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Religious and Spiritual Communities Must Adapt or Die: Surviving and Thriving during Challenging Contemporary Times

Thomas G. Plante

Abstract: Current trends within both religious and secular communities suggest that contemporary times mean that people spend more time alone than with others. Community engagement in general has been declining, while religious and spiritual community engagement in particular has dropped off significantly in recent decades, and most especially following the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although humans are social beings and benefit from community engagement, we tend to avoid or minimize our affiliations and associations, including our religious and spiritual ones today. Religious and spiritual communities must adapt to changing times or risk becoming irrelevant, diminishing further, and losing their sustainability to continue with their activities and services. Religious communities might wish to consider the best state-of-the-art evidence-based practices to engage their members, as well as appeal to those who might be interested in joining with them. There are many mental and physical health benefits to active engagement with spiritual religious practices and communities. The world could use more rather than less community engagement, including religious and spiritual engagement, during our challenging contemporary times.

Keywords: religious; spiritual; communities

1. Religion and Spirituality Are a Communal Affair but “The Times They Are A-Changin”

Religion and spirituality have always been a community affair. Community benefits include a sense of belonging, connection with others of like mind; caring for one another in times of need; offering social norms and community expectations; life cycle rituals regarding births, coming of age, marriage, sickness, and death; and much more (Brown et al. 2023; Stone et al. 2003; VanderWeele 2020). All of the major religious traditions have focused their attention on the benefits of community engagement and the importance of being part of a group or tribe with shared, or at least similar, identities, beliefs, values, and practices. Being part of these religious and spiritual traditions and communities also helps individuals to be part of something bigger and grander than themselves. While religious and spiritual communities and traditions offer helpful strategies for personal or individual beliefs, practices, and activities, they are, at their core, community- or group-minded and focused (Foltz and Foltz 2003; Numrich and Wedam 2015; Ward 2000).

However, contemporary times and changing lifestyles associated with numerous and fast-moving cultural shifts have resulted in the evolution of our religion and spiritual engagement into more of an individualistic, personal, and private matter rather than a group or a communal one (Cohen and Hill 2007; Cohen et al. 2016; Diener et al. 2011). Many religious and spiritual activities of today, regardless of the religious tradition or denomination, focus on individual beliefs and practices rather than communal group engagement. Religious traditions and communities have experienced a significant decline in church/synagogue/mosque attendance and membership in the United States, Europe,
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and elsewhere in recent years (Brenner 2016; Burkimsher 2014; Vahidi Mehrjardi 2022). These declines have been especially steep and dramatic during the past several decades relative to earlier times (Davis et al. 2023). For example, while approximately 40% of the American population claimed to have attended a religious service during the past week, according to yearly Gallop polling, most recent figures suggest that less than 30% affirm religious service attendance on a weekly basis. However, additional research that relies on direct observation of behavior rather than on unreliable self-report survey data suggest that only 15% might be a more accurate figure of those who attend religious services or activities at least weekly (Burge 2020; Jones 2021; Norpoth 2020).

Furthermore, the recent global COVID-19 pandemic forced those who continued to practice and engage in their religious and spiritual traditions in a communal manner to isolate and quarantine for months on end and even for several years in many locations (Froud 2021; Pillay 2020; Williams et al. 2023). Although most religious communities provided online activities and services, and many continue to do so even with the pandemic now receding, once quarantine restrictions were lifted, many of these churchgoers have not returned to communal practices and services as they had during the pre-COVID-19 days (Kincaid 2022; Siaki 2021). They likely gave up the habit or found that attending in-person communal events were not rewarding or engaging enough to return to pre-pandemic attendance habits and patterns. Thus, while the decline in communal religious engagement has been occurring over several recent decades, the COVID-19 pandemic perhaps dramatically accelerated this trend to the point where it is now questionable whether in-person religious and spiritual events and services are feasible or sustainable for many religious groups moving forward (Kincaid 2022; Siaki 2021). The lack of communal attendance and affiliation also means less money in the collection basket, and thus, decreased engagement, attendance, and memberships mean less money is available to maintain these groups and traditions. The prognosis for these communities may be guarded at best.

