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# Making my faith my own: church attendance and first-year college student religious and spiritual development

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**Making my faith my own:  
Church attendance and first-year college student religious and spiritual development**

by

**Neil A. Rowe**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

Program of Study Committee:  
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**ABSTRACT**

There is a glaring lack of research on spiritual and religious development in human development journals. Emerging adulthood, specifically, is an important period to study religious and spiritual development because it is characterized by identity formation and an enhanced power of free will. Church attendance can provide a context for identity formation, but declines in religious service attendance are prevalent throughout late adolescence into emerging adulthood. Twelve first-year undergraduate students at a public Midwestern university who attended a Christian church regularly during their childhood participated in a semi-structured interview and shared their experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding church, their transition to college and their religious or spiritual identity. Six participants were attending a church or college ministry and 6 were non-attenders in college. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed participants valued close relationships, acceptance, freedom of individual thought, and religious understanding at church and reasoned their attendance by previous church experience, desire for spiritual support and personal beliefs. Analysis also revealed critical events which coincided with changes in religious meaning or commitment. Additionally, a process of personalization of faith was discovered. Implications for these findings were discussed.

*Keywords:* church attendance, emerging adulthood, college, religion, spirituality

## CHAPTER 1. OVERVIEW

### Significance

Greater attention has been given to religion and spirituality research in adolescence and emerging adulthood in recent years (King & Roeser, 2009; King, Ramos & Clardy, 2013; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014); however, it has been drastically under-researched as a dimension of human development given its salience in the United States and internationally. Merely 1.3% (.9% from 1990 to July 2002) of top developmental journal articles published from August 2002 to January 2008 reference religious and spiritual development (RSD) related research terms (King & Roeser, 2009). Adolescence and emerging adulthood is an especially important time to study RSD. Adolescence is described as a time of questioning and pursuit of spirituality and religion (King & Roeser, 2009). Additionally, 84-87% of adolescents in the U.S. identify with a collective religion (Smith & Denton, 2005; Wallace, Forman, Caldwell & Willis, 2003). Moreover, 40% of teens in the U.S. attend a religious service weekly or more with an additional 19% attending 1-3 times a month (Smith & Denton, 2005).

There is evidence that religious service attendance promotes identity formation in adolescents and emerging adults (Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen & Lawford, 2011; Alisat & Pratt, 2012). Additionally, several standard measures of identity formation include religion: the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ) (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel & Geisinger, 1995); Identity Status Interview (ISI) (Rogow, Marcia & Slugoski, 1983); Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS) (Gretovant & Adams, 1984); and the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OM-EIS) (Adams, Shea & Fitch, 1979), thus indicating religious identity as an important identity construct.

Despite relative stability in religious affiliation and acknowledgement of the importance of and desire for spiritual growth throughout the college years, declines in church attendance are prevalent (Stoppa & Lefkowitz, 2010; Bryant, Choi & Yasuno, 2003; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant, Szelényi & Calderone, 2005; Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) observed a decline in church attendance of 41% by the time college students were seniors. Similar declines in church attendance have been observed in adolescents as well (Hardie, Pearce & Denton, 2013). These declines are important to note considering the multitude of benefits for religious engagement in emerging adulthood.

In a meta-analysis of seventy-five studies from 1990 – 2010, Yonker, Schnabelrauch and DeHaan (2012) assessed the impact of religiosity/spirituality on psychological outcomes of adolescents and emerging adults. Greater religiosity/spirituality was associated with significantly higher self-esteem, well-being, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness, and significantly lower depression, alcohol consumption, smoking, marijuana use and deviant behavior. Additionally, when assessing the impact of religiosity/spirituality (religious/spiritual behaviors, church attendance, religious/spiritual importance as well as a combination of the three) on risk behavior, church attendance was the most robust predictor. Church attendance also had the greatest effect size and was significantly different from all three other measures. High religiosity has been associated with higher self-esteem, greater assets for personal growth, and lessened likelihood to engage in anti-social behaviors in undergraduate students (Knox, Langehough & Walters, 1998). Additionally, higher religiosity has been associated with a better perception of health and life satisfaction (Zullig, Ward & Horn, 2006). Bowman and Small (2012) found that college students who consider themselves religiously unaffiliated had lower well-being than mainline Christian students. Specifically, engagement in religious activities

(prayer, worship, service attendance, sacred text reading, etc.) was associated with greater subjective and psychological well-being, while attending a religiously affiliated college institution was associated with greater psychological well-being. Moreover, Burdett, Ellison, Hill and Glenn (2009) found that church attendance was negatively associated with “hooking up.” Hooking up represents casual physical encounters which may involve any one or more of a variety of physical behaviors such as “making out”, mutual masturbation, oral sex and sexual intercourse.

### **Methodological Rationale**

The vast majority of studies involving religion and spirituality in college students have been quantitative. While quantitative analysis has been helpful in showing trends and providing information about how emerging adults rate the importance of religion and their frequency of religious service attendance throughout college, the *processes* involved in emerging adult religious service engagement remain largely unexplored. The current study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate how first-year college students think about their religious engagement from childhood into emerging adulthood. Additionally, this study provided innovative theoretical foundations for the study of RSD by integrating concepts from emerging adulthood, identity and sacred theory frameworks.

### **Study Rationale**

This research focuses on first-year college students because I wanted to capture the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of participants amidst this transitory year and amidst their early experience with the increased autonomy and free will of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) is categorized as a time of identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). This is described as a time when people have the most autonomy and power of choice in their lives, but

also a delaying of definitive commitment. According to Erikson (1982), college allows the opportunity for prolonged adolescence, which Erikson attributed the stage of identity versus role confusion. The strength developed through the identity versus role confusion stage is fidelity. Fidelity is described by Erikson (1965, p. 20) as, “the strength of disciplined devotion.” The first year of college represents an opportune time to investigate commitment and identity in a religious context.

In the United States, an estimated 173,402,000 people self-identified as a Christian religious adherent in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The nationwide accessibility and variety of Christian congregations as well as at the public Midwestern University where the research was conducted provided a rich diversity in experiences. In addition, the commonality of Christianity provides ease in recruiting as well as convenience. Also, the majority of prior research on institutional religious engagement in college has included Christianity.

Considering the potential for the church to provide structure and context for identity formation during the identity versus role confusion stage of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, the stability in importance of religion and desire for religious development in college students and the positive psychological and social impacts of religious participation, it is necessary to understand the reasoning college students provide for their level of religious service engagement in their freshman year when they have attended church throughout their life up to this point. It was an aim of this study to disseminate the feelings and experiences of first-year college students who grew up attending a Christian church and the potential implications of these experiences. The results of this study may aid religious institutions in addressing and meeting the needs of youth and young adults and may increase our understanding of first year college student church attendance.

This study will address the following research questions:

What do first-year college students who grew up regularly attending a Christian church value in experiences at church?

What reasons do first-year college students who grew up regularly attending a Christian describe for religious service attendance?

What other themes emerge regarding first-year college students and their current religious service attendance status?

## **CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theory, which could provide answers to the why and how questions and guide future research has been omitted in much of the literature on religion and families. White and Klein (2008, p. 16) state, “Theories provide answers to ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions... Without theories, we cannot determine why and how things happen the way they do.” Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood and sacred theory will provide the framework for this research.

#### **Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development**

Erikson’s (1982) fifth stage of psychosocial development is identity versus role confusion. This stage is characterized by the affirmation and refutation of roles and identifications by one’s self, one’s peers, one’s family and one’s society. Erikson also acknowledged that the institution of college provided an opportunity for prolonged adolescence. Erikson (1982, p. 75) explained, “the later school and college years can, as we saw, be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium: a period of sexual and cognitive maturation and yet a sanctioned postponement of definitive commitment. It provides a relative leeway for role experimentation.”

#### **Theory of emerging adulthood**

Erikson’s view of the college years is congruent with Arnett’s (2000) theory of emerging adulthood. Arnett described emerging adulthood as a distinct period separate from adolescence and young adulthood in which possibilities and directions in life (in work, love, roles, ideology and world views) are at their peak. This time period is also described as a time when an individual has the greatest power of individual choice.

