

# GOD'S MIXED ECOLOGY:

THE CHANGING SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE

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## Today's Culture Begg for Witness Beyond the Familiar

Immediately before Jesus ascends to heaven at the beginning of the book of Acts, he speaks final words to his disciples. They are words of promise and charge: You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Do you think Jesus knew that those first disciples would gravitate toward Jerusalem? That they would cling to what they already knew? Do you think he knew that if he didn't spell it out, they might not envision their mission extending all the way to Samaria and the ends of the earth? Of course it's pure conjecture, but I imagine he knew enough of human nature to suspect that the gravitational pull toward the familiar would be strong. He knew they needed a power beyond what they could muster on their own to fight against that pull. So Jesus reminded his disciples: you are not in this alone; the Holy Spirit is at work in you. And he spelled out their mission: to be witnesses in the familiar places you know and in the places you've never imagined going.

Today, that same gravitational pull toward the familiar is as strong as ever. We are drawn toward people, lifestyles, purchases, neighborhoods, jobs, schools, restaurants, music, and of course, churches that feel familiar. It's what social psychologists call the familiarity principle, and it leads to a kind of social clumping that keeps us from living out the very mission Jesus gave us. The church came of age in a time of cultural cohesion<sup>2</sup> that normalized this kind of sorting and frankly limited not only the diversity of membership but also the willingness of those members to engage with their neighbors, unless of course those neighbors looked, spoke and acted like them. The church's de-



But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

*Acts 1:8...*



facto mission became to attract and nurture the familiar.

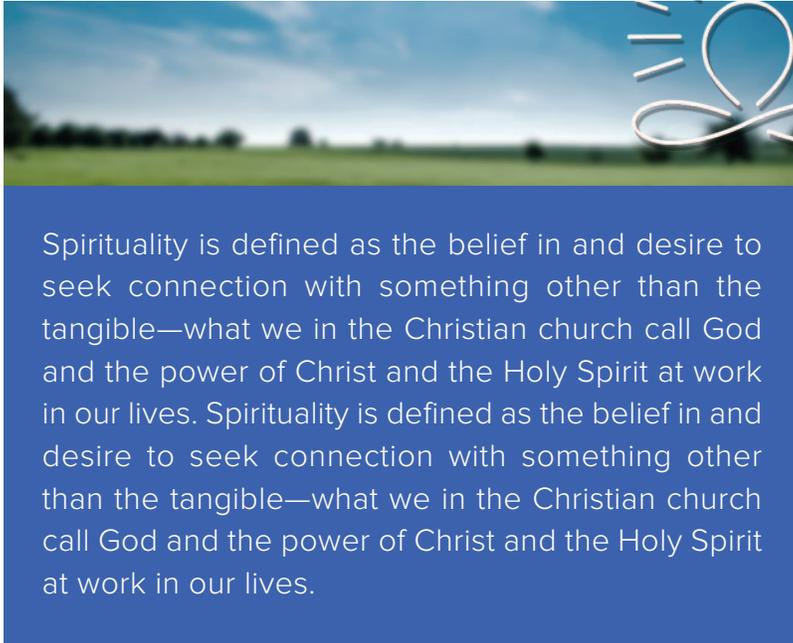
We have fallen into the very trap Jesus sought to help us avoid.

What does it look like today to be witnesses beyond Judea, to Samaria and the ends of the earth? The changing landscape indicates that what used to be considered the ends of the earth are actually in our own backyard.

Being a leader in the church today requires a new imagination for what the church looks like and acts like. Today's complex, non-linear, liquid culture begs for diverse expressions of the Body of Christ living out the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, introducing a hurting world to love and grace and mercy and justice and hope and joy. The church can no longer rely on a single mode of delivery: namely the traditional, attractional-model local church. It must diversify in order to be relevant in the current landscape. It must find its way to a mixed ecology of church. Perhaps the first step is to notice the ways God is already at work creating just such a mixed ecology, with diverse expressions of Christian witness and faithful communities connecting and forming disciples who are impacting the world.

# The Future Church Must Engage the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR)

The phrase, “spiritual but not religious” has been in use for years, but until recently the existence of people who might have claimed that designation didn’t catch the attention of leaders in the church, presumably because it was assumed they didn’t significantly impact the church. Because the culture tended to push people toward affiliation—whether it be in a congregation, service/social/sports club or other organization—those who opted out were not of particular concern. The church had its hands full meeting the needs of those who were already in the doors. That reality has changed dramatically.



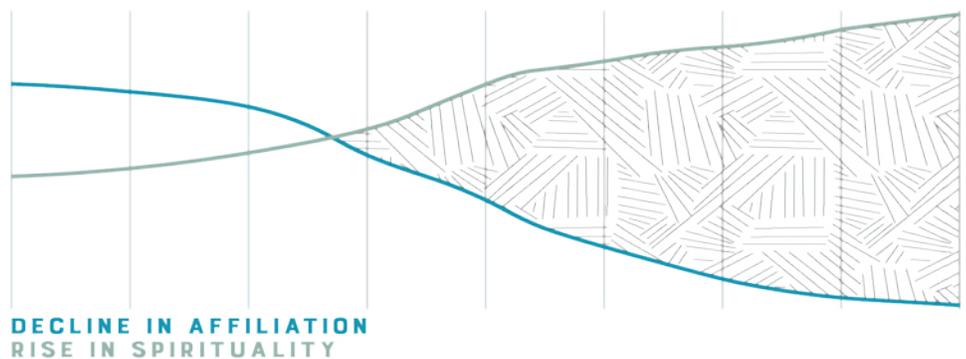
Spirituality is defined as the belief in and desire to seek connection with something other than the tangible—what we in the Christian church call God and the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. Spirituality is defined as the belief in and desire to seek connection with something other than the tangible—what we in the Christian church call God and the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Research over the last several decades tracks a marked decrease in institutional affiliation. With that decrease in affiliation, the church has experienced a steady decline in membership and attendance.

