flexible in translating the gospel to meet people where they were, open to the Holy Spirit's transformation in their lives, committing themselves to the living God, willing to go anywhere people gathered … and engaging in personal conversations regularly with others." (Gortner 2008, 49, 50)

The church is already taking its trust fall into the arms of the next generations, the faithful post-Boomers. What they will do with the church, or with Christian faith apart from institutional churches, is still unseen; the church is still falling into the future. We

can only share our faith with them as we know it, and help them to give voice to the faith already alive within them. What happens next is veiled from us, as Walter Brueggemann writes: "In every generation, the transmission of the blessing is not only problematic, but laden with mystery. The process of transmission into the next generation is not fully accomplished through human intentionality. Thus Isaac comes late to his blessing…. I find these stories important models for our own intergenerational work. They affirm to us that the arrival of the blessing is well beyond our control. One cannot dictate the shape of faith to the next generation…there is a freighted mystery between the generations which cannot be penetrated." (Brueggemann 1993, 108,109)

But without Abraham's commitment to God's promise, without his willingness to travel wherever God led, and without his investment in the future (finding a wife for Isaac so the next generations could, in fact, emerge to be blessed), there would have been no transmission of the blessing at all. So we too, like Abraham, must travel forward in faith -- bearing the blessing and remaining faithful to the promise, trusting that our work today will bear fruit far into the future, in the lives of those generations yet unimagined, yet unborn.

AFTERWORD

A PORTRAIT OF THE PASTOR AS RESEARCHER

The transmission of the blessing from one generation to the next may be fraught with mystery, as Walter Brueggemann notes. However, without Abraham's constant presence in the life of his son Isaac, and without his concern for the future of the blessing, that blessing would never have crossed the very first generational divide. And just as Abraham was essential in transmitting the faith to Isaac, so too have I been fortunate to play a role in this attempt to pass on the faith on to the generations following my own. The position of priest, mentor, and researcher is a privileged one, and I engaged in these conversations and explored these questions from that distinctive location.

In portraiture -- the method I adopted for analyzing this qualitative research project – the person of the researcher is part of the narrative, part of the portraits that are drawn to analyze and summarize the research. "The self of the portraitist emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights," Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot explains in her depiction of the process of portraiture. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 13) In fact, she describes the researcher's voice as *the research instrument* (italics mine), echoing the researcher's self and present in every assumption, preoccupation, and even in the framework that is brought to the inquiry. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 85) She outlines six ways that a portraitist might use voice to develop a text. As I reflect on my own role, relationships, and voice over the course of this project, three of those dimensions are intriguing to me: *witness, autobiography,* and *dialogue.*

Voice as witness*:* Lawrence-Lightfoot defines this use of voice as that of a discerning observer, newcomer, stranger, or boundary sitter. A witness can sit on the edges of a scene, watching as it develops, while systematically gathering details of behavior, talk, and expression, noticing and drawing out perspectives that might otherwise fade into the background. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 87-88) This use of voice has been the most comfortable and familiar for me in this process of researching and writing the thesis. I am a journalist by training and trade. For more than twenty years, I went into situations as a stranger/observer, asking questions, describing details, drawing connections and painting portraits of a variety of people and places. Whether that was following a wolf researcher up a hillside in Isle Royale National Park, or sitting in a city council meeting listening to an endless debate on setbacks, I was the one watching for the story, listening for the story, telling the story, even placing myself *inside* the story when appropriate – but always in the position of a witness and an observer.

My invitation to the group members to participate in this research, to draw pictures, to answer open-ended questions, to speak in a group setting with others, and to speak privately in interviews with me helped to empower my parishioners to speak theologically and to name their own experiences with the divine. My role as listener and conversation facilitator – drawing out their stories and ideas about God – without imposing my own narrative or theology upon them – felt to me like the way Mary Clark Moschella describes listening in *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice:* "a primary duty of love … a means of grace, as it brings forth stories through which people make sense of their lives and become aware of the larger reality." (Moschella 2008, 144) And even

when I wanted to interrupt the flow of conversation or blurt out my own thoughts on a topic, my years of experience as a professional journalist provided me the ability to silence that desire in order to facilitate the dialogue between group members. The group conversations and subsequent interview sessions belonged to the participants. It was their speech, their stories, and their lives that mattered in that setting, much more than mine.

