Trump Can't Be Ignored: A Congregational Case Study

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Ken Bedell
Kbedell@dnaco.net
202 744 3225

Summary

This case study grew out of more than seven years of participation in the life of a suburban Denver United Methodist church. I conceived the project after observing that the political reality created by the Republican Party and President Donald Trump is causing congregation participants to talk about how to respond. The church offers short-term book studies and other small groups. That made it a good site to study in light of the sociology of knowledge and the research on small groups begun by Wuthnow (Wuthnow 1994) and Putnam (Putnam and Campbell 2010). As the study progressed, it became clear that the impact of President Trump on the congregation cannot be ignored. A new hypothesis emerged: congregation participants have not examined the paradigms they use to understand the "separation of church and state" and the authority of scripture and church teaching. So, the sociology of knowledge's tools to examine paradigms in religion and politics offer a place to start in addressing the anxieties that respondents and informants expressed.

1. Introduction

This project falls into the category of a participant observer sociological study. It is about the relationship between religion and government (church and state).

Renato Rosaldo has shaped my understanding of what it means to do sociological research as a participant observer. His experiences as an anthropologist in the 1980s led him to conclude that a social scientist is always a participant observer. Rosaldo challenged the idea that a social scientist collects data and makes observations, then constructs a detached and objective explanation for what is happening. He pointed out that social scientists always bring past experiences and need to openly share them.

In other words, everyone is always trying to make sense of the social environment with its individual relationships, organizations, and social systems. The foundation of any sociological study is the inescapable reality that the sociologist is always a human being and, therefore, a participant observer of humanity.(Rosaldo 1993)

Consistent with Rosaldo's proposal that a social scientist is a "positioned subject," I have sometimes used the first person singular voice in this report.

Focus on Two Questions

In this study I have two questions. The first tests my suspicion that participants in one suburban Denver United Methodist congregation are reexamining what they believe about the relationship between church and state.

The second question is whether two streams of sociology, the sociology of American Christian religious organizations and the theoretical sociology of knowledge, would be helpful if the answer to the first question is yes. Therefore, the following section gives a brief review of the development of these two subspecialties of sociology.

Participant Observation

I have worked in both the government and the church. This means that I was present to observe both settings from the inside. In some cases I made observations about the behavior of people and the functioning of the institution that would be very difficult to identify with surveys or even interviews.

Federal Government

In November 2009 I joined the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office in President Barack Obama's White House, working at the Department of Education as Senior Advisor. The office was the successor to George W. Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This gave me an opportunity to observe how the federal government in one administration interacted with religious individuals and organizations.

Church

I have been a participant in the church since my parents carried me into the Spirit Lake (Iowa) Methodist Church to be baptized during my first year of life. I am an ordained United Methodist minister who over 20 years served congregations in New York, Maryland, and Ohio. I taught sociology and communications at a theological school, was a contract employee at the National Council of Churches, and was an administrator in the national office of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church.

2. Background, Context, and Sociological Literature

This study is based on two streams of sociological inquiry. The first is the scientific analysis, since 1905, of Christian churches in America. This is a branch of the sociology of religion with a focus on how congregations, denominations, and ecumenical associations have responded to cultural and political shifts. Then I review the development of the sociology of knowledge, how individuals and groups come to have the beliefs that they have.

Sociology of Religion

In 1905 Albion Small helped found the American Sociological Society, now the American Sociological Association. He co-authored the first American college textbook on sociology.

His work at the University of Chicago firmly established sociology as an academic discipline. And religion was at the center of his interests. In his textbook he argued that the sociology of religion is important because it studies how Protestant Christianity can be more effective in replacing all other religions in America and around the world. While admitting that American democracy is not perfect, he believed that it was a perfect partner for the only true religion, Protestant Christianity as taught by Luther, Calvin, and other reformers. For example, his approach to diversity was that Blacks in America and Africa should accept white Protestant religion and American-style democracy.(Small and Vincent 1894)

Small was the dominant force in the development of sociology until his retirement in 1925 and death in 1926. As editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*, he was the gatekeeper of what qualified as scientific study of religion. Publishers and universities gave little critical attention to alternative views about the tight relationship between American democracy and Protestant Christianity.

An example of Small's control is that the white club of academic sociologists ignored his contemporary, the sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895, becoming the first African American to be so honored by Harvard. Small received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University six years earlier. Du Bois's work during his time at Atlanta University and as editor of the NAACP journal *The Crisis* was never published, reviewed, or discussed in Small's *American Journal of Sociology*. Yet Du Bois was laying a foundation for many of the advances in theoretical sociology that came from white scholars in the mid-1900s. His 1903 study of the Black church was groundbreaking not just in its content, but also in its invention and use of new sociological methods and theories. (Du Bois 1903)

During the first half of the 20th century, social scientists in both the government and the church took an interest in counting participants in social institutions. In the government, the U.S. Census Bureau was established as a permanent federal agency in 1902. But it was Princeton's Office of Population Research (OPR), founded in 1936, that provided the resources for social scientists to document changes in the demographics of institutions including churches.

Religious leaders saw the benefit of counting people and organizations. The churches were early adopters of collecting statistics. The Federal Council of Churches was founded in 1908. In 1916 the first annual edition of the *Federal Council Year Book* appeared. Thirty-two denominations joined together to promote a shared agenda of progressive reforms that they believed American democracy had not addressed. This was the beginning of a division of Christian denominations, with the Catholics and Southern Baptists not ready to criticize the political establishment while other denominations proposed that theology had priority over politics. The mainline churches that had formerly been the establishment churches were the largest financial supporters of the Federal Council. This included Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Congregationalist denominations.

In 1962 Littell published his study that proposed a timeline for the shifting relationship between American government and Christian churches.