Just as researchers have been tracking the decrease in affiliation, they have also noted a growth in spirituality. Spirituality, for the sake of this conversation, is defined as the belief in and desire to seek connection with something other than the tangible—what we in the Christian church call God and the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in our lives<sup>3</sup>.

It is a mysterious combination of meaning, purpose, grace, mercy, justice, love, hope, joy and connection.

*The graph to the right is a non-scientific depiction of the decline in religious affiliation and the rise in spirituality.*



The dashed area indicates the gap between those who the church is currently reaching and those who are seeking meaning and purpose but not through the church: the self-identified SBNR. This area represents those the church cannot reach by doing what it already knows how to do, and yet it is also the area of greatest potential for the church’s mission. Make no mistake, the gap is not going away; it is only getting wider as less people seek to affiliate with a church. If the institutional church continues to measure success only by increased membership and attendance at traditional churches, thereby making the goal to close the gap by lifting the lower line, they are fighting a losing battle and missing the potential for transforming lives and communities among the SBNR.



This kind of transformation requires a different kind of church and a different kind of leadership. The question is not simply, “How do existing churches increase vitality so that more people will want to affiliate?” (though that is still important), but it is also, “How can the church (that is, the Body of Christ) understand its mission field and direct its resources in new and innovative ways that help transform lives and communities among those who are not likely to attend a traditional church?” How can the church be a witness in Samaria and the ends of the earth?



Until recently, we described the religious landscape almost exclusively in terms of congregations of varying denominations and traditions. Today the spiritual landscape is much more diverse and can be described as a mixed ecology. Ecology, as the branch of biology that deals with the relationship of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings, serves as a fitting framework to talk about the spiritual landscape. In a healthy ecosystem, a diversity of organisms is essential. A mixed ecology in the spiritual landscape consists of a diverse variety of entities that exist in relationship with each other and to their contexts. Each has a distinct role to play in the health of the overall spiritual ecosystem.



Through our work at TMF, we are developing a map of this mixed ecology in the spiritual landscape. This paper is an attempt to describe the map and name some of the distinct organisms we are observing. It is not intended to provide an exhaustive description. Quite the opposite. In writing this paper, we are hoping to invite conversation about the emerging spiritual landscape and the church’s role in it.

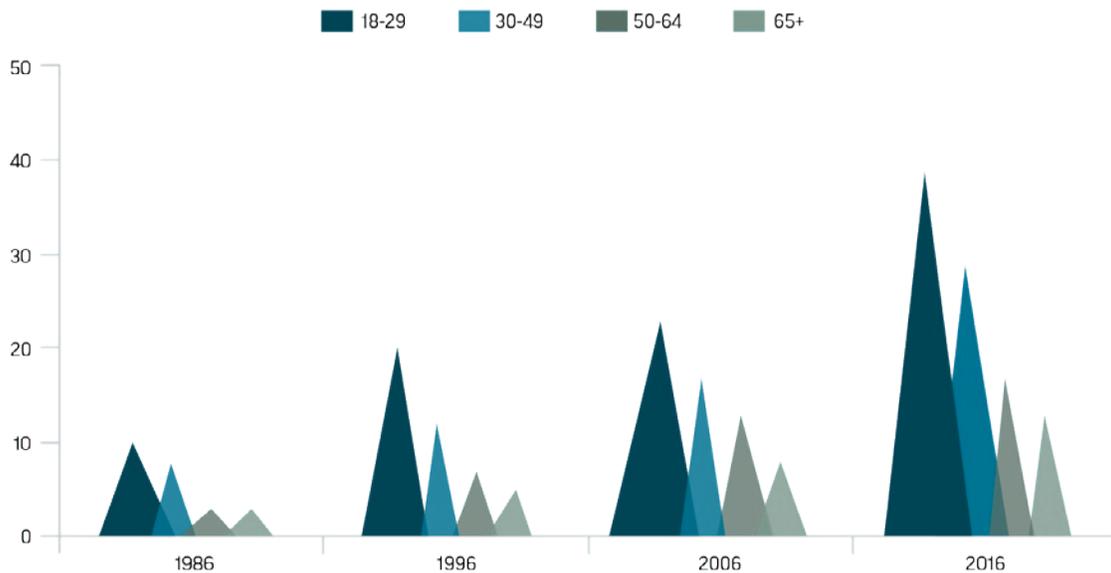


# Mapping the Spiritual Landscape

The decline in membership and attendance in mainline churches has become familiar territory in conversation and research. Still, when the Pew Research Center published numbers tracking the increase in those who claimed no affiliation with organized religion, so-called “nones,” it rocked the world of church leaders. Unmistakable was the increase in each age group and the sheer numbers of unaffiliated adults in the younger generations. Pew reports the number of those who claim no affiliation with organized religion increasing from 7% in 1972 to 23% in 2014. In a 2016 report, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) breaks down this increase by age group.