Recent research has also found that more and more people are completely unchurched without any particular religious affiliation, identity, or community (Gabrie’l 2022; Seversen 2020). These unchurched and unaffiliated individuals who are interested in spirituality have found, or are looking for, their own unique way to be spiritual. This might include being in nature by hiking, biking, and running, for example. It might also include practicing secularized versions of spiritual or religious practices such as meditation, especially mindfulness. It might also involve practicing a secularized approach to yoga at a local yoga studio, health club, or spa (Harmon 2023; Naor and Mayseless 2020; Smith et al. 2022). These non-religiously associated spiritual activities are often conducted or completed alone on one’s own terms and conditions. They rarely involve close supervision and often only minimal instruction or coaching. They also rarely include the benefits of a communal holding environment for support and guidance. People looking for spiritual engagement simply do what feels right for them without the structure or wisdom of age-old religious traditions, groups, or expert guidance. Typically, they engage in their spiritual quests without any social or community support other than perhaps what they might receive from their hiking partners or yoga classmates, for example. These activities are not steeped in the wisdom of century- or millennium-old spiritual practices and traditions nor with the guidance or supervision of trained clerics or sages who have been both trained and ordained to be of service as spiritual leaders and directors. Of course, one does not need to be part of a spiritual or religious community to be spiritual or religious. Spiritual and religious communities offer structure, resources, and expertise that might be helpful to others but are not necessarily a requirement for spiritual and religious development and maturity.

Much has been written about our increasingly isolated and individualistic society in general where, for example, more people live alone than with others, and most avoid any engaged or significant community, civic, or religious attachments or affiliations (Buecker et al. 2021; Lim et al. 2020; Twenge et al. 2021). Certainly, recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as our increased reliance on digital technology, have
accelerated these socially isolating trends (Ernst et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2020; Lim et al. 2020). Our increasing dependence on digital technology, social media, remote work, and so forth provides less of an impetus to engage with others in person and in community. However, perhaps there may be a way to parlay digital communities into in-person communities over time with ongoing encouragement. Finally, well-publicized religious organization scandals such the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as various financial and sexual scandals in Protestant and non-denominational mega churches, have also discouraged active involvement and trust in these institutions and organizations (Goodwin 2020; Hilary and Huang 2023; Plante 2020a). The hypocrisy of sexual or financial scandals within religious organizations that preach morals, ethics, and high standards for behavior can be breathtakingly shocking to many, as well as deeply disappointing and tragic for those who have entrusted their souls, and money, to these groups (Jordan and Sommers 2022). Finally, antisemitism and Islamophobia resulting in bomb threats and periodic violence during community gatherings have also contributed to a decrease in in-person communal activities and engagement within both the Jewish and Islamic religious traditions (Shanaah 2023; Rosenblatt 2020). Thus, a confluence of factors that include increased secularization, a growing mistrust of institutions and organizations including religious and spiritual ones, and technological advances that diminish our need to be with others in person have led to less community engagement in general and less religious and spiritual community engagement in particular (Plante 2024).

2. Less Community Engagement Has Negative Ripple Effects on Our Well Being

This increased social isolation and lack of communal engagement is problematic on many levels and has ripple effects. It also appears to increase our risk of mental health challenges including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicidality, loneliness, violence (including gun violence), and so many other personal and community ills (Hutten et al. 2021; Mann et al. 2022). Much has been written, researched, and discussed about the dramatic increase in mental health and behavioral problems now facing society. In fact, in 2021, the United States Surgeon General issued an unprecedented advisory on the mental health crisis in the United States impacting youth in particular (Office of the Surgeon General 2021). He also issued a later, separate, and unprecedented advisory about the damaging health consequences associated with increased loneliness as well (Office of the Surgeon General 2023). Clearly, as a society, we have not been attending to our community and communal needs as we should, and our current lifestyle choices and demands make community engagement that much more difficult to participate in and sustain.