As a pastor, priest, and researcher, however, maintaining the stance of the discerning stranger was not always possible. As Moschella notes, the role of pastor-researcher can heighten a parishioner's vulnerability and blur the nature of the two roles. (Moschella 2008, 148) My own role as pastor to much of the group (Natalie and Julia excepted, as they were not actual members of the parish) placed me in a sensitive position. I knew about Blake's struggle through unemployment, and I was deeply involved in the pastoral crisis affecting Cherie's extended family. The longer stories told in the private interviews were profound for some of the participants, leading to tears and an atmosphere that was close to that of the confessional.

And at the very end of the last group session, all of these things came into play. When everyone had finished their statements of faith, they demanded to know mine. What would I say to this question about who is God and how we should live in relationship with this God? In Chapter Two of this thesis, I drew the portrait of the group as if the conversation segued directly from Mike's comments on Revelation into Cherie's sudden, vulnerable tears. I stepped out of the portrait at that point, fully embracing the role of witness and portraitist, in order to focus attention on the interactions of the group participants

To write it in this way was not unfaithful to the essence of the conversation. It *was* Mike's original statement about the truth and the hope of all things being made new that caused Cherie to cry, bringing her grief about her family into the room and connecting it to the great Christian story of redemption. However, it was my own statement of faith and the way I connected my story to what Mike had said that actually triggered Cherie's tears. I said, "When you [Mike] said all that stuff about the mountain of badness and at the end, God makes all things new, that to me is the story of Easter. That really -- out of any anything horrible, at the end there's resurrection. At the end, there's Easter. And the Holy Spirit being whatever connects us. The Holy Spirit has been very present for me in this room as we've talked. In the Hebrew Scriptures, they call it the Shekinah, the presence of God. 'When two or more are gathered, I'm in the midst of them.' When two people sit down, if you're Jews, if two of you sit down to study Torah, the Shekinah of God dwells between you. So I felt like the Shekinah of God was dwelling here among us." At that point, my witness to my experience of God and my sense of the Holy Spirit broke through the barrier of my role as a witness/observer/outsider. As Cherie began to cry and I shut off the recorder, we became simply a group of Christians caring for one another, and I stepped out of the role of researcher, returning fully to my role as Cherie's – and the others' – pastor.

Voice as autobiography: The life story of the portraitist is another dimension of voice Lawrence-Lightfoot delineates. The portraitist's own history, culture, and ideology shape her perspective, questions, and insights. Yet at the same time the *actors* must remain the primary focus, and the portraitist must be alert for the ways her own story

might distort or clarify her vision of them. Thus, the judicious use of personal history becomes part of the portraitist's own voice, bringing her story into conversation with the stories of the research participants. (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997, 95)

The snippet of my own story that I used at the beginning of Chapter One traces some of my own journey in my recent life of faith, looking to the future of the church and trying not to be afraid. It also taps a deeper, unspoken tale of coming to faith that dates back to my teen years, when I was part of a youth group in an Episcopal church that was formational in ways I still cannot fully describe. That group helped me develop my Christian faith and witness. But it also helped me become self-reflective and committed to grow into a healthy, loving human being, into the "full stature of Christ," as the *telos* or vision for my life. It probably struck the spark that led, decades later, to my journey to ordination. And it fuels my sense of purpose -- that I must also help people find these same things along their own journeys of faith. I made this connection several months after the project ended, when I wrote in my field notes, "I realize that this has echoes for me of EYC --- people sitting in a circle talking deeply about important things – how much my faith and my Christianity was grounded in that kind of experience, and why this feeds me. It *feels* true somehow." (Field notes, April 11, 2014)