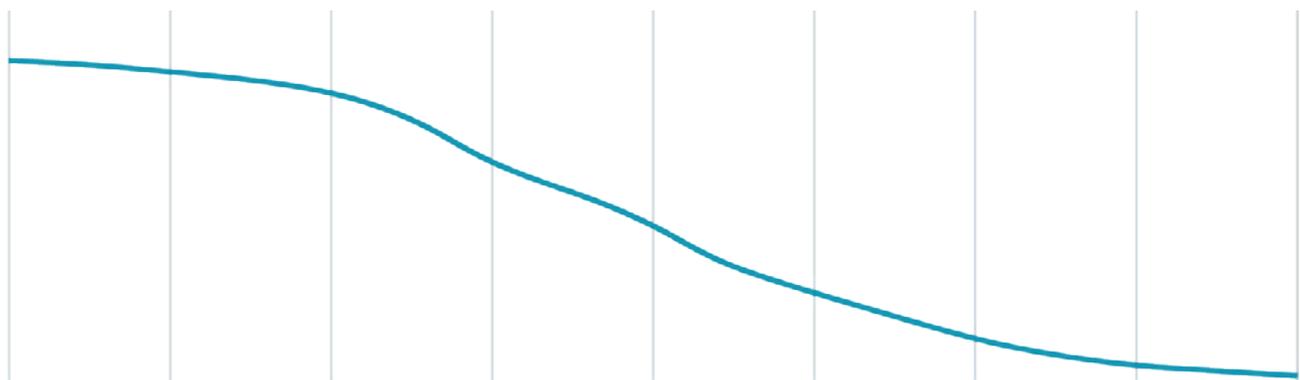
## MORE YOUNG ADULTS ARE UNAFFILIATED THAN IN THE PAST

Percent of each age group who are religiously unaffiliated, 1986-2016



Sources: General Social Survey, 1986, 1996, 2006; PRRI/RNS August 2016 Survey

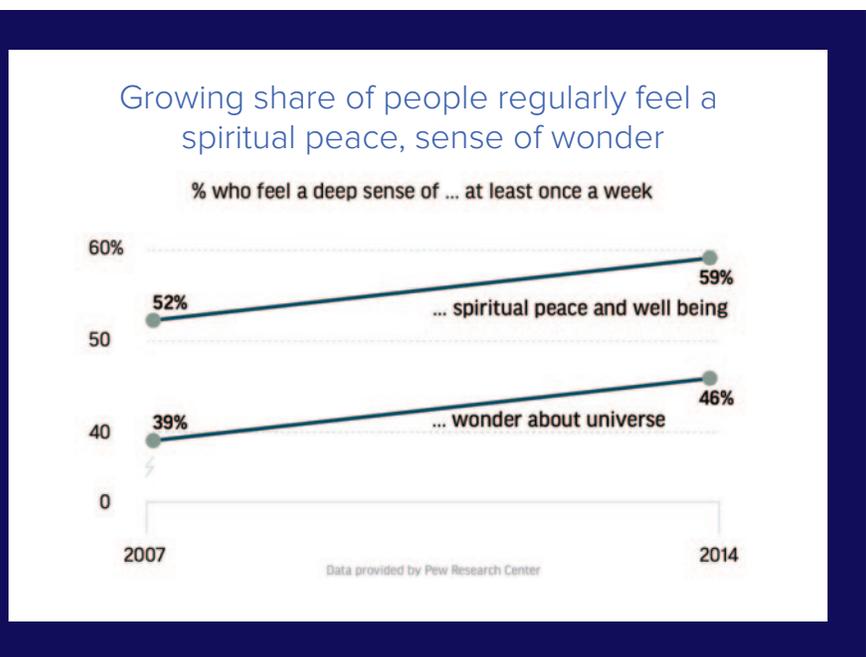
Note that 39% of young millennials claim no affiliation! What these numbers tell us is that there is no indication that the trend will reverse. The trajectory for membership in organized religion, in its current form, is a steady decline. And so we place our first line on our map: this blue line represents the decline in those who choose to affiliate with organized religion. It is the line of decreased affiliation.