## **Sacred theory**

Religion and spirituality are two different, but related constructs. Religion is described by Koenig, King and Larson (2012, p. 45) as, “an organized system of beliefs, practices, and symbols designed to (a) facilitate closeness to the transcendent and (b) to foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community.”

Alternatively, Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones and Shafranske (2013, p. 15) describe religion as, “the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality.” Spirituality is described by Pargament et al. (2013, p. 14) as “the search for the sacred.” Spirituality is not defined by context; however religion is defined by the context of an institution. In his sacred framework for a theory of spirituality, Pargament (2013, p. 266) stated, “spirituality is a dynamic process that evolves in diverse ways over the lifespan.” According to Pargament, three processes are involved in spiritual development: discovery, conservation and transformation. The primary assumptions of Pargament's theoretical framework of spirituality is that there is an intrinsic motivation to find sacredness in our lives, to conserve what is sacred to us and to transform our understanding of what is sacred when necessary.

## **Literature Review**

### **College and religious development**

Perhaps the greatest evidence supporting the need for additional scholarly inquiry into emerging adulthood church engagement comes from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) report on the spiritual lives of college students. Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant, Szelényi, and Calderone (2005) surveyed a diverse sample of 112,232 first-year college students from 236 colleges and universities throughout the United States and reported the following:

- 79% Believe in God
- 83% Believe in the sacredness of life
- 81% Go to religious services occasionally or frequently
- 80% Had talked about religion/spirituality with friends
- 76% Had talked about religion/spirituality with family
- 80% Had some or a great interest in spirituality
- 47% Deem seeking opportunities for spiritual growth essential or very important
- 69% Somewhat or strongly agree that religious beliefs provide strength, support and guidance
- 48% Responded that it was essential or very important for their college to encourage their personal expression of spirituality
- 42% Responded that they were secure in personal views on spiritual and religious matters
- 10% Considered themselves as doubting
- 23% Were seeking
- 15% Identified as conflicted
- 15% Reported they were uninterested

Astin et al. demonstrated that the majority of first-year college students were exploring, discussing and incorporating religion and/or spirituality in their lives. Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) published their findings after a 2007 follow-up survey for those who took part in the research from 2003. Overall, 25% were attending church frequently in 2007 (down from 44% in 2003). A similar decline (42% to 29%) in at least weekly church attendance was found in adolescents aged 13 to 17 after two and one half years (Hardie, Pearce, & Denton, 2013). Life

course transitions were correlated with changes in church attendance. Both moving away from home and initiation of sexual activity were associated with declines in church attendance.

Arnett and Jensen (2002) discovered a decline in religious attendance in emerging adults, but not a decline in religious salience. Religious beliefs remained important even to those who were not attending religious services. Emerging adulthood yields, for many, personalized beliefs: ideas they are exposed to and agree with are merged with prior beliefs, forming a unique and individual set of beliefs. In a qualitative study, Alisat and Pratt (2012) noted that 55% of participants described a religious high point in early adulthood while 36% reported a peak experience in adolescence. This may have been due to ease of recall, but it may also allude to the importance of emerging adulthood in religious identity development.

Similarly, other studies examining the first year of college have observed a sharp decline in religious attendance from the start of the school year to the start of the second school year, but relative stability in religious importance and stability in religious affiliation and non-service religious activity, such as bible studies (Stoppa & Lefkowitz, 2010). Bryant, Choi and Yasuno (2003) observed a decline in first-year college students' religious activity engagement, but an increase in commitment to incorporate spirituality into their lives. Additionally, a goal to integrate spirituality into their lives was the most significant predictor of religiousness among college experience variables, which included parent divorce or separation, hours per week socializing with friends, hours spent per week partying, hours spent per week reading for pleasure, participation in community service and self perceived spirituality rating.

In Small and Bowman's (2011) study of college students, religious engagement, the degree to which an individual engages in religious behaviors such as prayer, scripture reading and church attendance, was found to be strongly correlated with both religious commitment and

decreased religious skepticism. Student spiritual and religious engagement was also the strongest predictor of spiritual identification in the junior year of college. Additionally, students who identified as “born-again,” a term used to describe a religious or spiritual rebirth as a Christian, had significantly greater spiritual identification in their junior year at secular universities than Christian students who did not. Religious engagement may potentially be a marker of religious commitment. In addition, religious engagement may promote spiritual identity development. A transformative religious or spiritual experience such as being “born-again” may also support spiritual identity development.

The primary ecological systems impacting

### **Family**

Greater than 90% of couples and parents are affiliated with a religion in the United States (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001). Additionally, familial bonds are an integral part of most if not all world religions (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003). The relationship between religiosity in individuals and families on outcomes such as health, well-being, and satisfaction has been well-researched, but the vast majority of the research has been data-driven without theoretical framework. Substantial evidence has been accumulated that points to the salience of religion in families on child discipline, parent-child relationships, child sexual decision making, marital relationships, spousal verbal communication, domestic violence, commitment, and child psychological and social adjustment (Mahoney et al., 2001). It should be noted, though, that research has focused on global measures of religiosity as predictors, such as service attendance, importance, religious text reading and prayer frequency, and these do not describe why or how religion affects families in positive and/or negative ways (Mahoney et al., 2001, Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, Emery & Rye, 1999).

Mahoney (2010) found 77% of research articles published about religion in families in the past decade used only one or two global measures of religiosity. There has also been little research regarding what impacts these global measures of religiosity, such as church attendance.

The majority of research has focused on positive outcomes and there is consistency on many family outcomes, such as higher marital satisfaction and marital commitment, and child outcomes, such as greater prosocial behavior, less externalizing and internalizing behavior problems and decreased alcohol and drug usage (Mahoney et al., 2001). This focus on positive outcomes masks the potential negative impacts religion may have on the family or child. Additionally, correlations between global measures of religiosity and family outcomes provide no information as to why or how religion makes an impact.

Parent importance of religion and religious behaviors, such as church attendance are strong influences in adolescent religiosity. Bader and Desmond (2006) reported consistency between parent religious behaviors and importance as an additional important determinant in adolescent religiosity.

### **Peer group**

When examining the decline in church attendance at Evangelical Christian colleges, Astin et al. (2005) determined that high initial peer group church attendance was the primary factor for church attendance 3 years later. Gunnoe and Moore (2002) reported similar findings regarding the influence of peers. Peer church attendance in high school was one of the best predictors of religiosity for 17-22 year olds. It was suggested this reflects a shift in influence in late adolescence from parents to peers considering research that supports religiosity of parents as the primary predictor of adolescent religiosity.

## **Church**

In a study of developmental experiences of organized youth activities, Larsen, Hansen and Moneta (2004) discovered strong relationships between youth involvement in a faith-based youth group and significantly higher means (deviation scores of .30 or more at  $p < .01$ ) for experiences related to identity work, emotional regulation, positive relationships and adult networks and social capital than for the overall adjusted mean which included sports, arts, academic, community, service and faith activities. Faith-based youth groups also had the highest deviation score (.13 at  $p < .01$ ) for teamwork and social skills. Research has also looked at the indirect relationship congregations have on developmental outcomes for youth; chiefly, congregations provide a place to acquire developmental assets and social capital that are associated with decreased risky behavior and increased positive outcomes (Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006).

A study investigating the religious and spiritual lives of a nationally representative sample of teens (Smith & Denton, 2005) identified four levels of religious engagement: the devoted, the regulars, the sporadic and the disengaged. The devoted attend religious services each week or more. Regulars attended religious services two to three times a month. Those recognized as sporadic attended religious services infrequently to monthly. The disengaged never attended religious services or if they attend, identify as non-religious. Participants who were considered devoted had significantly higher levels of comfort when communicating with adults other than parents or relatives, a larger number of adults other than their parents to whom they could turn to for support or advice and more supportive adults the teens' parents know well enough to talk to than regular attenders, sporadic attenders and disengaged youth. In addition to social resources and support, the devoted also thought about and planned for the future more than

the disengaged, sporadic or regular attenders. The devoted were also less likely to be truant, have C, D and F grades, feel alone and misunderstood, or be rebellious or temperamental. In regards to risky behaviors, 88% reported never consuming alcohol (63% average for sample) and 93% never had smoked marijuana (75% average for sample). Additionally, 91% reported never having sexual intercourse (80% average for sample) and 89% reported never engaging in oral sex (79% average for sample). Furthermore, the devoted were happier with their body image, more engaged in volunteer work and organized activities and clubs, more likely to donate 20 or more dollars of their own money to a cause or organization, and were more likely to have been involved in an organization where they played a leadership role in a meeting, presentation or event. The correlations in this study are interesting, but it is unclear why the devoted are committed to church attendance.