Colonial period through early Republic (1600s–1830s) — The closest thing to actual state churches existed here. Several colonies had government supported churches: Congregationalist in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire; Anglican in Virginia and the Carolinas. In 1791 the American Constitution forbade the national government from telling Americans what church they must follow. However, state governments could still partner with a particular religion as Massachusetts did with the Congregationalists, the church of the Pilgrims, until 1833.

The Protestant "informal establishment" (roughly 1830s–1920s) — This is the period Littell focuses on most. Without legal standing, Protestantism maintained cultural dominance through institutions: public schools that were effectively Protestant schools, the YMCA, temperance movements, Sunday closing laws, the assumption that American civilization and Protestant Christianity were essentially the same thing.

The cracks appear (1920s–1960s) — Littell recognized that the late 1950s marked a turning point. The Protestant churches could no longer assume that Protestant leaders were in a full partnership with American politics and American culture. The early rumblings of the civil rights movement, the increased visibility of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, and scientific advances like public discussion of evolution contributed to a decrease in the authority of Protestant Christians in the public square. The government did not pick up the challenge of defending the Protestants.

The collapse becomes undeniable (1960s onward) — Supreme Court decisions removing prayer and Bible reading from public schools (1962–63) were the symbolic end point. Many mainline Protestants experienced them as the loss of their informal partnership with government and cultural authority.(Littell 1971)

There were other sociologists ready to shout a warning to the leaders of the mainline churches. One was Jeffrey K. Hadden. In 1969 Hadden identified an additional challenge for Protestant Christian leaders. In *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* he documented the beginnings of a split in the churches. The leadership of the mainline churches wanted to influence the policies of the government by supporting specific legislation that addressed civil rights, poverty, education, military spending, and similar issues. Hadden claimed that the middle-class mainline church members were more conservative than the leadership. Progressive politics was not what they were looking for at church.(Hadden 1969)

In the early 1970s other sociologists and commentators pointed to shifts in the church and state relationship. In addition to Hadden's warnings, the French journalist and philosopher Jean-François Revel in 1971 published *Without Marx or Jesus: The New American Revolution Has Begun*. His primary interest was not the relationship between government and religious organizations. But he pointed out that Americans believed in the goodness of their government's structure and practices without depending on a theoretical (Marxist) or religious (Christian) ideology. (Revel 1971) Sociologists of religion did not pick up his ideas; they turned their attention to what could be done about the loss of membership in the mainline churches.

One of the first to pick up the challenge of solving the problems of the mainline churches was Dean Kelley, an executive at the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. Kelley

argued that the reason the mainline churches failed to attract and keep members was that they were not offering people solid ground to stand on. He called it “strictness,” a set of beliefs and practices that were required of all members. This was ironic because, since its predecessor was founded in 1908, the survival of the Council had depended on its ability to adapt to the diversity of the denominations that supported it. Neither the National Council itself nor the mainline partners who paid most of the bills put Kelley’s ideas into practice. The Council continued to be a voice for a progressive agenda that it promoted to the government.(Kelley 1972)

Two decades later David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway put the final nail in the coffin of the strictness hypothesis.(Roozen and Hadaway 1993) With solid statistical analysis they showed that the variables related to whether a particular congregation grows are many and their relationships complex, but theology and “strictness” are not particularly important factors.

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, sociologists identified a new trend: Christian denominations and congregations no longer identified with a specific understanding of the relationship between the church and state. Robert Wuthnow was among the first to point out that denominations did not have a unified approach to the relationship between church and state. For example, in the United Methodist Church there were parachurch organizations, advocacy caucuses, and renewal movements. The participants in these groups, or those who identified with their agendas, called themselves Methodists, but they had very different approaches to how the church relates to the state.(Robert Wuthnow 1988)

Wade Clark Roof surveyed people in their 30s and 40s who had been progressive during the ’60s and ’70s. By the 1980s they were looking for a church experience that addressed their personal spiritual needs. Although they were seeking, they were not looking for a church where they could re-engage with politics from a Christian perspective.(Roof 1993)

In 1990 Duke University Press published C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s *The Black Church in the African American Experience.* It is a massive report of 519 pages. They not only included descriptive material, but they proposed a structure of six polarities that describe the characteristics of Black churches. Unlike what happened with Du Bois’s groundbreaking descriptive and theoretical publications about the Black church, white scholars took notice. Congregations, Lincoln and Mamiya argued, cannot be classified by clear categories like “worship and spiritual care” versus “politically and socially engaged.” Churches are on a continuum. And they are constantly moving along that continuum. (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990)

By the end of the 20th century, sociologists of religion agreed that mainline congregations include individuals with varying degrees of interest in how church participation relates to political participation. However, overall, participants were moving toward interest in how the church addressed their own lives rather than in how the church supported or confronted the government.(Ammerman and Farnsley 1997) And as Robert D. Putnam pointed out, Americans were becoming less interested and involved in civil society. This included both church and politics as well as secular organizations.(Putnam 2000) This “Big

Tent" approach that everyone is allowed to join was not just the strategy of congregations. Denominations were also diverse in their approach to engagement with the state. As well as the official leadership, there were national caucuses and special interest groups. In some cases this diversity was very divisive, such as the decades during which an LGBT+ caucus confronted the United Methodist Church. But for the most part denominations, including the United Methodists, tolerated diversity and special interest groups.

New Sociology of Religion Observations

With a large grant from the Lilly Endowment, Robert Wuthnow studied Americans' participation in small groups. He reported his findings in 1994 in *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*.(Wuthnow 1994) Wuthnow's findings anticipated the "revival of American community" that Putnam's research in 2000 confirmed and developed in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.(Putnam 2000) This was surprising, since up to this point sociologists studying Protestant congregations and denominations had focused largely on demographic statistics. But this line of research showed two things as the 21st century began. White Protestant churches in particular were becoming less popular, and people were disengaging from civil affairs. At the same time, they were joining small discussion groups that met in churches.