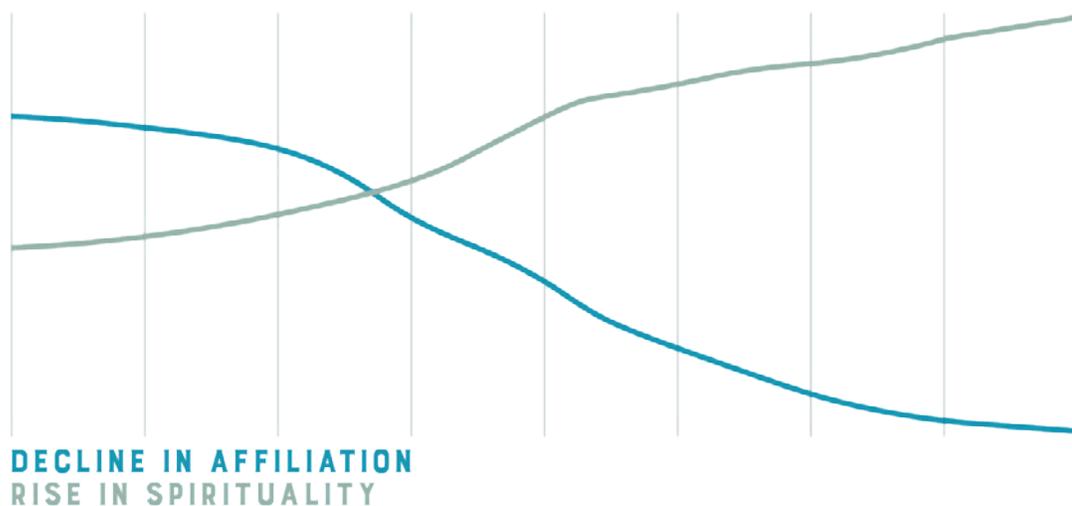
**DECLINE IN AFFILIATION**

In more recent years, researchers have begun measuring changes in spirituality—noting whether the population is more or less spiritual. Specifically, Pew’s research, gathered through self-identification (eg. “Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person?”) as well as asking questions which attempt to capture a person’s connection with Something More (eg. questions tracking a person’s sense of wonder in the universe and deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being), found a 7% increase in spirituality in just seven years from 2007 to 2014. Where we might naturally have assumed that decreasing church affiliation indicates decreasing interest in spirituality, those assumptions simply do not hold up in the research.

Barna describes the shift that has taken place: “Once synonymous, ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ have now come to describe seemingly distinct (but sometimes overlapping) domains of human activity. The twin cultural trends of deinstitutionalization and rising individualism have, for many, moved spiritual practice away from the public rituals of institutional Christianity to the private experience of God within.”<sup>4</sup>



When we combine the research, we find that an increasing number of people are seeking meaning, purpose and even encounters with the Holy; they simply are not seeking it through the church. And so emerges an awareness of those who understand themselves to be spiritual but not religious (SBNR)—those seeking meaning and purpose but not through organized religion.



The combined research, depicted in this graph, forms the basis for our map of the spiritual landscape.

# The Trends Confront the Church

Pew's research gave the church new language to describe the elusive unchurched and de-churched whom churches have been so desperately seeking to attract. "Nones" and "Dones" have become the target demographic for church growth efforts, including church planting and congregational transformation programs. The irony is that the church is working harder at the things it has already been doing for decades in order to attract the very demographic who is rejecting the church as it has been. Edwin Friedman talks about characteristics of imaginatively gridlocked systems, the first of which is an "unending treadmill of trying harder."<sup>5</sup> The church is on that treadmill with very little to show for it. The congregation with a full calendar of programs, worship services, Sunday School classes and committee meetings may be busy, and its members exhausted, but if it is not reimagining itself in ways that will actually engage Nones and Dones in meaningful ministry, it is facing a crisis of relevancy in this new landscape.

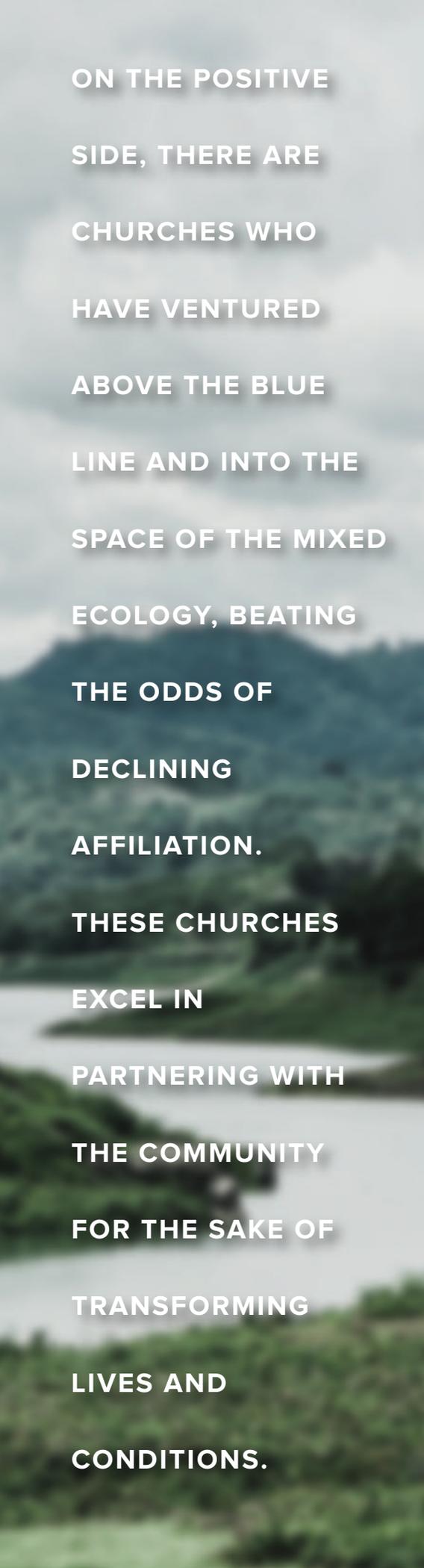
Returning to our map, the blue line depicting the decline in affiliation is, by definition, the place where we find traditional, attractional model churches. Those churches directly on the line are the ones who are keeping up with the decline in affiliation. They tend to offer strong worship and program ministries; their buildings are in good shape; they reach out to the community so that people will know who they are and ideally decide to visit the church; they use the latest materials to create an inviting and vital ministry so that when people arrive, they feel welcomed and connected. The problem is, of course, that less people are arriving on a regular basis, and it is increasingly difficult to attract new guests.

