

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

How Faith-Adjacent People Experience Spirituality in Wild Church:

A Phenomenological Study

A Professional Dissertation Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the

Doctor of Ministry in Leadership Degree

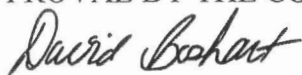
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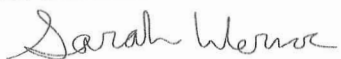
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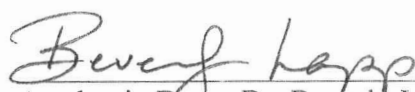


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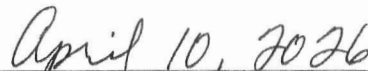


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Abstract

This phenomenological study investigates how "faith-adjacent" individuals—those who acknowledge a spiritual aspect to the world, but do not identify or understand their experience of the spiritual within any religious faith system—experience spirituality within the context of the "Wild Church" movement. Focusing on the communal life and practices of Atlanta Mennonite Church (AMC), the research explores the intersection of ecospirituality, nature-based worship, and contemporary shifts in church engagement.

Data was gathered through qualitative methods, including six individual interviews with faith-adjacent participants, a focus group interview with five AMC members, and direct observations of Wild Church services. The findings reveal that Wild Church can provide a vital space for individuals who identify as "spiritual but not religious". Emerging themes highlight the significance of nature as a primary catalyst for spiritual connection, the value of slowing down and practicing attentiveness, an emphasis on experiencing spirituality over understanding it, and a shared comfort with seeking without needing to achieve intellectual certainty. Furthermore, participants emphasized the inclusiveness of the outdoor setting, which fosters authentic community, shared leadership, vulnerability, and deep interpersonal connection.

The study additionally contrasts the perspectives of faith-adjacent individuals with those of established congregation members, identifying areas of overlap and divergence regarding how Wild Church impacts the broader life of AMC. With limitations detailed, this project offers insights into evolving patterns of church engagement and provides actionable recommendations for church leaders seeking to cultivate alternative, inclusive, and nature-attuned ministry contexts.

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Chapter One

Leadership Context and Purpose of Research

My leadership context is that of half-time pastor of Atlanta Mennonite Church (AMC) in Atlanta, Georgia. AMC is a small congregation with an average attendance of twenty. It is located on six acres of land in southeast Atlanta. I have been serving as AMC's pastor for a little over a year. Previously, I served as the pastor of Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship (AMF) for fifteen years, from 2006 to 2021.

Atlanta Mennonite Church, where I currently serve, was formed in 2022 through a merger of AMF and Berea Mennonite Church, which previously owned this land. Those congregations had existed since 1992 and 1961, respectively. When they merged, there were more AMF congregants than Berea participants, and since the merger, several Berea families have moved out of state. A few new people who were not part of either congregation are now integral to AMC, including serving in leadership positions.

As AMF and Berea merged to become AMC, I left to explore who I was as a pastor in other settings and to allow AMC to discern its future direction. Berea did not have a pastor at the time of the merger, and I felt that if I remained, AMC would inevitably take shape through the lens of my gifts and my history with AMF, regardless of how carefully I led. AMC, after working with a consultant and an interim pastoral couple, reached out to me to inquire about my interest in serving as the pastor of this new congregation. After six months of careful discernment with them, I began as AMC's pastor on October 1, 2024. As I did so, I invited us all to be intentional about recognizing that we are not who we were when I left in 2021. AMC had taken shape as a new congregation, and I desired to pastor differently from my approach with

AMF. Recently, AMC and I completed a one-year review, which I had requested as we began this new relationship. The results indicate that we all feel that the relationship is going well.

AMC is now in the process of discerning how best to sell or transfer its property to another organization, having determined that it no longer has the finances or energy to maintain the property. AMC leases space to three partners: The Language Garden, a forest preschool; the urban agriculture program of The Paideia School, a large private K-12 school; and HolaLand, an aftercare program whose students mostly also attend The Language Garden. A Garifuna congregation also meets on Sunday afternoons at AMC. This congregation does not pay rent, but its members contribute in kind to the property's management. Before I began as pastor, AMC determined that it would seek to sell the property in a way that preserves it as green space and allows current partners, including us, to continue our ministries and work on the land. These constraints significantly limit potential buyers, and this process is now at least 18 months long, with various moments of hope and dead ends along the way.