Wuthnow discovered that about 40% of American adults belonged to a small group that met regularly and provided caring and support for its members. For sociologists of religion the most surprising discovery was that more than half of these groups were connected to churches and synagogues. This was not just Jews meeting in synagogues(Aron, Lee, and Rossel 1995) or African Americans meeting in Black churches.(Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) Wuthnow discovered that in a religious context the small groups influenced the way participants rethought their faith. And the groups often had a more powerful influence than the teaching that the pastors or the denomination promoted. Faith became more subjective. It was about what my religion means to me and how it can help me with everyday life. This was consistent with what Roof,(Roof 1993) Ammerman,(Ammerman and Farnsley 1997) and others were observing. Wuthnow and then Putnam pointed out that the changing dynamics of small groups within congregations were contributing to the cultural shift of church participants away from civic engagement.

National Progressive Christian Engagement with the Government

While members in the mainline congregations were turning away from civic engagement, the mainline congregations and denominations were following suit. The decreasing membership in mainline denominations was not threatening their existence. But whatever was causing decreased membership and influence in congregations and denominations was creating a crisis at the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC).

The NCC was founded to be an ecumenical voice that addressed the government. During the last decade of the 20th century the organization had put Kelley's ideas about strictness behind it and was again attempting to be a progressive voice. The Council has a Governing Board with representation from member denominations in proportion to their denominational membership. In practice the mainline denominations chose the General

Secretary. The Board gives the General Secretary broad authority to organize the work of the Council. This broad authority included speaking about political issues. The Council formed commissions and wrote position papers.

However, as I observed, in the 1990s the General Secretary supported a progressive agenda by working directly with and coordinating with the Clinton White House. I was a contract employee at the NCC, where I edited the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. I was meeting with Joan Brown Campbell, the General Secretary, in her office when her secretary interrupted us to say that the White House was on the phone. She picked up the phone, and I listened to her side of the conversation. It was clear that the caller wanted the NCC to put out a release in support of some legislation. Campbell took notes to get the wording correct and asked questions that showed she was not completely familiar with the issue. We quickly finished our meeting, and I left. The NCC may have thoroughly vetted the issue. Still, a representative of the White House directed when and how the NCC distributed the release.

When Campbell retired in 1999, the Council was on the verge of financial collapse. The Governing Board looked for someone who could save the organization, and Robert Edgar was a likely candidate. He was an ordained United Methodist minister and a former Democratic member of Congress. In his most recent job, as president of Claremont School of Theology, he had saved it from bankruptcy. Edgar and his wife, Merle, were close personal friends of my parents, and I sometimes socialized with them. Edgar and I also served together on the board of a nonprofit that my father founded. From my conversations with Edgar, I have no inside information that was not completely public. (RNS 2000)

I met with Edgar shortly after the Governing Board elected him. He told me that the Board had given him authority to do any reorganization that he thought necessary, including firing staff. Edgar had three strategies for "saving" the NCC. The first was downsizing so that expenses more closely matched income. The second strategy was to look for progressive foundations and individuals who were interested in a strong and effective progressive ecumenical organization. The third strategy was to put an end to the NCC and establish a broad ecumenical organization that included the Catholic Church and evangelical churches. He believed that Christian individuals and denominations could tolerate varied theological beliefs and join around shared moral values. He made his case by publishing a book entitled *Middle Church: Reclaiming the Moral Values of the Faithful Majority from the Religious Right*.(Edgar 2006)

Edgar stabilized the NCC with his first two strategies, but the organization was still very fragile. However, his dream of a Christian-based advocacy organization was not embraced by the Protestants, the evangelicals, or the Catholics. He did support the creation of the organization Christian Churches Together, but it is a fellowship of church leaders that avoids taking political stands. After two terms at the NCC, Edgar moved on.

Edgar was not able to solve all the organizational challenges in making the NCC a viable institution. Perhaps his dream of a national religious voice for Christian moral values made it impossible to stabilize the organization completely. In any event, he left the NCC while it

still had challenges and gave his energies to Common Cause, which had a tradition of supporting the causes he believed in but didn't have the religious baggage.

For the next six years the NCC struggled to find a direction and strong leadership. Then it named Jim Winkler as President and General Secretary. In 2013 Winkler seemed like a good choice. I knew him from when he headed the work of the General Board of Church and Society for the United Methodist Church. I worked at a different agency of the United Methodist Church, so we sometimes attended the same meetings. For example, we spent hours together when we traveled to Austria to attend a meeting with European Methodists. When he took over leadership of the Council, the budget was about $2 million, down from a high of over $5 million. There were fewer than a dozen employees, and the offices had moved to Washington, D.C., to reduce rent expenses.(Banks 2022)

While Campbell had been able to promote political action as she wished, Winkler could not speak for the NCC on political positions without approval from the Governing Board. Edgar had identified three issues for the NCC to advocate: peace, ending poverty, and saving the environment. These were all issues that required government attention. Under Winkler's leadership there was a focus on racism and interfaith engagement. Neither of these issues required political action. I became aware of tensions within the small staff, questions about financial procedures, and very limited capacity to promote the organization's agenda.

The NCC as an effective connection between church and state was no more. For example, the NCC scheduled an event called "A.C.T. Now to End Racism" for April 2018, the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Winkler asked me if I would volunteer to coordinate a fundraising effort to support the event from people and organizations that had previously donated to the NCC. I agreed and drafted a plan, including proposed mailings through the post office and emails. I sent the plan back to Winkler and asked for the list of previous donors. After some time it became clear that no one at the NCC office was able to produce the list. So, the fundraiser didn't happen. As the date approached, the organizing was in disarray. A former NCC employee, Brenda Girton-Mitchell, volunteered to help. She organized volunteers and was able to produce a rally on the National Mall attended by thousands. Speakers included leaders of NCC member denominations, who described their commitment to keep King's legacy alive.