While youth church engagement is associated with positive outcomes, many families do not feel youth ministry is valued highly by their congregation. According to the National Congregational Life Survey (Woolever & Bruce, 2004), only 16% of surveyed congregations reported ministry for children and youth as one of the three most valued aspects of the congregation. Additionally, only 58% reported satisfaction with current child and youth offerings.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

### **Criterion and Sampling**

The criteria for participating in the current study were: 1) first year university students attending college immediately following high school and 2) attended a Christian church regularly while growing up. In order to fully understand the transition experience of young Christians into college, participants were purposefully sampled by gender and attendance. Thus, four groups were created: women who were regular attenders in college, women who did not regularly attend, men who were regular attenders and men who did not regularly attend.

Following IRB approval for the project (See Appendix A for approval letter), recruitment was accomplished through in-person and email advertisement in introductory college courses and by providing study information to contacts in leadership positions in campus clubs, organizations, ministries and churches. For class recruitment, a script was used towards the end of class inviting first year college students who were attending college immediately following high school and regularly attended church growing up to participate if they either regularly attended church or campus ministry or did not currently attend any church or ministry. A sign-up sheet was available for those who were interested in signing-up after class, asking only for their name and email address. A PowerPoint™ slide with the name of the study and the email address of the researcher was also shown for those that wished to email their interest at a later time. Interested participants were sent an email script and provided a copy of the consent form. Participants that responded and designated an available date and time period were sent an email confirming their interview time and date. Participants were sent a reminder email the day of the interview. Participants who scheduled an interview date were interviewed.

Contacts in leadership positions of churches, college ministries and campus organizations were also given information about the study to share with potential participants that met the sample criterion. Information was in the form of a flyer with the researcher's email address on it. The script on the flyer was modified to recruit men. These methods were utilized because recruitment from classes did not yield enough participants.

### **Procedure**

This study was conducted through in-person semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted at a public Midwestern university in a private reserved conference room. Participants were seated at a table across from the interviewer. Participants were told before the interview they were free to skip any question they did not want to answer and were welcome to leave the interview at any time. Participants were also informed that if a question was not clear to ask for clarification. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Notes were taken by the interviewer immediately following the interview to avoid distracting the participant. Interviews were approximately 25 minutes to one hour in length.

The door was shut and a sign was taped to the door that stated, "interview in progress, do not disturb." An Apple IPAD™ was used to record the interview and to take notes following the interview. An application called Notability was utilized for this purpose. The IPAD™ was put in airplane mode to avoid any disruptions from potential notifications. A script was used for both the opening and the closing segments of the interview. Participants were asked if they had a chance to look over the consent form and were encouraged to read through it and ask any questions if needed. The participant was asked if they were in agreement with the terms of the consent form, and then asked to sign and date the form. The author then signed and dated the form also. Seventeen interview questions and seven probes were asked while conducting

interviews (see Appendix B). If the participant's answers were unclear to the interviewer, clarifying questions were asked such as, "what do you mean by \_\_\_" or "could you describe what that felt like" or "what were your thoughts about that at the time."

### **Ethical Considerations**

A locked filing cabinet was used to keep sensitive documents safe in a private office. The use of an IPAD™ and Notability, a digital voice recording and note-taking application, allowed the researcher to have one file for both notes and recordings, so that the notes for each specific interview could never be mixed up with another. Use of the IPAD™ also made the transfer of the files that contained notes and recordings between devices (IPAD to computer) easy. Once files were transferred from the IPAD, the files were deleted. A secure university server was used to store all digital documents and audio files.

Interviewees were coded with a double digit number prior to interviews, in the audio recording and in notes. Additionally, pseudonyms were used in place of the participant's names in transcriptions. The college participants attended was referred to as a public Midwestern university. Digital data was backed up on a jump drive and was password protected using BitLocker® encryption. The jump drive was stored in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. Physical data from notes and consent forms was stored in a private office in a locked filing cabinet.

### **Participants**

Twelve first-year college students participated in this study who had attended a Christian church regularly during their childhood. Six participants indicated they were regularly attending either a campus ministry or church while 6 considered themselves non-attenders. This sample represented a group of first-year college students from diverse Christian denominational

backgrounds. Though it was not an intention of this study to investigate sects of Christianity, the sample provided rich detail from a variety of religious contexts in which participants were raised. Ten participants were recruited through introductory college courses: 7 women and 3 men. One participant, a male attender, was recruited through a church and an additional participant, a male non-attender, was recruited through a campus organization. Involvement in this research was voluntary, and no compensation for participation was offered. Written informed consent was provided by participants prior to being interviewed. Information from interviews was compiled in Table 1 below to provide an overview of each participant.

Table 1

*Twelve First-Year College Students Who Regularly Attended Church During Childhood*

Pseudonym	Religious Service Attendance	Childhood Church Affiliation	Year in School	Gender	Current Religious Identity Status
Dylan	Yes	Lutheran	Freshman	Male	Christian
James	Yes	Non-Denominational	Freshman	Male	Christian
Olivia	Yes	Assemblies of God	Freshman	Female	Christian
Molly	Yes	Disciples of Christ	Freshman	Female	Christian
Kylie	Yes	Lutheran	Freshman	Female	Christian
Emily	Yes	Baptist	Freshman	Female	Christian
Zachary	No	Presbyterian	Freshman	Male	Christian
Sebastian	No	Catholic	Freshman	Male	Catholic
Lucas	No	Methodist	Freshman	Male	Agnostic/Spiritual
Lucy	No	Methodist	Freshman	Female	Spiritual
Maya	No	Congregationalist	Freshman	Female	Curious
Sophia	No	Catholic	Freshman	Female	Catholic

### Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to analyze transcripts. IPA involves engaging with interview transcripts and interpreting and evaluating data simultaneously (Smith, 2007). Additionally, the focus of IPA is on specific meanings ascribed by participants, and the contexts and social worlds involved rather than the frequency of these meanings. Initial

in vivo coding was utilized by the author for each of the participants to attempt to best maintain the integrity of the participants' voices. Additionally, for the purposes of interpretation, interview transcripts were printed with wide margins on the left and right. The margin on the right side of transcripts was used for notes and the left side for later theme identification following the recommendations of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Initial coding was performed by underlining potential codes and making notes in the right side margin. Interview recordings were listened to during this process to reconnect the author with the participant. The transcripts were then read through again by the author to identify any additional codes and provide additional interpretative notes that relate the codes to the entirety of the transcript. Codes were sorted into thematic groupings for each research question. Themes were noted on left side margin of each transcript. Once each transcript was coded, the transcripts were read through one more time to add codes and interpretative notes which emerged through familiarity with all transcripts. Additional theme notes were also made at this time. Themes across all twelve transcripts were compared for frequency and interrelatedness. An overarching theme structure was developed using themes present in at least 3 transcripts. Direct quotes from interviews were used that best described the overarching theme structure and the participant's point of view.

Quotes were selected for themes utilizing a two-tier process outlined by Watts (2014) which includes 1) creating a pool of quotes by considering which excerpt best communicates what each participant's overall perspective is and 2) considering which of these quotes contributes to existing research literature. This process involves reading transcripts through a first-person, in the shoes of the participant and third-person, in the shoes of the researcher perspective. Because of the quote selection method employed and considering IPA involves

simultaneously analyzing and interpreting data, results were presented in the same chapter as discussion. Results were analyzed utilizing a first-person perspective of participants' quotes which were chosen for each theme using the process outlined above. Interpretative notes made in the right margin during coding aided in this process. Discussion follows the results and includes connections to current research literature and implications of results (Smith, 1995). Conclusions and future considerations and directions were addressed in the subsequent section. Results were provided with interpretation because it fits the type of analysis utilized. Data was analyzed and interpreted and sections of direct quotes were provided from interviews for illustration purposes. Sensitive information that may have been traceable to the participants such as names of churches, ministry groups or people were changed and replaced with a general description of the content in brackets. Dialogue unnecessary to understanding the theme in participants' responses was removed. An ellipsis was used to denote where portions of a participant's discourse was taken out.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability was achieved through reflexivity, low inference descriptors and theory triangulation (for a review of validity strategies, see Johnson, 1997). Interpretive validity was achieved through the use of in vivo coding and providing verbatim quotes from participants in the results. Reflexivity was applied to combat researcher bias. The primary investigator provided transparency in his background and connections to the research topic (see: pg. 20) and took notes during interviews. Additionally, audio recordings were listened to during initial coding.