And so while much of my life experience fueled my ability to facilitate these conversations (my life as a journalist, as a representative of a cross-cultural exchange program, as a teacher in community college, all supplemented by years of seminary training and pastoral experience leading small groups, meetings, and doing pastoral counseling), the passion for it grew out of my own experiences articulating my faith. As a 16-year-old, safe in a small group in the church, guided by two adults -- a skillful priest

and a psychologist (it was an extraordinary experience, and not like any youth group I have ever seen before or since!) -- in the presence of peers whom I could trust *completely*, I learned the power of sacred conversation early and powerfully. Does that mean that only someone with my particular experiences and skill set could lead such conversations? No. And the subsequent experience of training five of my parishioners to lead these same conversation sessions proved to me that it is the power of the group as much as the skill of the facilitator that can sustain these deep, honest conversations.

The second part of my autobiography that informed this experience is noted a little more clearly in the anecdote at the opening of Chapter One. I came into the D.Min. program struggling with my role as a parish priest in a rapidly changing American religious environment, serving in a denomination that does not seem to be keeping up with the changes. The D.Min. program was not merely an intellectual or professional exercise, but it was also part of some deep spiritual and emotional shifts for me both in the way I approach my work, and also in my hope for the future of the faith.

The comment my colleague made about the future of the parish: "What if that's not what they want?" provoked an existential crisis, which then led me to wrestle with that question – and wrestle hard. The companionship of my colleagues in my doctoral cohort helped me make this shift, and particularly their compassionate listening -- their *kind regard* when I was struggling to the point of tears -- demonstrated how powerful the ability to listen is … as much as the ability to speak. All these experiences led, in the end, to this project, which relied both on speaking *and* listening in order to focus on what is important for me now – how is the blessing transmitted? How is the Good News proclaimed? How do we travel together as people of faith into the future, and work for

the future of that faith … not the faith of the Episcopal denomination *per se*, but how do we work for the future of the faith of Jesus Christ?

Voice in dialogue: Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot describes this aspect of voice as the one farthest from voice as witness. Voice in dialogue happens when the portraitist places herself purposefully in the middle of the action, whether that is in the text, or in the field. She describes a symmetry of voice, with researcher and actor together expressing themselves and making meaning. Jessica Hoffman Davis elaborates with examples of how a researcher's conversation can be muted and made more implicit, so other threads can dominate and actors can maintain their own voices. Out of the interwoven voices comes a sense of the dialogue that constructs the narrative. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 103 and 123) In my own writing of this narrative, I tend more towards Davis's approach than Lawrence-Lightfoot's. I want to include the reader in my thought processes and analyses while still allowing the voices of the participants to sound clearly; thus, in the text my own voice as a group participant is muted. However, my voice in the text as an author and researcher is in full dialogue with the reader, as we take together the journey that began with the provoking question, "What if that's not what they want?" and ended with Mike's metaphor of the church's trust fall into the arms of the next generation.

As I reflect on my ongoing dialogues with the group participants from the beginning of the project through to our ongoing life together in the parish today, I believe that two aspects of my life and situation fostered the quality of our conversations. First, that I myself was a student, and that I needed their help and participation. Five of the nine

participants were students themselves or worked in academia, and the solidarity built up

between us as fellow students engaged in research and writing placed us on a more open,

egalitarian footing. For the other four, simply the fact that I, their priest, needed their

honest and committed participation helped them to cross some of the barriers that existed

because of our differences in roles and in generational cohort. Second, the ability to listen

and to reflect back to them what I was hearing, in a way that helped them to trust their

own voices, and their own experiences, and their own relationships and struggles with

God. In many ways, the gift I tried to give them was the gift I received as a teen in my

youth group and also as a member of my D.Min. cohort – the sense that there is someone

there who is *for you*, and who will try to hear who you are and what you're struggling

with, and who will help you bring that to the surface through speech and relationship. I

came to deeply love these people, and I believe they know that I deeply love them. Even

now, when Blake or Alejandro offers a testimony, a homily, at the Sunday Vespers

service, I want to weep with joy and love as they honestly, vulnerably, wrestle with their

faith and speak their own truth.