The relationship between church and state is not only determined by what the churches do. The government's engagement with religion is also part of the equation. The 21st century has seen a dramatic shift in the federal government's interest in and engagement with the mainline and progressive denominations.

So, as Trump entered the national scene, there was no well-organized progressive national coalition that represented the mainline denominations.

Church and State with Donald Trump

It is too early for academics to have developed a consensus about the relationship between church and state with the Republican Party and the influence of Donald Trump. There are pastors turning out theological books that promote Trump, primarily from two points of view. First, that Trump is a flawed human being, but God is using him to destroy the

ungodly American culture and politics that traditional politicians have not been able to address. Second, that Trump is fulfilling biblical prophecy. One of the first and most influential to publish both theological defenses of Trump was Lance Wallnau, in *God's Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling*.(Wallnau 2026)

Prominent evangelical pastors and leaders have publicly supported Trump in his three presidential campaigns. Among them are Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress, Jerry Falwell Jr., Jentezen Franklin, Greg Laurie, and Ralph Reed. Tim Alberta has written a description of some of the evangelical supporters. He claims that they were driven to identify with and promote Trump because they discovered that they could attract followers, fame, and income.(Alberta 2023)

The best demographic data we have is from data collected by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with the Brookings Institution in 2022.[1] They found:

- About 10% of Americans are Christian nationalism "adherents" and 19% are "sympathizers."
- Among white evangelicals, 29% are adherents and 35% sympathizers, nearly two-thirds combined. Among Republicans, more than half are adherents or sympathizers.
- Age matters: Americans under 50 are about twice as likely as older Americans to reject Christian nationalism.
- Evangelical identity matters more than race: evangelicals are about five times as likely to be adherents within every racial group, white (29%), Hispanic (25%), and Black (20%).
- Adherents attend church much more often: 54% at least a few times a month, versus 28% of all Americans.
- Attitudes: 40% of adherents agree that "true patriots might have to resort to violence," compared with 16% of those who reject Christian nationalism, and 71% view Trump favorably.

Sociological rigor requires more precise definitions of terms like "Christian nationalism," "sympathizers," and "evangelicals." Only then will we have a clear picture of shifts in Americans' beliefs and practices regarding church and state.

In a 2025 essay David Hollinger summarizes the confusing sociological context that we are living in:

> "The 13% of the nation that identifies as white evangelical in 2024 is more empowered politically than evangelicals ever had been. This fact gives specific meaning to a remarkable paradox in American life of the third decade of the twenty-first century: an increasingly secular society is saddled with an increasingly religious politics. Exactly while the pace of secularization becomes more rapid, with nearly one-third of the national population now professing no

[1] https://prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PRRI-Jan-2023-Christian-Nationalism-Final-1.pdf

> religious affiliation at all, evangelical Protestants and their Catholic allies—well represented by the new Vice President, J. D. Vance—exercise unprecedented power over the lives of all Americans. This distribution of power is a direct consequence of the Republican Party's sponsorship of evangelicals, and their eventual influence over what the Republican Party had become by the time of Donald Trump's second election in 2024." (Hollinger 2025:16)

Social Construction of Reality

The scientific method is not just a practice. It is a belief taught to all elementary school students. And it has its original prophet, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. It is the dialectical process promoted by Hegel in his 1817 *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.(Hegel and Wallace 1892) He proposed that human knowledge and understanding progress with an initial thesis of how things work. This produces the possibility of an antithesis, which challenges the original idea. The result is that a new thesis emerges that is neither the original nor the challenge, but a better and more "true" understanding, only to be challenged by another antithesis. He claimed this explains the source of human knowledge and the authority for why science is true. Humanity marches forward, gradually becoming more knowledgeable and wise.

As the previous section illustrates, since the early 20th century social scientists, including sociologists of religion, have embraced scientific tools like statistical analysis, textual criticism, and historical research. They embraced the study of religion as an object, a phenomenon. An example of the new sociology of religion was a groundbreaking study, *When Prophecy Fails*, published in 1956.(Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956) Leon Festinger and his team studied a religious group that believed a flood would destroy the world on December 21, 1954, and that aliens with a spaceship would rescue them.

The obvious "fact" that the prophecy was "false" did not deter the group from continuing to "believe" and expect to be rescued on a new date. As Festinger observed, "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change." It was a clear counterexample to the scientific method. He invented the name "cognitive dissonance." Festinger followed up with an analysis of what was happening and published his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, in 1957. (Festinger 1957)

Also in 1957 Thomas Kuhn published his history of the scientific idea that the sun is the center of the universe. It is a fascinating story about the way humans see themselves in the universe. In all of recorded history, humans saw themselves as living on a solid object that is the center of the whole universe; the earth is the center of everything that exists. Then Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) suggested that the sun is the center and the earth circles the sun.(Kuhn 1957) Christians would have no part of it at first, and European astronomers were Christians. What Festinger did for religion, Kuhn did for science.

Kuhn showed that the Hegelian model of the scientific method is not the way science works. Changing the scientific "fact" so that the center of the universe is the sun required a social process in which social forces and the interests of various institutions were the forces at play. Surprising as it seems, the Copernican calculations that gained acceptance after his death predicted the movement of the planets no better than the old Ptolemaic

calculations. The advantage was that the Copernican calculations were less complicated. The community accepted the Copernican calculations, and the view that the sun is the center, because of their simplicity and other social factors.