Denzin (1978, p. 294) described the purpose of triangulation: "Triangulation, or the use of multiple methods, is a plan of action that will raise sociologists above the personalistic biases

that stem from single methodologies... Triangulation of method, investigator, theory, and data remains the soundest strategy of theory construction.” This research lacks triangulation in investigators, data and methodology. Triangulation of theory was employed in the analysis of results for this study.

### **Researcher background**

I am a 30 year old Christian male. I was not raised attending a Christian church regularly, though I was baptized Lutheran and attended vacation bible school one year as a small child. I also attended Sunday school intermittently (only a few times across early childhood). My only memory from church as a child was the pastor saying that we needed to “chop Satan’s head off.” Through preadolescence and adolescence I attended services maybe once or twice a year with my mother, but the services were at Spiritualist churches that did not teach out of the bible or mention Jesus. In college and post-college I went to Christian church services about 4 times total with friends of mine, and though, I liked some of the services, I never identified myself as a Christian. I sought out churches at the age of twenty-seven because of dissatisfaction with my social life and a desire for meaning and direction for my life. I have attended a Christian church regularly now for over three years. During this time, curiosity struck me about the phenomena of Christian disengagement from church in college. I had heard testimonies (a faith life story) that involved a period in college where the person was no longer involved at church, or what is termed in the Christian community as “falling away.” I also met college students while working at a bible camp in 2012 who decided to work there because they wanted to reconnect with God after not being involved in church much or at all in their first year of college. I wanted to know what growing up Christian was like and I wanted to hear more

experiences and perspectives from college students who attended church regularly during their childhood.

## **CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

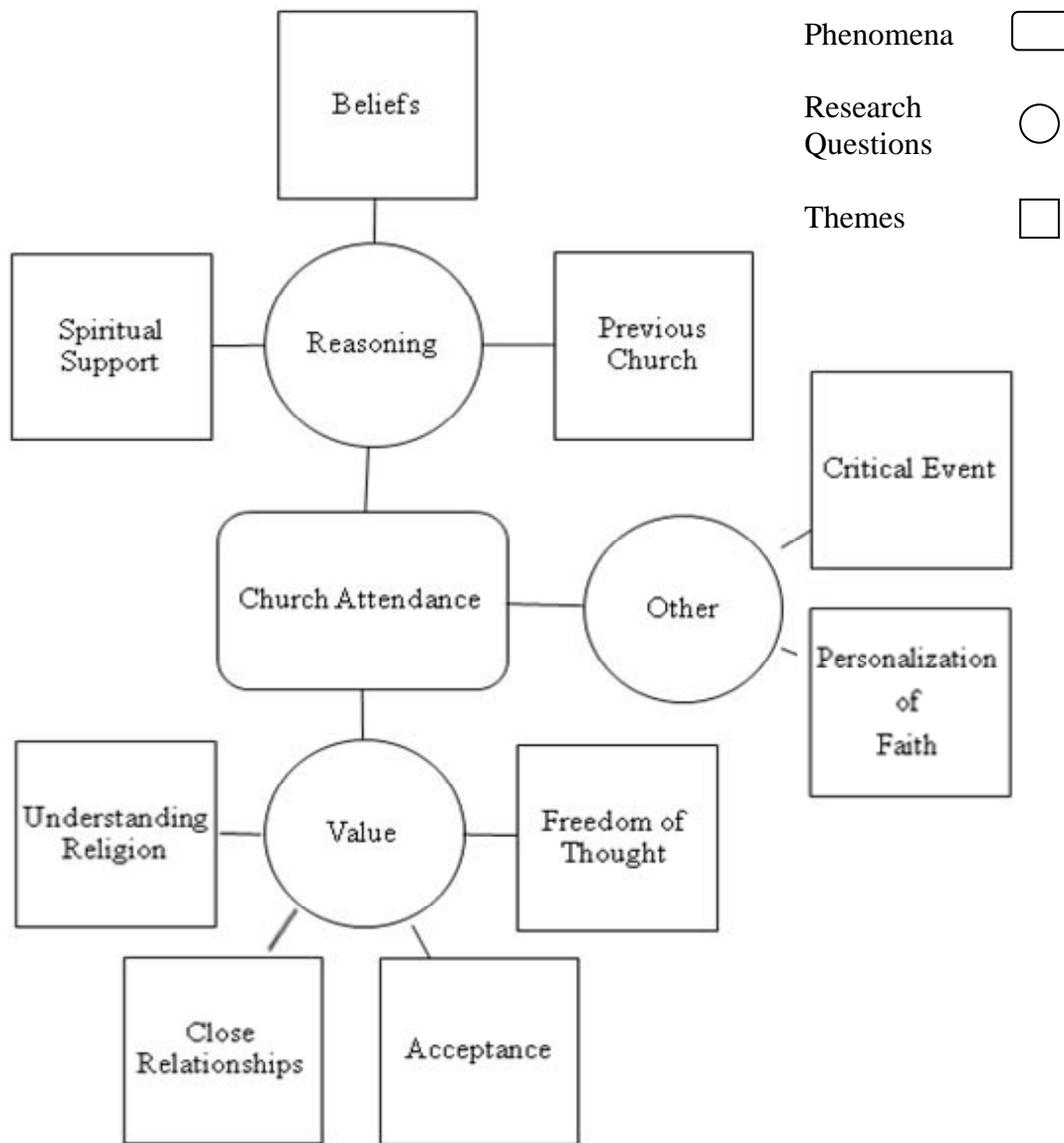
### **Introduction**

Twelve first-year college students shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding church, religious upbringing and religion and spirituality. The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students think about church experiences and how they reason their church attendance. An additional goal was to explore the narratives of first-year college students' religious and spiritual lives for other key themes in their religious and spiritual development.

### **Overview**

Participants in this study valued close relationships, understanding their religion, acceptance and freedom of thought when discussing church and past church experiences. Close relationships with both church leaders and peers were highlighted. First-year college students in this study reasoned their church attendance in complex ways, often providing several explanations for why they currently attend or do not attend church. Major themes across both attenders and non-attenders included spiritual support, personal beliefs and previous church experience.

Two additional themes emerged from participants' student religious and spiritual life narratives through interpretative phenomenological analysis. Participants mentioned the process of developing a religious and spiritual identity and figuring out what their beliefs are and where they belong. Additionally, critical events and critical moments were referenced by participants coincided with changes in religious attitudes or meaning or changes in religious commitment. See Figure 1 below for complete thematic structure.



*Figure 1.* Thematic map of results. This figure illustrates the thematic structure for each research question.

What do first-year college students who grew up regularly attending a Christian church value in experiences at church?

How do first-year college students who grew up regularly attending a Christian church reason their current religious service attendance?

What other themes emerge regarding first-year college students and their current religious service attendance status?

### **What Do Participants Value About Church?**

#### **Close relationships**

The value of close relationships at church was described by 7 out of 12 participants. This included 4 attenders and 3 non-attenders. Relationships with both peers and church leaders were discussed. James valued the close relationships his church offered through small group bible study. He appreciated the ability to develop close relationships relatively quickly through self-disclosure:

And then there's my [church bible study] group of guys is really, really tight-knit. And even though I don't, I haven't known them for a long time, you know like, when you know everything about each other it's, you know, that reveals your flaws and your sins and your failures and so it's hard to not establish that tight relationship and that tight bond and so I think that's one of the better things about being in the church when you go to college is you establish those deeper relationships a lot faster.

Emily did not want to attend church after her family moved in middle school. Her attitude changed in high school when she developed deeper relationships with people at church. She described the people at her church as very personable and said they took time to get to know her. Emily shared, "I started developing deeper relationships. People reached out to me and took time to get to know me and that was when I really got serious about how I viewed god in my walk with God."