So what made the conversations "sacred"? Was it simply that we were talking about

God and faith? I think it went much deeper than that. I think it touched what I articulated

at the end of the last group session. When two or three are gathered, the Spirit of Christ is

among them. The crucible, the holding space, constructed by people willing to participate

fully, who developed good group norms, who were held in prayer and who prayed

together, and who were willing to trust me as their leader through these guided

conversations, all combined to create a space where God was able to work. It was this

sense of the Spirit at work that has fueled the deeper engagement of group members like

Blake and Mike and Alejandro, that has generated a deeper interest and participation among the wider congregation in the subsequent rounds of Speaking Our Faith, and that has given me a new passion for my work in the parish. Mostly, I want to sit in rooms with small groups of people talking about Jesus. And isn't that what Christianity has really been -- ever since the beginning?

__Expanding the conversation:__ Six months after completing the initial Speaking Our Faith conversation sessions, I began to train five members of the parish to repeat the experience, to see if it could be replicated, and if it would produce similar effects. I did this by re-running the original sessions with the leaders-to-be as participants. Even though Mike and Alejandro had already participated in my group, we did it all over again with three new members – two parishioners in their early sixties, and a young woman in her thirties. These five then went out in turn and ran five groups going through the same sessions, exercises and questions. While this did not have the immediate effect of turning out forty parishioners passionately committed to exploring their faith, the outcomes were strong enough that I want to continue to pursue this method of building faith and the ability to speak about faith. In early 2015, two of the leaders will pilot Speaking Our Faith 2.0, following up on topics that did not get covered in the original sessions, like prayer and Scripture. In Lent of 2015, several of the leaders will lead another round of Speaking Our Faith 1.0 for those who did not get to participate in late 2014.

What we are learning through this process is that people are craving a safe space to have these conversations. One of the Speaking Our Faith 2.0 groups is a collection of women ranging in age from early thirties to seventies. They bonded profoundly in the

first sessions, and they want to keep going. Enough participants from the other groups are also interested in forming an additional group to have this next round of conversation. However, most of these other interested folks are not post-Boomers younger adults, but Boomers or older, which raises some interesting questions.

As my thesis proposed, how we equip post-Boomers to speak to their peers is going to make the difference in how the Christian faith is carried forward. Exploring other ways to form groups of post-Boomers to hold these conversations is my next challenge as I continue to develop this process of sacred conversation in my own context. As I often say -- with some level of snark -- "Boomers are sucking all the air out of the room." It is time to intentionally turn both the air and also the room itself over to the post-Boomer generations, a process that does not happen easily or automatically, and which requires intentionality and persistence.

For my peers and colleagues in the church, I would say: deeply listen to the faith stories of post-Boomers. This will not only help to equip them to articulate their own faith; it will enrich your own faith life. It will also strengthen your relationships in your congregation. When you know post-Boomer members well – through deep conversations like these -- you can better foster their personal spiritual development and help them to discover ways to live out their Baptismal vocations in their church lives and in their lives outside of church. But know that they will not independently invite themselves into this dialogue; they will need to be invited. And such dialogue will have to have all the qualities these postmodern Christians expect: it will have to be a radically alternative conversation that respects diversity of beliefs and which is rooted in personal experience; it will have to rely on non-judgmental listening first, only then followed by speech; it will

have to be buttressed by a congregational life that embodies the values of the gospel, including practices of justice, peace and inclusion, one that provides a legitimate and authentic alternative to the fragmented consumer lives of First World America.

Most importantly, such conversations must offer the vision of a life that can be and *is already being* transformed by Jesus Christ. Only those struggling with their own faith in the arena of *searching faith* or those who have come to their own understanding of *owned faith* will be able to speak with the authenticity post-Boomers demand. Loving, good intentions are not enough to mentor others in maturing faith. When you listen, when you speak, when you open the life of your congregation, will these younger adults meet Jesus? Without Jesus, there is no program of guided conversation that will help. As Rachel Held Evans wrote: *We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.* (Evans 2013)