Many pastors of these attractional model churches are what David Gortner calls "Talented but Tenuous" leaders.<sup>6</sup> They have gifts for ministry but lack the courage to take risks for the sake of the mission of the church. They lean into traditional disciplines of preaching, pastoral care, administration, Christian Education and worship leadership, but they lack self-confidence and decisiveness to pursue a new thing. Gortner describes these pastors as those "who can come up with wonderful ideas but have neither the skill nor the will (nor feel the permission) to help communities bring ideas to fruition. They are kind, thoughtful, dedicated, considerate of others' thoughts and feelings, and full of ideal visions of what the Church could be; but they are also conflict-averse, anxious about and watchful for opposition (and uncertain how to manage their own anxiety), and unclear about the nature of human systems and organizations." He also reminds us that "denominations as systems seek out people with, and shapes people into, these patterns." Do you see what is happening in the church Gortner describes? Leaders may have innovative ideas and creativity but fall prey to the constraints and rewards of the denominational systems to which they belong. As Edwards Deming once said, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets." The church rewards compliance and tenure rather than innovation and disciple-making. Thus solidifying the church's place on the blue line of decline.



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Existing, traditional, attractional model churches are membership-based organizations. Said differently: churches exist because people affiliate with them. Therefore, as the trend moves away from affiliation, the trend moves away from the church. It follows that the churches on the blue line are those who are simply keeping up with the decline in affiliation.

It is overly simplistic to say that every church falls on the blue line of decline in affiliation. Some clearly fall below the line. They are not keeping up with the trend; they are falling well below the fault line and are losing ground every year. These churches tend to be internally focused, have lagged on building maintenance, have lost touch with their community and their mission, and are not attracting visitors. The leaders who do not challenge these churches Gortner calls “placeholder” clergy. They may have basic skills of preaching, worship leadership and pastoral care but have not developed the capacity to inspire leaders to engage the community in transformative ways.

On the positive side, there are churches who have ventured above the blue line and into the space of the mixed ecology, beating the odds of declining affiliation. These churches excel in partnering with the community for the sake of transforming lives and conditions. They tend to offer excellent worship experiences, meaningful small groups engagement, high expectation membership, and significant investment in the community. Their leaders are courageous, self-aware, collaborative, and innovative. These churches were founded and formed in traditional, attractional models, so they still look and act, for the most part, like traditional churches. At the same time, they have not limited themselves to the way they’ve always done things. They are allowing creativity and innovation to diversify the ways they communicate, worship, gather and partner with the community.

This leads us to an exploration of the area between the line of declining affiliation and the rise of spirituality. This space beckons the church to be an authentic and relevant witness, to imagine new ways of engagement and presence, to venture into the world of the SBNR, to Samaria and the ends of the earth.

# The Mixed Ecology of Church

Biodiversity is the “infrastructure that supports all life,”<sup>7</sup> so notes Cristiana Pasca Palmer making an argument for the protection of ecosystems and the species within them. Essentially, environmental science reminds us that every living ecosystem thrives through its diversity of organisms. The opposite is equally true: the ecosystems most in danger of collapsing are those whose biodiversity is threatened. Cristiana Pasca Palmer describes, “The loss of biodiversity is a silent killer. ...by the time you feel what is happening, it may be too late.”<sup>8</sup> Did you hear that? “...by the time you feel what is happening, it may be too late.”

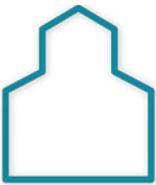


The biodiversity of the earth’s ecosystems serves as an apt metaphor for the church landscape. When we limit the diversity of expressions of church, we create a fragile ecosystem. When we limit the diversity of leaders who are living out our mission, we create a fragile ecosystem. When we narrow the pipeline of credentialing for ministry, we create a fragile ecosystem. We have rather successfully, even if inadvertently, created a very fragile ecosystem for the church’s mission. We have put all our eggs in the basket of the traditionally formed, attractional-model, local church. We have treated any other form of missional community as an intrusion or a distraction or even a threat to what we have in place. This singular focus on the traditional local church as the, not just primary but **ONLY**, means to carry out the mission of the church is our own silent killer.

The truth is, a diverse ecosystem has been emerging for years. It comes in the form of Missional Churches, Innovative faith communities, Non-profit organizations, and other expressions of disciple-making, life-changing, community-changing entities. To be clear, the traditional, attractional-model churches are a vital part of the ecosystem; they are simply not the whole of the ecosystem. Our own version of biodiversity is essential for missional flourishing. Let’s take a closer look at the diversity we are observing in the ecosystem of the spiritual landscape today.