Maya, who no longer attends church, went through several youth ministers during high school and she most valued a woman who was interested in getting to know everyone. Maya said of her minister:

She was just awesome and she wanted to get to know everyone on a personal level and just wanted to know the differences. We weren't just one big group of high schoolers. We had our own names and we had our own interests and hobbies.

Maya's youth group went on mission trips and camping trips and held ceremonies for graduating seniors that allowed youth to share what each graduating senior meant to them. Maya described her relationships with peers in her youth group: "In the high school years, we call ourselves [youth group name] and it was completely high school and it was the closest bond I ever felt like with people."

Lucy, a non-attender, described her relationship with her pastor as, "very very close." She stopped attending church after both her pastor and youth pastor left the church:

Around 10<sup>th</sup> grade our pastor retired, so that was a big thing, like he was basically the reason that I liked it because we always had good conversations. And then my youth pastor left the next year because she was going, I don't know, I think she sort of stopped believing in God and she was a science teacher or something. So, sort of like the two big influences in my church left me, so I was like, 'what's the point of going now?'

### **Understanding religion**

Eight out of 12 participants mentioned either frustration with not understanding what is being taught at church or valuing how the church helped relate teachings or the bible to them personally. Five out of 6 church goers discussed understanding compared to 3 out of 6 non-attenders. Dylan described valuing his current bible study group from his church because issues

that directly related to him were talked about in the context of the bible. Dylan shared he does not understand everything in the bible:

I still struggle with necessarily knowing what is in the bible and what it says about everything, but that is one thing that I really enjoy about [bible study group] is we, like, dig in to that, actually, like talk about, like issues with, like dating people and, like the different, I mean all the different activities that go on in college.

Kylie's first church did not answer questions in ways that satisfied her family. Her family switched churches after a summer camp aided their understanding and religious growth. Kylie, who currently attends church, shared how her first church felt fake because they were unable to help her understand stories in the bible:

I didn't understand why everything was feeling so fake, like why like for instance, the story of Moses parting the red sea, like it was just kind of brushed off as like, "yup, that's just kind of an everyday thing" and I was just like, "what? I don't get it" and I realized I wasn't learning much from going there.

Zachary, who was not attending church, believed people in church are supposed to understand what the pastor is talking about. He appreciated his pastor's ability to make a sermon relatable:

A big part for our church is what something [my pastor] always did was, he kind of related it in a way kind of so it was easy for all of us to relate to our lives. Being middle-class families in an urban environment, we have a lot of benefits, but we still struggle with plenty, so I don't know, he just made it really easy for us to understand what god was telling us and how we could grow into our spirituality.

## Acceptance

Acceptance was a significant theme in participants' thoughts about church and their church experiences. One out of 6 attenders and 5 out of 6 non-attenders discussed acceptance.

Kylie, who attends church regularly, talked about how people should behave during church:

I think many times people are very judgmental. Like I was or I still am at times. And that's definitely not how it should be. We should be open and accept everyone for where they're at in their faith and in their walk and meet them where they're at and love them where they're at.

Sebastian, who is no longer attending church, shared his thoughts on what church should be like. He expressed, "it's a place where you can just kind of, it's where you can go and not, at least it should be, where you can go and not feel judged or feel different. You should feel accepted."

Lucy did not feel accepted at church when her mom remarried and they attempted to go her step-father's church together. She attended a church camp in 6<sup>th</sup> grade with some girls her age from the Lutheran church who told her they were really excited about spending the week with her. Lucy felt ignored by them at camp and pointed out the hypocrisy in claiming to be Christian, but excluding her from their clique. She compared the Lutheran church to the Methodist church she attended until 10<sup>th</sup> grade:

Lutheran is something kind of scary to me. Like because that church didn't really accept me how I thought it would, I don't necessarily see it for myself as a positive thing. And I know that Lutheran and United Methodist beliefs are very, very similar, so like I could get along in that church and I would be able to understand what they were saying, but for

me the United Methodist was more welcoming and United Methodist, to me meant like friendship and love. Sort of a place where I was comfortable.

### **Freedom of thought**

Four out of 12 participants valued freedom of thought at church. This included 3 non-attenders and 1 attender. Molly shared her difficulties with campus ministry leaders telling her what she should believe. She was raised in a church which embraced members' freedom to think for themselves. Molly described this conflict:

I'm part of the Disciples of Christ denomination and I feel like that, being a part of this denomination has given me more freedom to think for myself which makes it easier for me to not question everything, because I am not being told exactly what to do... Other denominations have a more set in stone like set of rules, basically and like, where as mine has like three rules and then the rest is your own interpretation in a smart mind what God tells you, what you think God's telling you, so it's been a struggle because like in the past other leaders from, like something new, like I'm in [a campus ministry], will say like, 'it's not a blurred line, it's this way' and it kind of makes me feel awkward.

Sophia, a non-attender, shared how her confirmation leader approached teaching about Catholicism. She valued explanation and the opportunity to think for herself:

She really impacted, like, the lives of me and like my life and the other students in the classroom because she was always getting us involved and like if we didn't understand something she would explain it to us and explain why it was that way or because for other like when people are trying to teach you something they're like, 'oh, that's, that's just the way it is.' But she would, she wouldn't try to force her beliefs in us, she would have us like think for our own and have us like make our own beliefs and like judgments.

Maya, who does not attend church, appreciated how her home church supported freedom of thought. She emphasized acceptance and a more open structure rather than strict adherence to rules and beliefs as valuable in her church experience:

My church is not very umm, very structured and we have to do this and that and in order to like belong to a church and it's very, 'whatever you believe, you are more than welcomed.' And so it was more of, 'this is what we're reading from the book and this is how it can reflect your life.' And so it was, it made me, like think for myself from a young age of, like 'what do I do; what do I believe?' and it wasn't so, 'this is, you're supposed to think this way.' It was very nice to be able to think for yourself.

### **Reasons for Attending or Not Attending Church**

For 6 out of 12 participants, spiritual support was indicated as a reason for their current church attendance status. Additionally, 6 participants identified beliefs as a major reason. Lastly, a previous church experience was mentioned by 3 participants.

### **Spiritual support**

Five church attenders and 1 non-attender discussed the church as a resource for spiritual growth and support. Participants mentioned connecting to God and other church goers and being encouraged, fueled and rejuvenated by church. Olivia had missed church over the summer after high school graduation because of softball. She described it as, "the first kick" before coming to college. Once on campus, began to notice changes in her personality, specifically anger, so she began looking for a college ministry. Olivia reported what she needed from the ministry:

It was at one of the first weekends. They had like a concert. I went to that. I talked to some people there. I talked to some of the girls and it was exactly what I needed because I knew that I needed to get back into the church, I knew I needed people who were going

to encourage me and want me to do my best and basically make me a better person than I was becoming. So, I knew I needed that push. Getting back into [that college ministry] was exactly what I needed.

James recognized the significance of spiritual support as well when reasoning his attendance at church:

I know the importance of communicating and fellowshiping with other believers and how much joy it can give you and fill you with and just that aspect of surrendering before God with other believers and building each other up and encouraging each other; it's just, you can't replace it. If you get too far by yourself, you're in a tough spot.

Zachary was focused on the social aspects of college and finding his social niche outside of the church. Religiously, he identified as having a "horizontal relationship with God" where he connects with God through service to others. Thus, he did not feel the need to attend church for spiritual growth because he was already involved in campus and community service. Zachary compared himself to freshman church attenders:

I'm right there with them, as far as religious as I am, but I think that either they feel responsible to go to a church or that they need that to have that spiritual growth and if I was that way, I would 100% make that my top priority, but being so involved with so much going on, especially through the fraternity with the service thing and starting up group mentoring, I'm going to be a mentor for a middle school student... I think that's going to be a, just another spiritual outlet for me and so I feel like I'm accomplishing what I need to accomplish as far as my faith journey.

**Beliefs**

Five non-attenders and 1 attender discussed beliefs when providing reasons for their current church attendance status. Two participants had beliefs they felt opposed the church beliefs and 3 others talked about questioning or figuring out their beliefs. Emily said she also attended church for spiritual support, but shared she attended because she believed God commands church attendance:

Well, because God commands us to be a part of it. Umm, but also I want to go to it because it fuels me to keep going and to keep, keep living for god every week, because it can get hard.