As the famous 1623 John Donne poem begins, “No man is an island” (Donne 1987; also see He and Huang 2023). We have evolved to be people that survive and thrive within communities. Certainly, our history as hunter–gatherers depended upon our ability to live, work, and cooperate within close tribal communities. Historically, we needed others for safety, security, education and learning, reproduction, and not only for survival but also for flourishing. These communal needs have not changed or atrophied in our contemporary, modern, and increasingly individualistic and isolated society. We are more than a collection of individuals or self-sustaining islands but are a combination of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual needs that all must receive attention and care in order to survive and thrive (Adler 2009; Suls and Rothman 2004). We need healthy and sustainable communities, and we increasingly do not have them any longer as our modern society evolves.

3. How Can We Reverse Our Isolative Society Trends?

So, how might we turn these concerning trends around? How can we regain our community engagement, and what can religious traditions do to help achieve these goals? What are some sustaining practices that religious and spiritual traditions and communities can offer contemporary, skeptical, and individualistic-minded people? How can religious communities, both local and global, be appropriately relevant enough today to more fully engage contemporary people? While there are no simple answers to these challenging and
important questions, several principles and best practices might be of value and considered. Being mindful of these principles and strategies could be helpful in designing efforts to improve a sense of community within our contemporary society. Religious and spiritual communities might be uniquely able to make these efforts to do so.

A Pathway to Kinship

First, it is important to mention that there is a pathway to community, and even to kinship, that must start with civility and then gravitate to hospitality, solidarity, and mutuality (Boyle 2017; Pelly et al. 2018; Plante 2019, 2022a). People certainly do not immediately move from isolation, individualism, and skepticism to satisfying community and engaged connection with others. Rather, several necessary steps must be considered and acted upon. First, we must have civility (Davis et al. 2021; Forni 2010; Plante 2017). We live in an increasingly polarized community and world with the frequent and vigorous demonization of others who think, feel, look, and behave differently than we do. Social media and high-profile models who garner a lot of attention, such as certain politicians and celebrities, have created a climate where aggressive insults, cynical hostility, bullying, the demonization of anyone who disagrees with our views, and threats of violence or cancelling are common (Dershowitz 2020; Norris 2023). Treating others with respect and engaging in dialogue using active listening skills with those who we disagree with in a civilized and thoughtful manner has become rarer during contemporary times. We seem to have lost our ability to behave in a civilized and respectful manner with others (Fahey et al. 2023). Basic rules of civility and polite interpersonal behavior are critically needed in order to have any hope of developing a sense of community and connection with others (Bybee 2020; Forni 2010; Washington and Lathem 1996). We need to regain our desire and skills to engage in civil discourse with all, even among those who we do not like or agree with, regarding important and perhaps controversial topics. Being in community means people will have different views and perspectives that need to be considered and managed in a civil manner. While this might sound obvious, it has become harder to do during these current polarizing times.

Second, we need a renewed emphasis on hospitality. We need to be able to be gracious and welcoming to others and assist them in feeling comfortable within our communities (Ennis and Tatlock 2008; Martin 2018; Michelman 2021; Ryan 1990). Too often do community groups not strategically and systematically attend to hospitality by being sure that everyone, and perhaps most especially reluctant newcomers, are welcomed and treated warmly. Third, we must focus our attention on others with solidarity and mutuality in mind (Kolers 2016; Laitinen and Pessi 2014; Sosis and Alcorta 2003). We must be careful to avoid hierarchical relationships or vertical structures that prioritize some privileged individuals over others. Even when we perform charitable acts with marginalized communities, we must be careful to treat and experience each other as equals and be with one another in solidarity (Parsell and Clarke 2022; Pearlman 2023). In religious communities, clerics must be vigilant to avoid clericalism that can create a chasm between themselves and the people that they serve (Burnham 2023; Plante 2020b). Although clerics have education, training, and positions of authority, they must not exploit their privilege and status and treat others as inferior or generally “less than.” Finally, with civility, hospitality, and solidarity maintained and enhanced, we have the necessary ingredients to work towards kinship, treating each other as part of the same human family and as beloved brothers and sisters (Boyle 2017; Martin 2018).