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Café summary – theme sheets

Theme: Vulnerability and Safety

Having open spaces where we feel safe – Christians sometimes feel pressured to evangelize – fear of other. don't want to be the other – fear of being judged or making others feel judged – despite different doctrines/beliefs, we all were able to discuss many things which tended towards shared conclusions – Religion/faith=high stakes – faith (and/through/in) relationships, facilitate talking about it, enable formation, where you encounter tension – God as a force to bring people/energy together; what happens when people use God to divide and separate? – Bias against Christians as all evangelical is everywhere (all fields) – The strength of faith, the vulnerability of talking about it – Similarity in our struggles, pressure to be silent w/faith due to peer pressure – need "middle" way to discuss faith – do not be afraid – creating safe spaces to talk about faith, leading by example, presence, witness – faith as animosity/feeling attacked, threatened from other Christians … and as Christians from other people/atheists? Muslims? – Faith and Safety, feeling safe

Theme: What does it mean to not have all the answers re: God?
Feeling the need to defend faith/using faith as a shield/defense caused by doubt – personal relationship or beliefs vs. common/accepted/doctrine, doing Christianity wrong – things are not black and white – there are many paths toward faith – comfort/beliefs re: uncertainty – relationship with God personal, protected, no single path for everyone – fear and vulnerability – humility

Theme: Talking without judgment

What has heart and meaning? Common goal of accepting everyone regardless of belief or lack thereof – relationship with others on a journey – we reach and experience God differently but there is something shared in the conversation around God – go GLOBAL – I don't believe in hell and damnation – what have I learned? communal belief in the expansiveness of God – relationships – talking with those in our own faith community vs. talking with those outside of it – preconceptions don't represent my faith – how to talk about faith: kindness, respect, listening, focus on what is in common – community –understanding-learning-growing – relationship as the venue for sharing God – moderation vs. fundamentalism – acceptance of others past perspectives and current process of journeying, listening without judging, encouraging openness and continued seeking – maybe we need to reduce the stakes by acknowledging them and then disempowering the "cloud of judgment" around faith conversation – being Christ-like as

a part of sharing Christ – seeing past diversity in Christian beliefs – respecting multiple paths to God, engagement with different [a]religions – what is present now? community – afraid of judgment by those with different/no faith

Theme: being able to articulate our faith, the ground on which our faith stands

Knowing our own past and experiences and being open to continued growth – The box vs. excessive openness (theology, walking the fine line) – finding joy in our beliefs and conversations about them. it doesn't always have to be hard, right? – doubts don't make you weak – divine purpose, both clergy and laity are called by God – most share similar perceptions of sharing and discussing faith, but the perceptions come from different things – faith and relationships facilitate talk, enable formation, encounter tension – liberate God from the box – putting God in a box and challenging that box, creating our own faith community – developing strong relationships or friendships is an important way to set the stage for serious faith conversation

Theme: Cost and promise: the courage of living in the tension

Religion and power -- discussing faith without it being a sword and shield requires vulnerability – coming out as Christian – willingness to be vulnerable, have and voice doubts, to have doubts is not weakness – reconciliation – greater clarity and intention about living one's faith – what does it take to set expectations for a faith conversation in the context of a pluralist society? – faith café, we have lots of things in common than we realize … relationship

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Questions

Say something about your current state of faith, where you are in your relationship with Jesus and with the church…

Do you talk about your faith with other people? If you do, who do you talk to and under what sorts of conditions? What do you say?

If you don't, what do you wish you could say to someone else about your relationship with God? What would you prefer to keep to yourself?

What strengthens your ability to speak about your own relationship with God?

What hinders your ability to speak about your own relationship with God?

Name

Age

Ethnicity/national origin

Gender

Educational level attained

Were you raised in a family that practiced a religious faith? If so, which one?

Current denominational affiliation, if any

APPENDIX C

Introduction: My name is Kit Carlson, and I am a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Ministry at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. I am conducting research as part of my project thesis for this degree. My email is pastorkitcarlson@gmail.com. My thesis advisor is Dr. Lisa Kimball and her email is LKimball@vts.edu. You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this project.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to study how post-Boomers talk about faith. I am trying to learn more about how this age cohort talks about faith and what makes this kind of conversation possible.