Maya mentioned her experience at her previous church as a reason for the habit of not attending church, but she also mentioned being unsure of her beliefs as a reason for her non-attendance:

I'm not sure in what I believe in and so I feel like sometimes with some churches they tell you what to believe in and since I'm still trying to figure it out, I think that would be a reason why I don't attend.

Lucas started understanding the wide array world views and beliefs in high school. After realizing that not everyone was a Christian and exploring different opinions, he disregarded the bible because he could not agree with what was written. Lucas shares why he does not attend church:

I don't attend because I would just kind of have a fit in the back. I would disagree with a lot of the stuff being said because typically in church you get more into the specific texts and teachings and that's where I originally kind of found my problem with it when I really looked into it.

## Previous church

Three non-attending participants mentioned their previous churches when they discussed reasons for their non-attendance. Maya's home church disputed financial and renovation decisions and the church became a more divided and political environment. Because of this, her family stopped attending regularly. Maya discussed how her habits of non-attendance carried over into college:

Like I've been saying coming from a church that's gone down a little bit, it's kind of a regular, I'm used to that a little bit too. Just, I don't think about it now. I don't think, 'oh I need to wake up and go to church now.' It died a little bit and so it just kind of, not that I lost hope or faith or anything, it just, it's not in my routine anymore really to go.

Sophia moved as a child to a different state. At her old church, she attended mass every day. She felt cared for there and was very close to the priest. The priest even taught her how to play several different instruments. At her new church, Sophia did not attend church very often and did not know the priests. She also felt her peers at her new church did not care as much about their religion as the kids at her old church. Sophia shared that her feelings about church were negatively impacted by her peers' complaints of not wanting to be at confirmation. Her peers would also stretch her by asking her why she follows so many rules. Moreover, Sophia was annoyed by how people attending the Spanish service she attended would not be as respectful and quiet as those who attended the English service. Sophia described her fear of experiencing a similar transition from one church to another in college:

It's just that, I don't know, I don't have, [heavy breathing] I'm just scared that I won't be able to find a good church here and I'm scared that from my transition from my first

church to my second church to a third church will be even greater, like if that makes sense. I don't know, that I really won't be able to, I won't know anybody.

Sebastian stopped attending church in his senior year of high school because his church was telling the congregation what sides of issues to be on regarding the 2012 presidential election. Specifically, he disagreed most with his church's views on gay marriage. The church's pushing of their opinions frustrated him to the point where he stopped attending. Sebastian shared his non-attendance may be due to thinking a church here would be just like his home church:

Just because of the way that the church I used to go to was the way it was, I guess I'm just assuming that the next church is like the same way because I only have experience from going to one church.

### **Other Emergent Themes**

#### **Personalization of faith**

Participants mentioned a religious and spiritual identity process of personalizing their beliefs or faith. Some participants mentioned the personal freedom and power of choice during college allowed them to take ownership of their faith. Other participants mentioned a process of trying to figure out what they believe.

Kylie discussed her transition to college from high school when she went to church with her parents. She described how the power of choice in college allowed her to take personal ownership of her faith:

I made my faith my own and I own it now. You know? And so that was kind of cool to see that change, because it's no longer something that I feel kind of like forced into, but not. I know it was my decision back home, but at the same time, now, because I have

that freedom to choose entirely because my parents aren't here, it's cool to take the ownership of it.

James' described a very similar experience. In high school, James felt like he was involved in church and bible studies because his parents were taking him to it. He realized in college how much he learned throughout his childhood and felt it was benefitting him greatly now. James discussed the transformation of his faith in college because of his desire and ability to explore it on his own:

You don't understand it until you make your faith your own and I think that starts in college and so, that process of making my faith my own and like pursuing Jesus because I wanted to and not because my parents were taking me to church was kind of where that all turned around.

Sebastian discussed the need to be an individual now. He disagreed with some of his church's viewpoints on issues and wanted to decide for himself what he believed and why.

Sebastian explained his process of religious self-discovery:

I'm growing up to be an adult rather than be a teen where I'm becoming my own person and I have to look after myself and eventually I'll be grown up and eventually I'll have a family and just getting all that figured out and I guess just wanting to know how I feel about everything, rather than just continuing to believe; and just questioning, 'do I believe this much of it?' and 'if so, why?' and 'if no, why?' and then just kind of going from there to see how I feel about everything.

Lucy disclosed she abandoned Christianity because she was unable to experience God. Lucy described her spirituality in terms of a personal ownership of self-determined beliefs and purpose:

My spirituality was for me personally and it was something that I could define on my own terms. So it was important to me to have something to live for, but that wasn't really rigid and still let me live my life, I guess.

### **Critical event**

For each of the participants, a critical event or series of critical events was attributed to changes in religious commitment or a change in meaning. These events included divorce, changing churches, conflict amongst the congregation, learning about different opinions and religious worldviews, attending a church camp, noticing a change in personality, other church members taking interest in their spiritual development, parents giving freedom of choice regarding church attendance after confirmation and the attitudes and behavior of peers. James and his friends participated in a religious program together. This event transformed his relationships with his friends, provided religious purpose and he started to take ownership of his faith:

There's about ten of us growing up all through elementary together; super tight-knit group, but we didn't have spiritual conversations and so we did this thing called LFL which was Lust-Free Living and it was just, you opened up about everything and you just got really deep with each other and there's a lot of spiritual growth and a lot of spiritual connection and so those guys are like my brothers and so after that happened that's when we started taking things a little more seriously and it wasn't just guys being guys kind of thing, it was guys being guys but with a mission. And so, once that happened we started to engage the guys that were younger than us and we had some bible studies with them at school and really tried to spur them on and so that was probably where I started to make my faith my own.

Dylan experienced a change in the meaning of going to church through his sister's survival from brain cancer. This event deepened family relationships and transformed the meaning of attending church. Additionally, Dylan shared it provided something real to think about and be thankful for:

It had a greater meaning because when I was in 5th grade, my little sister was in 2nd grade. She was diagnosed with a brain tumor and later they found, like, they removed the tumor but had to leave part of it because it was wrapped around a blood vessel and so then it grew back and it was cancerous so she went through like a, a whole ordeal and she is healthy now... and that really impacted my family but it drew us closer together and I guess closer to our faith so it made more of a meaning that way... you really had something concrete to, like think about as that, you know, like [she] was saved... and we believe God had an impact in that and so it gave it more of a meaning to like go and worship in Him and like have that faith.

Dylan also experienced a major critical event after graduating high school. Dylan described his realization that he was attracted to men and how this event pushed him to a point where he had to make a decision regarding his faith:

I came to terms with the fact that I struggle with same-sex attractions and it kind of really just shook my whole like, my whole thing... I either had to, like reject my faith or, you know, accept it, you know, and like kind of learn more about it... what the stance on it was and everything and I think because of my prior church involvement and it being part of my life, I decided to, you know, hold on to my faith and grow in it further.

Lucy experienced a series of life events in her family. Her father stopped attending church and believing in God, her parents got divorced and her mother remarried and started attending a different church. Lucy described how this strained her religious commitment:

My Dad no longer was going to believe in God and go to church, so that strained the relationship. When they got divorced, he still didn't go to church, so that sort of strained it because then I only really had one parent saying, 'let's go to church, let's read our bibles, let's pray.' So that was hard, because literally 50% of my influence stopped influencing me in that regard. Then my mother stopped going to that church because she went to the new church where I didn't know anyone and I didn't get along with people my age, so I feel like around then it got pretty unstable.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore what 12 first-year college students who attended church regularly during their childhood value about church and how these participants reason their church attendance status in college. A greater understanding of what first-year college students value about church and how they reason their church attendance can assist churches in developing youth programs and college-age ministries that promote positive religious and spiritual development. Additionally, a better understanding can extend religious and spiritual development theory in the contexts of the first year of college and church.

It is critical to research in religious and spiritual development to understand the contexts in which people discover, conserve and transform what is sacred to them. The first-year of college is a unique context to study religious and spiritual development because of increased individual agency and freedom to utilize it, for many, outside of the family context. With this

increased agency, there are opportunities for self-determined discovery, conservation and transformation of the sacred.