The pathway from civility to kinship is necessary as a prerequisite to satisfying and sustained community engagement (Boyle 2017; Plante 2019, 2022a). Religious traditions and communities would be well served if they focused their efforts on this pathway as they try to appeal to and engage with more people, especially those hesitant to participate in religiously based communal activities or those who have left these communities and have failed to return (Kincaid 2022; Siaki 2021). Additionally, religious communities may wish to think creatively regarding how they may offer religious and spiritual communal activities.
in a manner that attracts and retains contemporary people. Too often, religious traditions have become stale and stuck in their perceived tried and true methods of the past. They might offer religious worship services as well as sacred scripture study (e.g., Bible study, Torah study), periodic lectures, social events, and charitable volunteer activities. However, these activities and offerings may not be compelling enough for contemporary sensibilities and desires, especially among those who are reluctant to participate to begin with.

Perhaps there are specific strategies that religious communities can be mindful of and consider offering to the public to enhance their influence and expand their membership and community engagements.

4. Suggested Strategies for Religious and Spiritual Communities during Contemporary Times

4.1. Contemporary People Need Contemporary Solutions

Religious communities have been around for a very long time. Many of their traditions, activities, expectations, and services have evolved over not only just decades but over many centuries and even millenniums. While great wisdom comes from these age-old traditions, sometimes they are slow to react to changing times and circumstances. Our rapidly changing society, which includes adjusting to disruptive and game-changing modern technologies and perspectives, may catch these more slow-moving communities and institutions off guard and flatfooted. They tend to be slow to change and skeptical of contemporary trends and fades (Putnam and Campbell 2012). They tend to move and change as very large ships on the sea rather than smaller and more nimble vessels. For example, many religious communities continue to struggle with contemporary perspectives on the role of women in leadership positions or the acceptance of LBGQTI+ or disabled people in the community (Acosta 2020; Beagan and Hattie 2015; Plante 2022b). They may also have difficulties with contemporary views on sexual ethics and behavior, including pre-marital sex, contraception, abortion, reproductive rights in general, and interfaith relationships (Salzman and Lawler 2012). While religious communities certainly do not need to endorse or support contemporary secular views on any of these issues, they do need to be able to respond to them in a way that is consistent with their religious traditions and beliefs yet in a way that is respectful and thoughtful about defending or altering them with the times. They need to avoid being overly judgmental if they want to attract contemporary and often reluctant people to their groups. Religious communities, traditions, beliefs, and practices do change over time, and these communities must at least go beyond their frequent tendency to hold on to their status quo and justify their views and policies by basically saying, “No, because we say so.”

Certainly, contemporary people need contemporary solutions. Adjusting to changing needs, methods, desires, and perspectives is important for religious and spiritual communities to stay relevant. For example, communities might consider securing ongoing feedback about what types of services, groups, and activities might interest and compel their members or their potential members to more fully engage with their communities and traditions. Religious communities that come with baggage or sustained bad press (e.g., sexual or financial abuse) might wish to address these issues directly and publicize their efforts to overcome their challenges. Often, religious and spiritual communities are not very sophisticated about public relations, branding, and message framing, often being reluctant to use contemporary expertise that might be available to them. Religious and spiritual communities should also be mindful of the need for people to feel welcomed and cared for in a positive, non-judgmental, and life-affirming manner that offers them various services and strategies for contemporary living.