Procedure: If you consent, you will be asked to participate in five conversation sessions with other people of faith in this age cohort. Following the five sessions, you will be asked to have a conversation about faith with someone known to you who does not practice your religious faith. Following that, you will be asked to participate in a 30-minute interview with me. I will make audio recordings of the conversation sessions and the interviews.

Time required: The conversation sessions will be 90 minutes each, for a total of 7.5 hours. The sessions will run from January 12 to February 9. With the follow-up interview of 30 minutes, total time required is 8 hours of your time.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer questions or participate in conversations. You may also leave the project at any time.

Risks and Benefits: There are no known risks associated with this project. However, if you feel distress in the course of these conversations, please inform me promptly. There is no guaranteed benefit, but it is possible that you will enjoy participating in the group conversations or that you will find them meaningful. This study is intended to benefit the wider Episcopal church by expanding our discourse on sustaining faith in younger generations.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Your name will be kept confidential in all the reporting and writing related to this project. I will be the only person who listens to the tapes. When I write the thesis, I will use pseudonyms – made up names – for all the participants.

By signing below, you agree to participate in the group and follow-up interview, which will be audiorecorded for this research project. If you agree to participate, a copy of this document will be given to you.

_____

Participant's signature   Date

_____

Researcher's signature   Date

APPENDIX D

Group Norms for Conversations
(Established January 12, 2014)

-- Listen as well as you can.
-- Don't jump to judgment.
-- Disagree respectfully.
-- OK to share disagreement, but not to disagree in a personal way.
-- Own and articulate your own feelings.
-- You can talk outside the group without identifying who said what. Strip out
   identifying information.
-- Revisit these norms if necessary.
-- No interrupting. Let each person finish his or her thought.
-- Don't assume … be inquiring.
-- In general, keep your phones off the table and out of your hands.

APPENDIX E

REFLECTING ON THE RIVER OF YOUR LIFE[4]

As you look over the diagram of your life river, think about the different ways you have experienced and understood God across your life.

• Who or what was God to you at the different times depicted in your diagram?
• What caused you to feel closer to, or more distant from, God at these different times?
• What places or situations were encounters with the Sacred for you?
• Have you faced situations or experiences devoid of any sense of God/the Sacred?
• *Decide on a way to note these matters, with words and/or symbols, and place them into your river.*

In relation to your life's journey,
• Are there times of significant pain or suffering – yours or others' – that shape the flow of your life river?
• What has happened along the journey of your life that you associate with evil?
• *Add these elements to your river.*

Rivers do not exist in isolation but are always part of a larger ecology. So, too, is human life situated in a larger world.
• What was going on in the world – local, regional, and world events – that shaped the flow of your river?
• *Using words and/or symbols, place these events in the appropriate locations on your river.*

As you reflect on your river of life,
• What values, commitments, causes, or principles were most important to you at a given point in your life?
• Toward what goals, if any, were your primary energies directed – or, metaphorically speaking, what purposes and ends helped to shape the flow of life waters at a given time in your experience?
• *Note these on your river.*

As you finish depicting your river of life, take a look over the whole diagram.
• Do its symbols and words seem to portray how you think and feel about the whole of your life?
• Is there some important element left out?
• *Make adjustments as needed.*

Remember that no drawing can possibly capture all that shapes a person's journey. This is intended to be a beginning point for reflection and/or conversation, not a comprehensive depiction of your life!

---

[4] Taken from Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls – and Their Parents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 135-136.

SOME HOUSES OF FAITH

Looks pretty
and put together
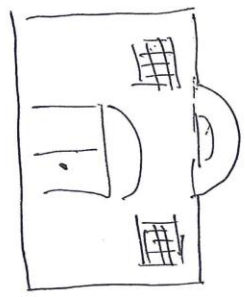
Intimacy &
personal relationships

- A little busy
- missing a few
  things
(Rare prayer)
or reading

Future life
- Future life
  in ministry
- Well decorated
- Well planned
  out
- Help with others /
  service