Non-attenders of religious services or ministries were not non-religious or non-spiritual. Religion, church and/or spirituality remained important to participants. Additionally, 5 out of 6 non-attending participants either developed a personal spirituality or were in the process of figuring out their beliefs. The other non-attending participant believed she could act out her faith by being a good person. These findings support the work of Arnett and Jensen (2002), who observed an overall decline in religious service attendance in emerging adults, but not for religious salience. For their participants, religious beliefs remained important even to those who were not attending religious services. First-year college students in this study described a process of personalizing their religion or spirituality. Participants personalized or were in the process of personalizing their religion or spirituality in a variety of ways including: feeling connected to everything through science, developing a spiritual purpose and set of beliefs, figuring out beliefs, taking ownership of faith away from parents, active involvement in public service as a spiritual outlet, trying to learn more about their religion, being a good person and trying to relate to the bible. This process of personalized religion or spirituality was also described by Arnett and Jensen (2002).

Two participants in this study did not attend church because they had not made an ideological commitment and did not want to be told what to believe. These participants may have been in a place where they were not conserving nor transforming what was sacred to them, but utilizing the college environment for spiritual discovery outside the context of church, so they could make a definitive commitment at a later time. This makes sense given emerging adulthood offers a peak opportunity to explore ideological beliefs and identities (Arnett, 2000).

Additionally, a ministry attending participant struggled with having a leader tell her what she should believe because she grew up in a church that supported the freedom of the congregation to interpret for themselves their own meanings. Future research should address how church or ministry autonomy support impacts religious and spiritual development.

Participants mentioned a desire for understanding, growth, knowledge, truth and/or purpose. According to attending participants, church can be a great resource for spiritual support. In addition, churches can also stifle this search for knowledge and understanding. Participants mentioned both autonomy support and impediments from church leadership in forming their own beliefs and meanings throughout childhood and adolescence. Five out of 6 non-attending participants valued acceptance at church, while only 1 out of 6 participants who attended church mentioned acceptance being important at church or in their church experiences. It is unclear why there was a disparity, though acceptance is an issue which may warrant further investigation for those who attended church during childhood, but do not attend in college.

The role of critical events to religious meaning, commitment and church attendance was a significant discovery in this study. These critical events included (among others): a sister being diagnosed with cancer, coming to terms with same-sex attraction, participation in a religious program, camp or mission trip, parental divorce, moving, changing churches, exposure to alternative worldviews, congregational conflict, church pushing political issues and pastors leaving. Gutierrez and Park (2014) recently investigated the impact of life events on worldviews and beliefs in college. The study was only over a period of 6 months, but 30% of participants changed their belief about God and 44% changed their belief about the afterlife. Life events in college did not moderate these changes in spiritual beliefs. The results of this study on first-year college students suggest life events or critical events have a strong influence on religious and

spiritual development throughout childhood and adolescence. In addition, going to college is a major life event which allows students to pursue their religious and spiritual interests on their own accord. Shifts in beliefs and worldviews are normative during this time as individuals personalize their beliefs as demonstrated in this study and by Arnett and Jensen (2002).

Half of participants reasoned their church attendance by a need for spiritual support. Church goers described connection with other church goers as well as connection with God at church in the context of spiritual support. Participants also discussed attending for fuel and rejuvenation. Non-attenders mostly reasoned their lack of attendance because of their beliefs – either they were figuring out their beliefs or their beliefs conflicted with those of the church. These results are best interpreted through Pargament's (2013) sacred theory framework for spirituality. Going to church can be a way to conserve what is sacred. Church was a means for attending participants to connect with God, connect with people with the same beliefs and a resource for spiritual restoration and energy. The spiritual support received from church helped church goers to maintain their spiritual identity, group identity and relationship with God. Two non-attenders identified themselves as in the process of discovery or figuring out their beliefs on their own. Non-attenders who still considered their religion important also identified ways they conserved their religion. One participant did this through public service and two others identified church as unnecessary because they can be a good person to maintain their religious identity. One non-attender who felt a spiritual connection through science and evolution conserved his spiritual identity by taking time each day to think about how he is related to every living thing.

Both attending and non-attending participants valued close relationships their church provided with leaders and peers. These relationships provided opportunities for spiritual

conversations, the ability to be vulnerable and authentic and feeling cared about. Loss of these relationships due to pastors leaving was significant for two participants who are no longer attending church. Place identity and the emotional attachments to place are embedded in the relationships between people at a given place (Chow & Healey, 2008). Because of this, place identity and attachment can easily be disrupted by changes in the people and activities within a given place. For these two participants, church lost significance after losing a close pastor. Two non-attenders in college also shared they attend their home church when they go home. Place identity should be further investigated in the context of church. Additionally, evidence from this study implies place identity may have implications for religious and spiritual identity development as well as church attendance in adolescence and college.

Many participants described church or religious services in relation to those they attend church with, describing behaviors and feelings that are characteristic of the group, but not themselves. Research has described this difference as delineation between person and group identities (Stets & Serpe, 2013). That is, a person's identity is a collection of meanings that are internalized and characterize the person as an individual. Group identities are meanings that only arise through interactions with a specific group of people. As participants are developing their identities and “making their faith their own” perhaps group identity through attending church provides a bridge between identity confusion and identity formation. Future research, therefore, should consider group identity in regards to religious and spiritual identity formation.

## CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The major findings of this study were as follows: (1) Non-attending participants valued freedom of thought and acceptance at church and both attending and non-attending participants valued close relationships and religious understanding. (2) Non-attending participants reasoned their non-attendance because of the state of the personal beliefs and previous church experiences and attending participants reasoned their church attendance because of a desire for the spiritual support it provides. (3) Critical events occurred in participants narratives which coincided with changes in religious meaning or commitment. (4) A process of personalization of faith was described by participants.

For some first-year college students, attending church is an expression of freedom and personal power to be an agent in their own religious and spiritual development. It is a context in which a student can connect with people with similar beliefs, connect with God and connect to a larger community for spiritual support. While most participants considered church important, even if not for them personally, it was not considered a requirement. While attending church can support religious and spiritual development, it is certainly not the only context in which first-year college students discover, conserve and transform what is sacred to them in their spiritual quest. Students not attending church services or a campus ministry conserved their spirituality through science and nature and through public and community service and being a good person. Future research should explore engagement in alternative contexts in which college students explore or express their spirituality.

The results of this study, supported by Arnett and Jensen (2002), provide evidence that church or ministry in college is sacred to some, but overall, the meanings of one's personal religious/spiritual identity is most sacred. Longitudinal research should look at sanctity as an

outcome variable and measure it throughout adolescence and through emerging adulthood for individuals attending church in early adolescence to examine the ways churches may impact development of sacred meanings. Additionally, religious and spiritual identity should be investigated through individual, group and place identity. Family identity is an additional area which warrants more exploration. A few participants described enjoying that church was something their family did together. Two participants even retrospectively appreciated their parents making them go when they did not want to.

Mahoney and Pargament (2011) addressed the significance of parents as an active guide in the spiritual and religious development of their children. Even though Lucas attended church through eighth grade, he mentioned he never knew how important religion was to his parents because they never talked to him about it. When he shared with his parents his thoughts and feelings regarding his agnosticism and what he believed, they were shocked:

Well, I've definitely kind of become not religious (laughter) and it's been interesting because it was never a, like I said it was never a spoken about, it was never spoken about, so I didn't think they were that, you know, I guess strict about that. And then I started talking to them about things and what I was interested in and what I was getting, what I was reading, what I was doing: this or that. And then it was kind of like, 'oh.' (laughter) You know, it was like they really take it very seriously even though they don't talk about it at all which I just thought was really strange because usually people who are really, really religious tell you a lot about it all time, you know.

Mahoney and Pargament (2011) argue that parental religious and spiritual guidance is necessary because approximately 50% of adolescents attend a religious institution once a month or less and thus are not receiving formalized spiritual or religious guidance. This case example

supports the notion that parents are important agents in their child's RSD and extends this beyond those who do not regularly attend a religious institution to include families involved in religious institutions as well. Desrosiers, Kelley and Miller (2011) affirm the importance of parents as guides to their child's relational spirituality, described as an individual's relationship with God and/or the universe. Mother openness to spiritual and religious discussions and paternal affection were significantly related to adolescent and young adult relational spirituality. Peer willingness to discuss spiritual and religious concerns was a significant predictor of relational spirituality as well. This study did not specifically address religious or spiritual conversations, though 3 participants discussed the significance of having spiritual conversations either with peers, parents or a pastor.