Five years later Kuhn published his ideas as a general theory of how science adopts new ideas. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* he introduced the term "paradigm." "Though the term 'paradigm' is used in several different senses, it is most usefully employed to mean the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community."(Kuhn 1996)

Kuhn was a historian who specialized in the history of science. He was reluctant to say he was describing a general theory of society. But others were not so reluctant. George Herbert Mead and his book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), had already set the stage among academic sociologists, who were using his theory, later called "symbolic interactionism," to interpret their sociological research. Mead's idea was that individuals interact with each other using symbols to create shared meanings. This shared meaning is the social reality. (Mead and Morris 1934)

Paradigm was a very useful word (concept). But scholars and everyday people needed a word to clarify, expand, and simplify symbolic interactionism. The words arrived in 1966 when Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*.(Berger and Luckmann 1966) Now there was an intuitive language to describe how we come to have our beliefs and the process that makes it possible for us as individuals to participate in society. What we think is true is the result of the "social construction of reality." According to Berger, **even religion is socially constructed.**(Berger 1967) Berger was a prolific writer who published books that argued that his theory applies to both religion and politics.

But there was still a problem, particularly with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They have texts that they claim a god delivered, and that claim gives the texts authority. A religious community can, and many do, use texts to establish a paradigm. It took fourteen years for a literary theorist, Stanley Fish, to provide the language to address the "God said in the scriptures" problem. In his 1980 book, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, he introduced the concept of "interpretive communities." The scriptures or Christian traditions have no authority in themselves. There is no authority outside of the community that gives authority to the paradigm unless the community agrees with it. This is true whether it is a community that reads an ancient text used by a religious community for centuries, a community that reads Shakespeare, or participants in an introductory college physics course. The authority for the shared paradigm of the group is always the group.(Fish 1980)

To summarize, current sociological theory posits that paradigms are a way of viewing the world and our individual place in it. Paradigms come into existence through a process called the social construction of reality. Social construction of reality happens in interpretive communities, which give authority to shared paradigms. The creation and sustaining of interpretive communities depends on symbolic interaction between individuals. Communities of interpretation are a source for individuals to understand

themselves and the world they live in. Sometimes this symbolic interaction results in new paradigms.

3. Research Process

The original design for this project was quite ambitious and traditional. However, there were assumptions that turned out to be wrong. The result is that this report is a pre-research study that suggests interesting questions about what is happening and proposes a perspective for a new study.

Following a traditional research design, and finding some of its assumptions wrong, led to the new perspective. For that reason, this section describes the design of data collection. In the following sections I report the numbers and patterns that emerged from the survey and the interviews.

A family illness hampered data collection. Just as I started distributing the survey and scheduling interviews, I had to be out of town from the end of July to the end of October. The telephone became the only way for me to be personally involved in recruiting informants.

While the results from the survey and interviews were rich in what they pointed to about the congregation, there were few participants. Seventeen respondents filled out the online survey, and I conducted ten interviews with informants whom I knew before. The results from the survey are not a source of information about the characteristics of the congregation. However, they do point to interesting patterns that deserve additional study.

The Survey Document

Below is the survey document that was available for congregation participants to complete online. Names that would identify the congregation are replaced with descriptions in brackets.

This survey is part of a research project studying how members of [the congregation] use conversations, worship, media, and community life to make sense of change in religion and politics over time. It is being conducted independently by Kenneth Bedell, in partnership with [the congregation's social justice committee] and [a local Indivisible chapter], for presentation at the Religious Research Association's 2026 Annual Meeting.

The survey takes about 5–10 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers — we're interested in your own experience and perspective.

You may skip any question or stop at any time. You are not asked to supply any identifying information

To submit: Drop off your completed form at the [social justice committee's] table in the church narthex, or take a photo of each side and text it to 202-744-3225. To complete online instead, go to https://religion-research.org

Q1. Change over time

In the last 12 years, have your views, beliefs, or practices changed regarding:

	Yes	No
a) Religion	☐	☐
b) Politics	☐	☐
c) The relationship between your religious beliefs/practices and your political beliefs/participation	☐	☐

Q2. Influences or supports

If you answered "Yes" to any part of Question 1: What have been the three most important influences on that change?

If you answered "No" to all parts of Question 1: What have been the three most important supports for your current beliefs and participation?

Q3. Resources

What resources do you use related to your religious and/or political beliefs? *(Check all that apply, for each column.)*

Resource	Religion	Politics
Conversations with friends and family	☐	☐
Worship services — sermons	☐	☐
Worship services — music	☐	☐
Worship services — other	☐	☐
Political rallies or protests	☐	☐
Internet — social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)	☐	☐
Internet — blogs	☐	☐
Internet — subscriptions (NY Times, Substack, etc.)	☐	☐
Internet — email or	☐	☐

Resource	Religion	Politics
messenger exchanges		
Internet — websites and search engines	☐	☐
Internet — other	☐	☐
Book clubs or discussion groups	☐	☐
Movies	☐	☐
Concerts or music	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐

If you checked "Worship – Other," what do you have in mind?

_____

If you checked "Internet – other," how else do you use the internet?

_____

If you checked "Book clubs or discussion groups," what is the theme of the group or groups?

_____

If you checked "Other", at the bottom, what are other resources you use related to your religious and/or political beliefs?

_____

Is there anything you want to add about how your beliefs about either religion or politics are supported or challenges?