Bedroom

Living room

Kitchen
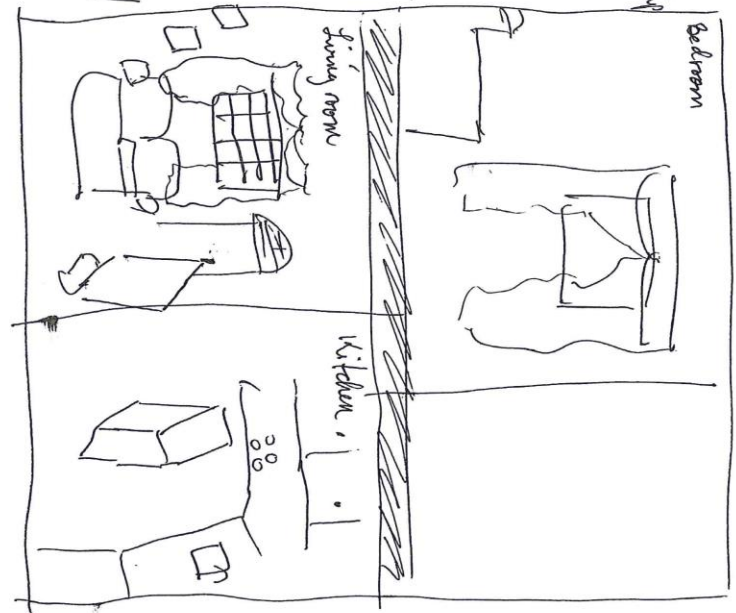
Spiritual front
- Church attendance
- Friends / connections

150

Singing music		
My beliefes are the same of the parts of my past and Room what song	I believe in all paths to god. there is no one right way.	Science as an evolution of Religion
Library Books Bible siddartha Member the Dog	Ritualistic pray Rosary mass Stations of the cross Meditation	Devotion through work gardening

EMPTY Room

BEDROOM — where I [try to] hide

ATTIC, STORAGE — where I keep the tough stuff that I don't want to see the light of day

It takes strength to climb

DOOR was not close [or should not anyway]

difficulty

Comfy chair; happy place

trauma
Doubt
guilt
anxiety
depression

KITCHEN — a place for flow + experimentation; embodiment, sexuality

LIVING ROOM/STUDY — quiet reflection; I see God in my study + my work — look at all the books!

music room

living room

quiet room

maths room

receiving room

The writing room

sympathic room

porch

stairs

basement

deeper questions

Christian Faith Practices Scale (CFPS)

I attend weekly worship services.
I participate in Bible study activity.
I share the Christian story with others (evangelism).
I study the teachings and history of the Christian church.
I pray.
I confess my faults to others.
I forgive and work toward healing relationships with others.
I encourage others, especially when they fail.
I give financial support to my church.
I provide hospitality and care to strangers.
I volunteer time to help those less fortunate
I participate in activities that promote social justice in society.
I discuss Christian response to contemporary issues with other Christians.

Adapted from: Garland, Diana R., Michael E. Sherr and James Stamey. 2009. "A Faith Practices Scale for the Church," Family and Community Ministries, Spring, vol.23, no.1,(http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/145852.pdf).

APPENDIX H

The Baptismal Covenant

(It begins with the Apostle's Creed, an ancient statement of faith about the Triune God. It says basically WHO we believe the God we are in relationship with IS.)

Celebrant   Do you believe in God the Father?
People   I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant   Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
People   I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
               He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
               He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
               He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.
               He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
               He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant   Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
People   I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
      ****

(Five questions outline the Episcopal Church's late 20th Century understanding of what it means to live a life in relationship with the Triune God…what is required of us when we become part of God's family in baptism.)

Celebrant   Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
People   I will, with God's help.

Celebrant   Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
People   I will, with God's help.

Celebrant   Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
People   I will, with God's help.

Celebrant   Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
People   I will, with God's help.

Celebrant   Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
People   I will, with God's help.

(Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305, circa 1979.)

An exercise in your own outline of faith

Who is God?
(What can you say about God, your understanding of who God is ... today ... knowing that any description of God can only be partial—and always culturally and personally contextual--but in a description that is YOURS?)