**Attractional-model Churches** – As noted above, these churches have been formed and shaped by traditional understandings of discipleship and church growth; their strategic ministries are worship, discipleship small groups (including Sunday school), mission and service, age level ministries, caring ministries, and generosity. They tend to measure success by traditional measures of numeric growth: worship attendance, giving, engagement in small groups, mission, and professions of faith. All of these data points serve as helpful indicators of what can't be quantitatively measured, namely someone's relationship with God. The most vital of these churches will continue to thrive in the new landscape precisely because they attract those who wish to affiliate with organized religion and the best among them will even attract a segment of the unaffiliated. We need vital traditional churches who are not content to rely on what they already know and do, but who are constantly seeking ways to be relevant in a rapidly changing world. For example, The Gathering in St. Louis ([gatheringnow.org](http://gatheringnow.org)) is one church with four locations, one of which is online. Each site is unique to its context, two of which have repurposed church space to launch a new worshipping community. Floris UMC in Virginia ([florisumc.org](http://florisumc.org)) offers three sites for worshipers and is deeply committed to social transformation work in each of the communities where they are located. St. Paul's UMC ([stpaulumcdallas.com](http://stpaulumcdallas.com)) in downtown Dallas, a historically African American congregation, together with First UMC Dallas ([firstchurchdallas.org](http://firstchurchdallas.org)), a predominantly Anglo congregation, are collaborating with neighbors, community leaders and churches to create opportunities for conversations and prayer in order to raise awareness about racial inequities and justice issues. Each of these attractional-model churches are growing disciples and impacting their communities.



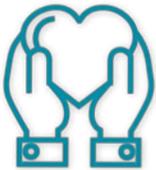
**Maintenance Churches** – For all intents and purposes, these churches look like attractional-model churches, but they are no longer attracting anyone. Rather they are struggling to preserve what is, often seeking to recapture what used to be. As described above, they are in steady decline and have lost their sense of purpose. They fall outside the healthy ecosystem of the spiritual landscape but warrant mentioning here since so many churches fall into this category.



**Missional-model Churches** – These churches were likely formed and shaped by traditional understandings of discipleship and church growth, but at some point in their lifecycle made a conscious decision to engage their community and their neighbors in a way that redefined how the church understood itself and its role. Their strategic ministries are defined and shaped by the gifts, assets, wisdom, needs and talents of the context—that is, their neighbors, participants, and the surrounding community. They may still have worship, small groups, and mission, but these ministries tend to look very different from a traditional attractional church, often with more diverse voices as well as creative settings and formats. These churches struggle to measure their effectiveness with traditional numeric measures of success because the measure of their impact can't always be counted or even seen. Examples of missional model churches include Broadway UMC in Indianapolis ([broadwayumc.org](http://broadwayumc.org)) (Rev. Mike Mather), White Rock UMC in Dallas ([wrumc.org](http://wrumc.org)) (Rev. Mitchell Boone, Neil Moseley and Rebecca Garrett), Wildwood UMC in Florida ([wildwoodflumc.org](http://wildwoodflumc.org)) (Rev. Michael Beck) and numerous Fresh Expression churches in Florida (& elsewhere).



**Innovative Faith Communities** – These faith communities are formed and shaped in new and fresh ways and settings but still have as their goal to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Their strategic ministries vary greatly but usually include a variation of gathering/worship, small group/faith development with accountability, hands-on mission/service, care/community-building and generosity/financial investment. These entities tend to appeal greatly to those who are seeking meaning, purpose, community and even the Holy but are not likely to find affinity in a local church. At the same time, these ministries often find themselves constrained by traditional measures of success, funding models, leadership training and expectations. These organizations and their leaders don't fit into the existing system and when they are brought into the system, they can find themselves strangled by the attempts to fit. Much work still needs to occur in this arena, on the part of both the denominational church leaders and the spiritual entrepreneurs, to reimagine funding models, credentialing, leadership expectations, measures of fruitfulness. Examples of innovative faith communities include Union Coffee House in Dallas ([uniondallas.org](http://uniondallas.org)), Gastrochurch in Houston ([gastrochurch.org](http://gastrochurch.org)), Simple Church in Massachusetts ([simpleumc.org](http://simpleumc.org)).



**Faith-based not-for-profits (engaged in disciple-making)** – The religious landscape has long included entities connected to faith traditions such as schools, hospitals, community centers and such. More recently, we have seen the development of faith-based non-profits which actually engage in disciple-making as either the focus or a significant aspect of their mission.

Typically formed to address an identified concern or need, they are less concerned with the organizational structure than they are with the stated purpose. They tend to direct resources toward meeting that purpose and form a structure as needed. As a result, they can look nothing like traditional organized religion and yet perform many of the functions of a congregation, including spiritual formation, community-building, and social impact. Think, for example, of Project Transformation ([projecttransformation.org](http://projecttransformation.org)), QuadW ([quadw.org](http://quadw.org)) and Project Curate ([projectcurate.org](http://projectcurate.org)).



**SBNR Meaning-making Communities** – We cannot map the spiritual landscape without noting the myriad of ways people (especially, but not exclusively, millennials) are gathering today. It's beyond the purview of this paper to map or even explain the diversity of these not-specifically-faith-based, meaning-making communities, but Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile offer an exquisite orientation to this SBNR landscape in their pieces, "How We Gather" and "Something More" ([howwegather.org](http://howwegather.org)).