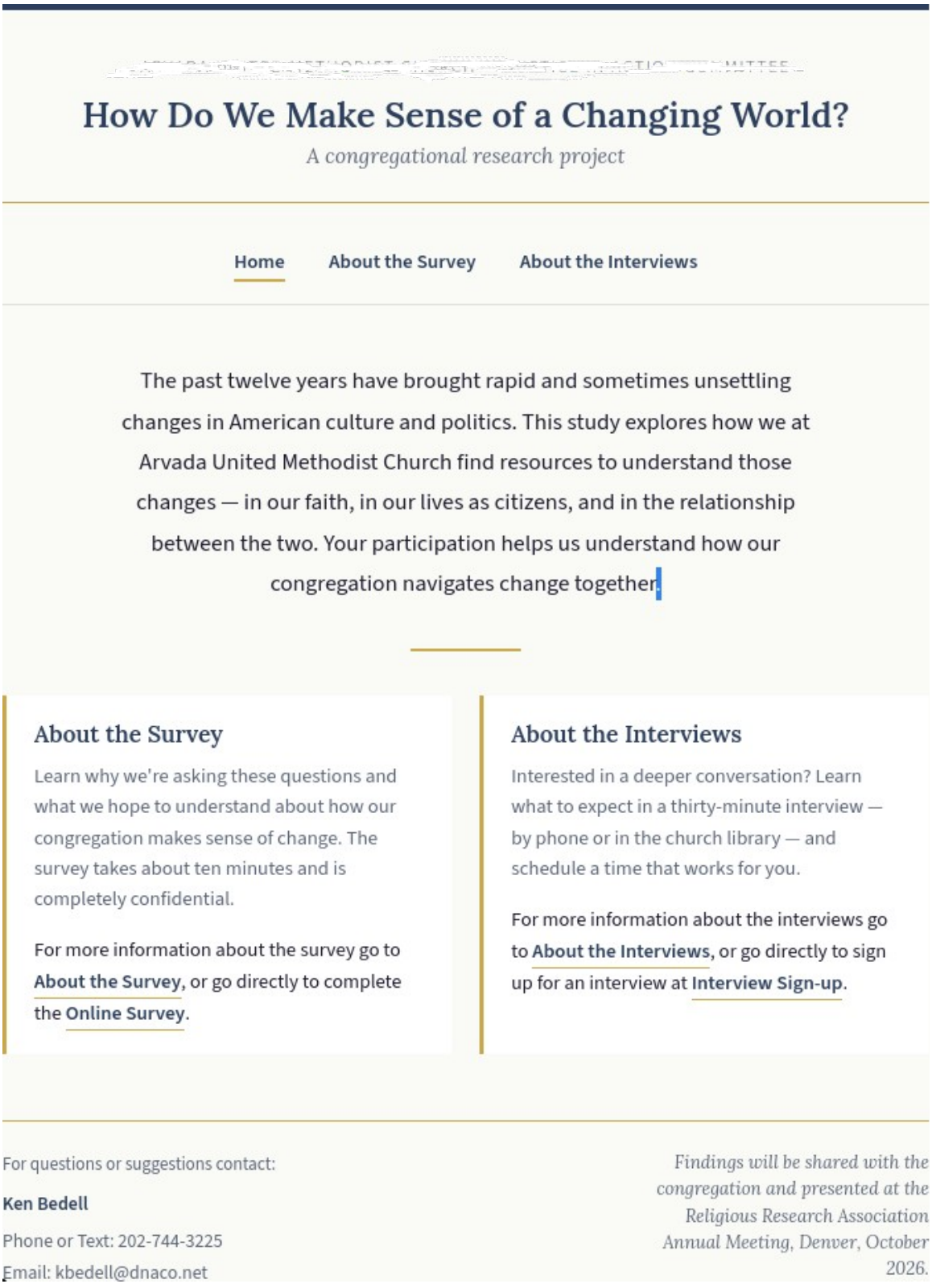
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Thank you for contributing your perspective to this study.

Interview Recruitment

I set up a website at https://religion-research.org, where I promoted the project and invited congregation participants to register for an interview.

The following pages show images of the home page and the page inviting congregation participants to sign up for an interview.



The project website's home page.



How Do We Make Sense of a Changing World?

A congregational research project

Home | About the Survey | About the Interviews

About the Interviews

The interview usually takes about 30 minutes and follows up on the survey questions. It is a relaxed conversation — there are no right or wrong answers — and everything you share is confidential.

Interviews can be by phone or in person in the church library, at a time that works for you.

What we'll talk about

> **Books and study groups** — whether you find reading helpful for thinking through your faith and the world, and whether you've participated in any book study groups at the church.

> **Faith and citizenship** — how your faith connects to your life as a citizen, things like voting or other ways you participate in public life. For example, what you're praying for when you say "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Your participation will contribute directly to research being presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meeting in Denver, October 2026 — and findings will be shared with the congregation.

Ready to schedule?

Choose a time for a phone call or visit to the church library.

Schedule a time

The page inviting congregation participants to sign up for an interview.

4. Data Summary

Here are the compiled responses from the 17 respondents who completed the survey online. I coded the 116 responses to Question 2 into 12 categories.

Question 1: Change over time

In the last 12 years, have your views, beliefs, or practices changed regarding…

Area	Yes	No
Religion	16 (94%)	1 (6%)
Politics	11 (65%)	6 (35%)
The relationship between religious and political beliefs	14 (82%)	3 (18%)
Yes to at least one	**17 (100%)**	**0**

Question 2: Influences on change

Number and percentage of respondents who named each influence. “All respondents” is out of 17. Each of the other columns is out of the respondents who described a change in that area: religion (16), politics (11), and the relationship between them (14).

Influence	All respondents (17)	Religion (16)	Politics (11)	Relationship (14)
Trump, MAGA, the current administration	10 (59%)	1 (6%)	8 (73%)	3 (21%)
Social, economic, and policy conditions	9 (53%)	1 (6%)	6 (55%)	4 (29%)
Church small groups, classes, committees	8 (47%)	7 (44%)	2 (18%)	4 (29%)
Christian nationalism / religious right	6 (35%)	5 (31%)	—	5 (36%)
Conversations and relationships	6 (35%)	2 (12%)	3 (27%)	2 (14%)
The congregation and the UMC	6 (35%)	5 (31%)	—	4 (29%)
Worship, sermons, music, pastors	6 (35%)	6 (38%)	—	2 (14%)
News media, internet, information	5 (29%)	1 (6%)	4 (36%)	1 (7%)
Personal life circumstances	5 (29%)	2 (12%)	2 (18%)	1 (7%)
Reading, study, education	5 (29%)	4 (25%)	2 (18%)	1 (7%)
Groups and activism outside church	4 (24%)	3 (19%)	1 (9%)	2 (14%)

Influence	All respondents (17)	Religion (16)	Politics (11)	Relationship (14)
Scripture, theology, faith practice	4 (24%)	1 (6%)	—	3 (21%)

— = no respondents named this influence for that area.