4.2. Learning from Best Practices and Experts

Too often do religious communities not learn from secular or non-religious communities about what galvanizes people to engage in community activities. There may be the best practices and evidence-based strategies for community engagement that they are not
attending to, as they might be too insular when they consider how to best conduct their activities. Additionally, religious communities, clerics, and religious community leadership may operate in echo chambers where they talk to each other rather than with experts outside of their religious communities and traditions who might be able to offer them state-of-the-art strategies to achieve their community goals. Seeking out expert opinions, including market research and strategic planning professionals among others, may be helpful to think creatively and outside of the box when it comes to strategies for better community engagement.

4.3. Understanding the Needs of Others and Meeting Them Where They Are at

Religious leaders, especially those who are celibate clerics without their own spouses and children, may have a hard time fully understanding the lives of their congregants or potential congregants. Clerics with families may also have difficulty fully appreciating the lives and lifestyles of their community members and potential members who have different lifestyles, demands, and priorities than they experience. Religious community leaders might consider strategies for ongoing advising and consulting with diverse members of their communities in an open and honest manner. Often, advisory boards can be merely window dressing and are not taken as seriously as they should. Religious leaders must be careful not to be defensive when criticized or too quick to dismiss thoughtful suggestions from their advisory board members or from their membership. People vote with their actions, and if religious community activities, services, and offerings are poorly attended, then that signifies a symptom of a larger problem that needs to be addressed in order to turn these declining trends around.

Limited financial and personal resources necessitate triaging the types of services and activities religious communities can realistically offer. They simply cannot be all things to all people. They must prioritize and try to make the best use of the resources that they have. Thus, taking full advantage of their efforts means that they must strategize and triage in a way that is thoughtful and based on the best available evidence, as well as on their limited resources. Thus, a constant evaluation and re-evaluation of what is working and what is not working is needed, with regular feedback from all stakeholders. Religious communities must be ready to switch gears or alter their priorities and efforts based on the data that they accumulate. Being nimble does not typically come naturally to religious communities but might be critically needed in order to understand and meet the needs of those who they serve or those they wish to serve.

Perhaps several case examples might offer ideas that church communities might consider, including within their own faith communities.

Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest in Los Angeles, has become well known for his efforts in Homeboy Industries (Boyle 2011, 2017). His program seeks to transition gang members into productive citizens of the community and is a faith-based ministry that involves practical solutions to life (e.g., securing and sustaining a productive job, removing gang tattoos) and spiritual engagement and community development. His efforts have helped to create communities that are faith-based, productive, and have been award winning. Fr. Boyle received the Presidential Medal of Honor in 2024.

Congregation Beth Am is a reformed Jewish community in Northern California. They offer a wide range of programming to congregants of all ages, as well as an ongoing high-level speaker series, social service activities, and various classes for study and engagement. Their Mitzvoth Meals program has congregation members sign up to provide meals when members are struggling with significant personal problems such as health troubles, divorce, loss of a family member, and so forth. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they significantly increased their Mitzvoth Meals program to help elders and others obtain groceries and other services during the quarantine months.

Menlo Church is a formerly Presbyterian but now non-denominational church with multiple settings. Their range of services offers for engagement is comprehensive and includes worship services, multiple 12-step groups for the community, a scouting troop,
a divorce recovery group, an after-school homework club for school children and teens, concerts, and even an impressive espresso bar on the premises. The Church has been growing while most others in the area have been shrinking.

These brief examples may provide a template for others to consider and potentially emulate.

5. Conclusions

We know that people have social and spiritual needs and desires, and religious and spiritual communities need to be able to address these issues in ways that are appealing to contemporary people living their lives who are often oblivious to what these traditions and communities can offer them. These religious and spiritual communities may need to be creative and consult with various stakeholders and experts in order to develop plans to engage people, using the best contemporary practices within their communities. Being open to the best newer practices and even to secular experts both within and outside of religious communities may be helpful to develop a plan of action that is both successful and sustainable. There is a popular statement often in reference to evolution and to changing times that states, “adapt or die” (Lynch et al. 2013; Sagarin 2003). Religious communities need to take this saying to heart as they move forward with their often-ancient traditions and practices and adapt them to the needs and desires of people living in contemporary and challenging times.

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