Attractional-model Churches, Missional-model Churches, Innovative Faith Communities, Faith-based Not-for-Profits and SBNR Meaning-Making Communities all scatter the landscape to create a mixed ecology for the church's presence in the new spiritual landscape. When each of these ministries is strong, the church's witness is bold and relevant, more people in more communities experience love and grace, community and connection, and ultimately life-giving transformation.



THE MIXED ECOLOGY OF THE SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE

**Consider a small sample of the mixed ecology of church in the mission field east of downtown Dallas:**

n Munger Church (attractional-model), nearby Highland Park UMC planted this wildly successful, satellite, faith community in a historic church revitalizing it to reach a creative, eclectic mix of worshippers who are embracing what it means to be deeply devoted followers of Christ; Casa Linda and Elmwood-El Buen Samaritano, both are attractional-model, bi-lingual congregations deeply committed to their neighborhoods and to forming disciples; (mungerplace.org)

■ **White Rock UMC** (attractional-turned-missional-model church), a church on the brink of closure which reinvented itself to become a community hub including co-working space, urban garden, yoga studio, theater school and authentic, vibrant Sunday worship all for the sake of meeting people where they live and helping them know what it means to be the Body of Christ in a tangible way; (wrumc.org)

■ **Owenwood Farm and Neighbor Space** (Innovative faith community launched by White Rock UMC), a self-described collective of nonprofits and do-gooders who are organizing around the talents, skills and passions of those who live in the neighborhood, complete with a four acre urban farm growing fresh produce with those facing food insecurity, a mid-week worship experience around a meal and numerous community partnerships for social transformation; Bonhoeffer House, another non-traditional faith community is an intentional living community committed to following a Rule of Life and offering hospitality through a weekly meal open to their neighbors; (owenwood.org)

■ **Project Transformation** (501c3), whose mission is to engage young adults in purposeful leadership and ministry, support children in holistic development, and connect churches with communities, has two sites in east Dallas (including Elmwood-El Buen Samaritano mentioned above) through which lives are renewed and transformed on a daily basis. (projecttransformation.org)

This list gives a small glimpse of what a mixed ecology of church can look like (and doesn't even address the hundreds of Meetup.com gatherings in Dallas around small businesses, fitness-especially biking and running around White Rock lake, gaming, food, support/recovery, and fellowship, some of which fall into the SBNR Meaning-Making landscape). You can see that each church/organization serves a vital and unique purpose and engages a different demographic. Each of them are making disciples who live in generous and transformed ways in their schools, jobs, activities, families and neighborhoods. But each organization goes about this mission in very different ways. The stronger each of these entities is, the more critical a role it plays in the community as it meets people where they are and helps them to know love and to share love. When they are thriving, the traditional churches become, by their very presence, a witness of strength, hope and assurance. The daily engagement by the missional and Innovative churches, as well as the faith-based nonprofits, is in itself a witness to the incarnational presence of God in our midst. All of these churches and organizations, when they are thriving side by side, create a healthy, diverse ecosystem that is better able to live out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. When any of these entities is missing, as is the case in most of our communities, we find the church's witness diminished at best, irrelevant at worst. It is incumbent upon the leaders in the church today to explore new ways of being the church, the Body of Christ, in the world.





## Observations and Issues for Further Discussion

In our process of mapping the landscape, several observations surfaced. By sharing these reflections with you, we hope to offer fodder for further conversation.

As soon as we begin to define and label a category, inevitably someone is quick to name the exceptions or the ways a specific example in one category is also like the characteristics of a different category. The truth is, the lines between categories are imperfect and inexact. They are simply ways to help us understand the diversity of organizations needed in a mixed ecology.

- Where do you see these categories of a mixed ecology of church apparent in your own context?
- What other categories are you observing?
- Where do you currently see your church/organization in the ecosystem? What are the challenges you are facing as you consider your current place?

We are often quick to place value on the different types of organizations, as if one type is more needed than another type and therefore warrants more resources and attention. Stated again, diversity of organisms is essential for a healthy ecosystem. And as applied to the spiritual landscape, the diversity of this mixed ecology only works if each entity claims and lives out of its identity, its strengths, and its purpose and lives into its unique context.

- How would you describe your identity in the ecosystem, as a leader, as an organization/church? What are your assets/gifts?
- What is the role God is calling you to play in helping to create a healthy ecosystem?

- What new support systems are needed to help the variety of organizations and leaders be their best self, doing their best work?