Question 3: Resources used

Number and percentage of respondents (of 17) who use each resource for their religious beliefs and for their political beliefs. The last column shows the resource's orientation: of all the times it was checked, the percentage that were for religion. Above 50% leans religious; below 50% leans political.

Resource	Used for religion, n (%)	Used for politics, n (%)	Share of uses for religion
Conversations			
Conversations with friends and family	15 (88%)	16 (94%)	48%
Worship			
Worship services (any)	16 (94%)	9 (53%)	71%
— Sermons	16 (94%)	9 (53%)	64%
— Music	12 (71%)	4 (24%)	75%
— Other worship	6 (35%)	1 (6%)	86%
Other church resources			
Book clubs or discussion groups	14 (82%)	13 (76%)	52%
Church mailings	8 (47%)	10 (59%)	44%
Internet			
Internet (any)	15 (88%)	17 (100%)	40%
— Subscriptions	9 (53%)	14 (82%)	39%
— Websites and search engines	10 (59%)	11 (65%)	48%
— Social media	6 (35%)	12 (71%)	33%
— Email or messenger	7 (41%)	10 (59%)	41%
— Blogs	2 (12%)	6 (35%)	25%
— Other internet	4 (24%)	5 (29%)	44%
Other resources			
Political rallies or protests	5 (29%)	11 (65%)	31%
Concerts or music	7 (41%)	6 (35%)	54%
Movies	4 (24%)	4 (24%)	50%
Other	2 (12%)	3 (18%)	40%

"Worship services (any)" and "Internet (any)" count respondents who checked at least one item in that group.

Notes from the interviews

I conducted one in-person interview and nine telephone interviews. This was a way to test some of the patterns that appeared in the survey and to specifically raise questions about the "separation of church and state." In the invitation for congregation participants to sign up for interviews, I wrote:

"What we'll talk about: Books and study groups — whether you find reading helpful for thinking through your faith and the world, and whether you've participated in any book study groups at the church.

Faith and citizenship — how your faith connects to your life as a citizen, things like voting or other ways you participate in public life. For example, what you're praying for when you say 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'"

No one used the QR code to schedule an interview unless I first talked to them or telephoned them to invite them to participate. The ten informants were generous with their time and engaged in responding to my questions. I announced that interviews would take about 20 minutes. All were between 30 and 60 minutes.

Participation in study groups

Every informant is now, or has been, part of a church study group. One reported that a study group has evolved into a social group.

What Does Separation of Church and State Mean?

For the first few interviews I struggled to discover a way to ask informants about their understanding of the "separation of church and state." I found that asking informants what they mean by "Thy kingdom come" did not help them focus on how the church relates to the government. The third informant explained, "'Kingdom' is a word that has a negative connotation."

Informants supported the "separation of church and state" as the requirement that the government cannot impose a religion or give special treatment to a particular religion. When it came to politicians, informants said the church should not support specific candidates, but members need to evaluate candidates' values.

United Methodist Social Principles

Every four years delegates elected by the regional annual conferences of the United Methodist Church meet at what is called a General Conference. As well as establishing church law, these delegates review and amend a document called the *Social Principles*. It is not church law but intended to guide United Methodists regarding their engagement with civil society and the government. Every General Conference since 1972 has modified the language, and in 2024 delegates rewrote it completely.

Informants mentioned it with comments like “Social Principles are a guide,” “The United Methodist Church is different because it has the Social Principles,” and “The Social Principles are a foundation.”

The Bible

Informants described the Bible as something that needs interpretation. And an informant suggested that in these times, “It is important to not just talk about Jesus, but also consider the Hebrew prophets.”

Diversity

“I like to hear different opinions.” This was a common theme.

5. Reflections on the Data

The sample is too small to support general statements about the congregation. Even so, it shows a number of interesting patterns. Taking this sample seriously points to possible patterns in the congregation and to questions that need additional study.

Reflections on the Survey

Reflections on Survey Question 1

1. Every respondent (17, 100%) reported change in at least one area. Because every respondent reported change, it is impossible to compare people who have experienced a change in their “views, beliefs, or practices” in the past 12 years with those who have not.

2. Change in religion was most common (16, 94%), followed by change in how religion and politics relate (14, 82%) and change in politics (11, 65%).

Reflections on Survey Question 2

1. Trump was the most important influence on change. Seven named Trump or MAGA explicitly; including references to the current administration, 11 of 17 did. This influence on change is both in religion and politics.

2. When respondents described what had influenced their changes, only 5 (29%) mentioned news media or the internet. Yet in Question 3, every respondent (17, 100%) reported using the internet as a resource for politics, and most (15, 88%) use it as a resource for religion.

3. Few see the church as an influence on their political beliefs, despite the church’s claims to be liberal. No one named worship, sermons, the congregation, or the UMC as an influence on political change. Only 2 of 17 respondents named a church source as an influence on their political change, and both named a small group (a book study and the congregation’s social justice committee).

4. Christian nationalism influences how respondents reflect on religion and on the relationship between religion and politics, but no one named it as an influence on

politics alone. Five respondents named it as an influence on religion, and five as an influence on the relationship between religion and politics.

5. Conversations: diversity is valued for politics, like-minded people for religion. Six respondents named conversations or relationships as an influence. For politics, they named contact with differing views ("opposing views," "connections with other faith communities," "listening with an open mind"). For religion, they named friends and discussions with others, which suggests support from like-minded people.

6. The church isn't the only source of influence. Four respondents named groups or activities outside the church: a 12-step program, Indivisible, Scouting, volunteering with community organizations, and peaceful protest.