What is required of you as a person in relationship with this God?
(As a child of this God, or a follower of this God, or as a beloved of this God? What practices, commandments, moral imperatives or commitments does this relationship require of you?)

APPENDIX I
Interview Protocol for Faith Conversation Participants
You participated in the small group conversations for five sessions. You were then asked to talk about faith with someone you know who does not share your faith. This interview is an opportunity to reflect on these experiences and how they affected your ability to talk about your faith.

1) Prior to participating in the conversation sessions, what experiences have you had talking to other people about your faith?

Probes: Positive? What made that a positive experience? Negative? What made that a negative experience? How did those experiences affect your interest in talking about your faith? If no experience... how did it happen that you never talked to other people about your faith?

2) What were the conversation sessions like for you?

Probes: Did any exchanges or comments stand out for you? How did the other participants interact with you? Can you say something about your experience with some of the topics or exercises from the sessions?

After the sessions were over, you were asked to have a conversation with someone you know but who does not share your faith. This part of the interview relates to that conversation.

3) Tell me about the conversation you had with someone about faith.

Probes: Who did you talk to? When? For how long? How did you happen to talk to this particular person? What was it like for you to have this conversation? What did the conversation entail?

4) What connections did you make between the group conversations and this one?

Probes: Was there anything someone in the group said that connected to your subsequent conversation? Did you draw on any of the exercises we did?

As you go forward in your life of faith, I am curious about how this experience will inform your further thinking and speaking about faith. The next questions relate to your future conversations.

5) As you reflect on your interest or ability to talk about your faith, how did this experience affect – or not affect – your interest or ability to talk about your faith?

Probes: Did your comfort level change? Do you think you will talk to anyone else about faith now that this project is finished?

6) What will you take away from this experience?

A SUMMARY OF HOW FAITH DEVELOPS based upon Gene Robinson's interpretation of John Westerhoff's theory of faith development presented in this book, **Will Our Children Have Faith**, first printing Seabury Press, 1976.

OWNED FAITH
KEY: Conversation, witness, interaction with the world.

Typified by "I" statements in regard to faith/beliefs

SEARCHING FAITH
KEY: Critical judgement
Doubt

Need: To push against the known and accepted. Religion of the head is now equal to religion of the heart. Serious study of the "story."

Need: To continue to have Experienced and Affiliative faith needs met – To be affirmed and accepted amidst the struggle.

AFFILIATIVE FAITH
KEY: Belonging

Need:
To witness to one's faith and beliefs in word and deed, responding to the call to ministry and mission.

Need: A sense of community authority. Knowing the community "story"

EXPERIENCED FAITH
KEY: Experience & React
Observe & Copy

Need: Experience of acceptance, trust and love.

Typified by "we" statements in regard to faith/beliefs

Need: A sense that we are wanted, accepted, needed and missed when we are absent.

Need: Experience of awe, wonder, mystery. Religion of the heart. *"Spiritual goosebumps."*

Need:
To commit time and energy to persons and short term causes.

Need:
Experimentation. Exploring alternatives to earlier understandings and ways.

Need:
The help and support of other "oweners" in sustaining and putting faith to work. Identifying individual ministry.

What motivates a person to grow and change?

1. When confronted with situations or problems which are not satisfactorily resolved by the present style and old answers?
2. When confronted by role models or persons who are acting more satisfactorily in an expanded style of faith.

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Phone:_____ ___ __

Email:_____

Title of Content:____Speaking our Faith: Using Sacred Conversations to Develop Evangelical

Comptency in Post-Boomers_____

 Author(s):__Katherine Ann ("Kit") Carlson____

Date Content was Created:____March 2015_____

Description of Content: A review of the literature on evangelism to the post-Boomer generations

(Gen X and Millennials) reveals that neither the generational literature nor the evangelism literature

speaks about specifically empowering and equipping members of this age cohort to evangelize their

peers. To address this gap and equip post-Boomers to speak about faith, this project uses sacred

conversation with people between ages 21 and 39 to build competency in speaking about faith. The

project finds that the practice of speaking about faith in a facilitated small group helps to equip post-

Boomers to have conversations about faith with their peers who do not share their faith.