This research also provides case examples that warrant further research. For one of the participants, same-sex attraction was a driving force for religious commitment and church involvement. Further research should seek to discover the contexts and ways in which religious involvement can be helpful or harmful to those who experience same-sex attraction. This participant also mentioned engagement in a program for healing. Conflict between religious and sexual orientation and identities is an important issue recently addressed in research literature (See: Benoit, 2005; Haldeman, 2004; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). How this conflict is navigated by individuals and by interventionists and psychologists and the psychological and developmental outcomes of coping with this conflict need to be thoroughly investigated.

Perhaps the most salient finding was the discovery of critical events. Some critical events were church-based activities or programs such as a mission trip, camp or curriculum. Churches could potentially plan their programming to create a critical event for youth in their religious and spiritual development. Helping youth make their faith their own could be a goal of

congregational youth programs. In developing youth programs, congregations should consider the values expressed by participants: acceptance, close relationships, religious understanding and freedom to think for themselves.

Pargament and Mahoney (2005, p. 180) provide an excellent rationale for why sacred meanings are important in the lives of people and why further study beyond global measures of religiosity is necessary:

People invest a great deal of time and energy in sacred matters; people go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred; sacred aspects of life elicit spiritual emotions; sanctification offers a powerful personal and social resource that people can tap throughout their lives; and the loss of the sacred can have devastating effects.

Strides have been made towards more thorough empirical research on religiosity through the creation and use of sanctity scales, which have been more accurate predictors of outcomes than general religiousness (Mahoney et al., 2003, DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010). In addition to using these scales as predictors, future research should consider utilizing sanctity scales for outcome variables. It is imperative for RSD research to further explore the ways religious institutions and families can be helpful and harmful in spiritual and religious development, especially considering the potential negative effects of sacred loss or religious/spiritual strain.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited by a small homogenous sample of first-year college students attending a public Midwestern university (N = 12). The majority of participants were sampled from introductory human development courses and do not represent diversity in ethnicity. Although

there was great diversity in denominational background, this study included only those who attended a Christian church regularly during their childhood. The sample potentially could have great diversity in church attendance regularity in childhood as well as currently because participant interpretation of “regular” attendance may vary. Additionally, participants who identified themselves as current regular attenders may have done so because they felt it was socially desirable. This research also lacks triangulation of investigators, data and methodology. This research relied on one interviewer, using a semi-structured interview, who collected data at one time, at one place and from only first-year college students. Thus, the results of this study constitute a glimpse in to the phenomena of first-year college student church attendance. This research is not intended for generalization, but it is a purposive exploration into the phenomena of church or ministry attendance after the transition to college. The findings represent the thoughts, feelings and experiences of 12 first-year college students enrolled in a public Midwestern university who attended a Christian church regularly during their childhood.

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## APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 12/13/2013

**To:** Neil A Rowe  
4133 Ontario St  
Ames, IA 50014

**CC:** Dr. Kere Hughes-Belding  
2362 Palmer  
Brenda Nelson  
4380 Palmer

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Church Engagement, Identity and Growing Up Christian

**IRB ID:** 13-038

**Approval Date:** 12/12/2013      **Date for Continuing Review:** 2/24/2015

**Submission Type:** Modification      **Review Type:** Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your church/churches growing up... How would you describe Sunday school, youth group and/or church services?
  - A. What were your thoughts and feelings about these services at each stage of childhood growing up?
2. What were your relationships with church leadership (pastor/priest/minister) and peers like at church?
  - A. What were your impressions of the church leader(s)
  - B. What were your impressions of other members of the congregation?
  - C. What were your impressions of peers?
3. Tell me about your religious upbringing...how would you characterize / describe it?
  - A. Were there elements of your religious upbringing that you liked or disliked, found difficult or easy?
  - B. Describe any changes or stabilities in your religious routines growing up.
    - i. What do you think influenced these changes or stabilities (if applicable)?
4. If you were to become a parent or give advice to friends with children, what would you recommend as the ideal religious upbringing for young children?
5. What does church mean to you?
  - A. What is it supposed to be like?
  - B. What should happen?
  - C. How are people supposed to behave in it?
6. How do each of your parents feel about church?
  - A. How frequently do they attend?
  - B. Describe any similarities or differences between you and each of your parents.
7. Tell me about your transition to college from high school... What's changed and what hasn't changed about how you feel about church?
  - A. What do you think has influenced these changes or stabilities?
8. How would you describe your relationships with your close friends and/or peers at college?
  - A. How well do you feel they can relate with you or you with them?
  - B. How often do you spend time socializing with these friends and/or peers?
  - C. Discuss (if you are aware) the church attendance of these close friends and peers.
9. Describe what Christian means to you.
  - A. If different than your definition of what Christian means, define what a specific denomination (if this was your experience) means to you.
10. Describe how you identify yourself now, religiously or spiritually.
  - A. Discuss the importance of religion and/or spirituality to you.
    - i. Why do you feel this way?
  - B. Discuss the importance of church attendance to you.
    - i. Why do you feel this way?
11. Why do you feel like you like currently attend or don't attend church?
12. What do you think is different about your experience from those whose church engagement is different than yours their first year of college?
13. Is there anything you want to change or add or subtract from what you have said?
14. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you want me to know about regarding first year college students and their engagement or non-engagement in church?

**APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** Church engagement, faith, and growing up Christian

**Investigators:** Neil A. Rowe (researcher), Dr. Kere Hughes-Belding (major professor and supervising investigator)

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is being conducted by a graduate student at Iowa State University for the purposes of completing a master's thesis. Dr. Kere Hughes-Belding is the major professor of the graduate student in the Human Development and Family Studies department (contact information below). Dr. Hughes-Belding is also the supervising investigator.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the experiences of first-year college students who grew up in a Christian church. Understanding how students define church engagement and how they reflect on their religious experiences will provide insight into the dynamics of identity development and religion. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a first year college student who has grown up in a Christian church.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last about thirty to sixty minutes in the form of a one-on-one interview. It will involve you allowing the researcher to interview you about your experiences growing up in a Christian church and your feelings about church engagement in your first year of college. The interview will be audio recorded. The recording will be transcribed by the researcher and will be erased following the transcription (within one month). The interview will be conducted as your schedule allows. You may also be contacted later to make sure that the researcher is correctly representing your ideas and opinions.

## RISKS

The risks of this study are very minimal. While participating in this study you may experience possible discomfort at disclosing information during an interview. However, you are free to not answer any of the questions and to withdrawal your participation at any time.

## BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study has the potential to guide further research of religious and spiritual development in emerging adults (ages 18-25). This information may lead to future research that aids in understanding the relationships between religion and human development.

## COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not incur any costs from participating in this study. You also will not be compensated for participating in this study.

## PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

**Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and you may stop answering questions at any time. You may decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early for any reason and it will not result in any penalty.**

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential and will not be made publicly available. To ensure confidentiality the following measures will be taken: The subjects will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in writing the notes, transcriptions and thesis. Any other identifying details obtained in the course of an interview or observation will be altered to protect confidentiality. All data gathered will be kept in a password coded USB drive using the BitLocker encryption. The some contents of the interviews may be used to demonstrate overall themes observed from participants in the write up of the thesis. Quotes may be used for public presentations as well as for research article publication. Pseudonyms will be attached to these quotes and any information that may link the quote to the participant (such as names of people or places) will be changed or excluded. The persons who will have access to the individual data and/or summarized data are the researcher, major professor and members of the researchers program of study committee.

Committee members may be granted access to de-identified data to aid in the identification of themes and assist in other forms of data analysis.

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

### QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

For further information about the study contact: Kere Hughes-Belding, Ph.D. (major professor) by phone (515-294-8441) or by e-mail [kereh@iastate.edu](mailto:kereh@iastate.edu)

Or you may contact me at: Neil A. Rowe (researcher) by phone (515-294-9578) or by e-mail at [neilrowe@iastate.edu](mailto:neilrowe@iastate.edu)

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu) <mailto:[IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu)>, or Director, [\(515\) 294-3115](tel:5152943115), Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

**INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining  
Informed Consent)

(Date)