7. Small groups and book studies matter for understanding religion, not so much for politics. Seven respondents named a church small group, class, or book study as an influence on their religious change; 2 named one for political change. Independent reading and study follow the same pattern, though more weakly (4 respondents for religion, 2 for politics).

Reflections on Survey Question 3

1) The most important resource that respondents reported for their religious beliefs was worship services (16, 94%). But almost as many respondents named conversations with friends and family (15, 88%).

2) The most important resource for politics was the internet (17, 100%), with subscriptions (14, 82%) and social media (12, 71%) ranking highest among internet uses.

3) Conversations with friends and family were rated as a resource for political beliefs (16, 94%) more than any single use of the internet.

4) About one third of respondents who saw book clubs and discussion groups as a resource specifically mentioned Christian nationalism as a topic of the books or discussion. (4 out of 13)

5) While almost all respondents see worship services as an important resource for their religious beliefs, more than half of respondents also see worship services as a resource for their political beliefs.

General Reflections on the Survey

1) More respondents report religious change than political change, even though, as Question 2 shows, political events were the most frequently named influence. For these respondents, national politics appears to be prompting a rethinking of their religion more than of their politics.

In Question 3, 13 of 17 said they use book clubs or discussion groups as a resource for politics. Yet in Question 2, only 2 credited a church group with changing their political

views. Respondents bring politics into their groups but rarely credit the groups with changing their minds.

6. Implications for Congregational Practice

What surprised me most was how hard it was to get informants to say how they understand the relationship between religious organizations and the government. At the same time, respondents and informants specifically identified Trump and the Republican Party as sources of anxiety.

Church and State

After several interviews, I realized that the informants saw the question of "What should the relationship be between the church and the state?" as a settled question. The angst they are feeling about what the Republicans and the President are doing is not causing them to question their paradigm that separation of church and state means:

1. The government does not tell citizens what church they must attend. (No establishment of religion)
2. The government does not tell citizens what they must believe. (Freedom of conscience)
3. The church does not tell people what candidates or party to vote for. (Churches are nonpartisan)
4. The church can lobby for legislation.
5. The church can provide social services.
6. An individual can petition the government, organize protests, and freely discuss their political opinions. (Freedom of speech)
7. Individuals must follow the laws. (Rule of law)
8. An individual can change the government by voting. (Democracy)

One might explain this easily: for more than 250 years, white Americans who are not poor have adopted the paradigm of "American exceptionalism." Perhaps congregation participants in a mostly white suburban church in Colorado have never encountered alternatives. However, that is not the case.

The congregation has offered opportunities to learn about the structures that preserve racism, liberation theology, the pacifist theology of Martin Luther King Jr., and the stories of Jesus taking a stand against the Roman Empire and oppression.

Six years ago the church had an African American co-pastor. He had expertise in liberation theology. He and I led an eight-week study on racism where we used resources from racism workshops he had offered and my book, *Realizing the Civil Rights Dream: Diagnosing and Treating American Racism*.(Bedell 2017)

At the beginning of Trump's first term, the congregation hosted an event with a speaker who talked about nonviolence from the perspective of Martin Luther King Jr. And more than a year into Trump's second term, the church offered an eight-week book study on Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of*

Extremism.(Alberta 2023) More than 60 people attended the nonviolence event; fewer than a dozen congregation participants took part in the Alberta book study.

Early in 2026, the previous pastor presented a sermon series entitled "Resist." Among other things, she said that Jesus claiming to represent the Kingdom of God was a bold act of resistance, because the government (the Roman Empire) claimed that Caesar is god.

These are only a few examples of times when congregation participants have encountered ideas that question the "American exceptionalism" paradigm. The question I am left with is whether we are observing a *When Prophecy Fails* moment.(Festinger et al. 1956) Is this a primarily white congregation, with few if any congregation participants living in poverty, holding on to the paradigm of American exceptionalism described above while they are surrounded by evidence that:

1. The Republican government led by Trump is not a working democracy but has many tyrannical characteristics. (Democracy)
2. Fear of retribution keeps some people from saying publicly what they think about the government. (Freedom of speech)
3. Recent Supreme Court decisions have corrupted the federal government by allowing wealthy people and interests to invest as much as they want in elections. (Democracy)
4. The government is rounding up and deporting individuals without judicial guardrails. (Rule of law)
5. The President is forming an alliance with religious leaders in the White Christian nationalist movement. (No establishment of religion)

Why Does It Matter?

It matters primarily for one reason. The American exceptionalism paradigm is one of the greatest forces, if not the greatest, driving global environmental change. That change could cause the next great extinction of life, and possibly the extinction of humanity. The imperial and tyrannical inclinations of the Republican Party and President Trump could also lead to nuclear disaster. Their "America First" agenda seeks a global order that protects and preserves American economic interests.

For years scholars and politicians have known and promoted alternative paradigms: nonviolence and democracy, Martin Luther King Jr. (King 1967) and Jonathan Schell (Schell 2003); the environment, Barry Commoner (Commoner 1972); education for paradigm transformation, Paulo Freire (Freire 1985) and Janusz Korczak (Tsyrlina-Spady and Renn 2020). The names go on and on.

Possible First Steps

First, sociologists of knowledge and of religion could do more than study what is happening. They could engage religious practitioners in conversations about what we know of paradigms and how they function in a religious community. Christian religious leaders can immediately adopt styles of leadership that do not depend on claims of authority from scripture, tradition, or church documents like the *Book of Resolutions*.

Instead, they can intentionally adopt forms of education that develop communities of interpretation.

Second, religious leaders can quickly create a community that is a witness against the forces of tyranny in America. The first step is giving up any pretense that one religion can claim superiority over all others. People who are leaders in religious organizations can organize groups where participants are intentional about being interpretive communities.

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