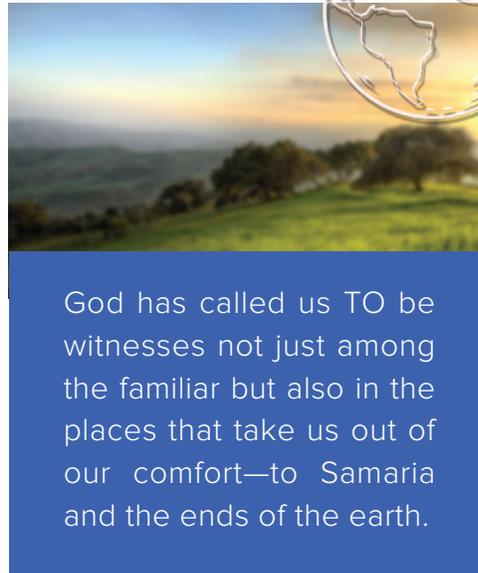
One of the immediate reactions we often hear when we talk about innovation in the church is something along the lines of “Our church is too \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank here with things like small, rural, old, etc.), so we can’t do the things you’re describing.” Or similarly, there is a deep sigh of despair on the part of some traditional, attractional-model churches who aspire to be more missionally-focused, but can’t see a path to that kind of organizational transformation. We have seen examples of small, rural, old (yes, all three!) congregations engage their community in ways that have transformed members of both the congregation and the community. The truth is that in smaller communities, creating partnerships, collaborations and engagement with schools and community leaders becomes that much more important. That said, the church still plays its part in a diverse ecosystem. It must stand to its full height as a part of the ecosystem, and it will not be able to do that if it does not engage the community.<sup>9</sup>

- What are the conversations you are not having, but need to have, in your setting?
- What resistance is getting in the way of new ideas for engaging your neighbors (Samaria is now in our backyard!)?
- Who might you gather to explore new partnerships or collaborations?

Each of the entities named here needs the other to be as strong as possible. Those in the center of the institutional church—serving traditional local churches or at the denominational level—and those on the edges serving in non-traditional settings, have much to offer each other, so those connections must be nurtured without judgment or expectation to make one be more like the other. In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger reminds us that when we are in uncharted territory, those who reside in that environment are not actually in uncharted territory; they are home. Using the example of Sacagawea’s role in the Lewis and Clark expedition, he challenges church leaders to listen and pay attention to those living in the margins who can guide leaders from the center into new landscapes. He writes, “For lasting cultural change to occur (even within an institution), those in the center and those outside the center must be truly engaged and valued in decision-making processes. The interaction between the margins and the center creates new possibilities.”<sup>10</sup> Who better to guide the journey into Samaria and the ends of the earth than someone who calls those places home? The question is whether we are truly engaging and valuing these voices in decision-making processes.

- As you look at your own mission field context, who do you need to bring to the table in order to see beyond what already is?
- What new leaders and organizations need to be introduced in order to create a more diverse ecology of the church’s witness in your context?
- In what or whom might you over-invest for a period of time in order to introduce a new entity/ministry/leader or to strengthen one that is greatly needed for the sake of the mission?

Current systems in the church are structured to support traditional, attractional churches. New forms for reaching the SBNR are in nascent stages in the UMC and in order to be strengthened, will require resources and attention and a willingness to try new things. Even when leaders understand and acknowledge the need for learning new ways of reaching the SBNR, the



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constraints are deep and strong against innovation. It’s as if a good bit of the system of the UMC reacts to innovation as an intrusive, toxic virus which triggers an aggressive immune response in the ecosystem: If you can’t be scaled, you are a virus; if you don’t have a track record, you are a virus; if you can’t be loyal (to the established definition of loyalty), you are a virus; if you can’t contribute to the numbers (aka preserve the

institution), you are a virus. Ironically, in evolutionary and micro-biology, viruses play an essential role in the ecosystem by eliminating the weaker organisms in the system so that the ecosystem as a whole is healthier. The established institution has a lot of work to do to examine its motivations, its purpose and its alignment of resources so that new learning can occur through experiments.

- What is standing in the way of innovation in your current system/church/organization?
- What is being rewarded in your system/church/organization?
- How might you reward experimentation and failure for the sake of learning and innovation?
- Who are the innovators you want to support and encourage?

Despite the constraints of the institutional church and the gravitational pull of doing what we already know how to do, this season actually holds great possibility for the church's witness. The people of God are uniquely poised to offer meaning, purpose, grace, mercy, justice, love, hope and joy to those in search of these things. God has called us to be witnesses not just among the familiar but also in the places that take us out of our comfort—to Samaria and the ends of the earth. It's true there is a gap between where God is calling us to be and where we find ourselves today, and the church is called to that gap. We are seeing evidence over and over again of how the church is finding new and innovative ways to face into that gap: courageous leaders willing to explore and learn, tangible resources sufficient for the mission, and creative experiments occurring in a variety of communities. It is an exciting time to be the church!

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<sup>1</sup> See Gil Rendle's *Quietly Courageous* and Yuval Levin's *Factured Republic* for further explanation of the cohesion and convergence of the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley McChrystal's *Team of Teams*, Gil Rendle's *Quietly Courageous* and Michael Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change* for more insights into the complex, non-linear, liquid culture in which we find ourselves today.

<sup>3</sup> Millennial researchers Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile use the term "Something More" in their monograph of the same name.

<sup>4</sup> From "Meet the 'Spiritual but not Religious,'" in *Faith and Christianity*, April 6, 2017. Barna.com

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017 revised edition) p. 38

<sup>6</sup> David Gortner, "Clergy Leadership for the 21st Century: Are We Up to the Task"

<sup>7</sup> From "Biodiversity is the Infrastructure that Supports All Life" in *The Guardian*, June 28, 2018

<sup>8</sup> *The Guardian*, Nov 6, 2018

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (revised and updated, 2018) for generative ideas for strengthening the local church's missional engagement with its community.

<sup>10</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2015) p. 199

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