AMC recognizes that it needs new energy to flourish. It has been doing good and vital discernment for several years, and people are tired. The congregation would like to grow, but none of AMC, AMF, or Berea has experienced significant growth in the past decades. There are undoubtedly many factors that contribute to this. Berea had some leadership conflicts and divisions over vision during its history. AMF, which formed after one of these conflicts led to division, valued the intimacy of being a small group. I recall being told that at its founding, AMF had committed to dividing into multiple congregations should they ever reach fifty regular participants; they never did. During discernment about its formation and periods of lay or interim leadership, AMC has maintained an average attendance of about twenty, as some long-time members of Berea and AMF moved away from Atlanta, but some new people became involved.

The lack of growth of AMC and its predecessor congregations parallels the congregational decline identified in a 2023-2024 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study that found that participation in religious services and identification with traditional religious beliefs have declined in the United States over the past decades.¹

As I began at AMC, I articulated my sense that we needed to find new ways to share God's love with additional people. To achieve this, the congregation needed to develop additional points of entry into our community life beyond our usual Sunday morning worship services. Chapter Two articulates my theological sense that we are called to share God's love but that doing so need not involve drawing people into worship. Chapter Three summarizes a religious landscape today in which fewer people seek out religious worship services than in prior generations. I was open to whatever experiments with additional points of entry the congregation chose. Over the first three months of my pastorate, we identified potential options for experiments to try in 2025, culminating in a survey of these options. At a congregational meeting in January, 2025, AMC affirmed two experiments with worship and encouraged small group participation.

Wild Church is one of the worship experiments that AMC affirmed. Wild Church is a movement that originated as Forest Church in the United Kingdom approximately a decade ago. It involves worshipping with nature and encountering God, who is understood to be present in all of nature, in and through nature. AMC has experimented with outdoor worship in the past, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and on several occasions during the Season of Creation, a liturgical season in September that celebrates creation. The reasons for AMC

¹ Pew Research Center, "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off: Findings from the 2023-24 Religious Landscape Study," February 26, 2025, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>.

choosing to experiment with Wild Church are varied. Some members shared my hopes that Wild Church might be a space that we could invite people to join who would be unlikely to attend regular worship. Some were excited to explore worship in this way. Some just felt that substituting one type of worship service with another required the least extra energy of them.

In March 2025, AMC began holding monthly Wild Church services at our usual 10:00 a.m. worship time on the third Sunday of each month, replacing our normal worship service inside. Wild Church services replace the reflection or sermon time with a “Wandering and Wondering” time in which we invite everyone to explore the property with an openness to encountering the presence of God, the sacred, and beauty.

Wild Churches vary in how overtly Christian they are, ranging from ones that celebrate communion each time they meet to ones that are explicitly pagan. Victoria Looz and Valerie Luna Serrels are sisters who are leaders in the Wild Church movement. They understand Wild Church as “a practice of re-sacralizing our wild and alive Earth, and in the process, remembering our role in the web of life.”² They go on to say, “Wild Church doesn’t ask people to leave or join any particular religion. The us-them boundaries of religious identity are less important than the common roots of our shared belonging with a sacred Earth.”³ In our Wild Church services, we have intentionally limited the use of Christian language, scripture, and theology to allow those who do not identify as Christian to participate more comfortably. We use the term ‘God’ relatively frequently, as well as more general terms such as ‘the divine,’ ‘sacred,’ and especially ‘Creator.’ We rarely talk about Jesus. A few months into our experiment, a parent whose family had begun attending shared with me that their daughter had distinguished between regular church and Wild Church in terms of whether Jesus was discussed. The biblical scriptures we read often

² Victoria Looz and Valerie Luna Serrels, *Field Guide to Church of the Wild* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2025), 2.

³ Looz and Serrels, *Field Guide*, 4.

include poetic passages related to nature, and we frequently use a First Nations translation. Other poetry is more prevalent than scripture. We sing hymns centered on creation, but we also learn new songs related to nature rather than explicitly to God.

A 2023 Pew Research Center study identifies a sizable group of respondents (22 percent of Americans) who identify as spiritual but not religious.⁴ They are more likely than people who identify as religious or who identify as neither spiritual nor religious to spend time in nature at least a few times a month.⁵ They are also more likely than these groups to spend time in nature in order to connect with something bigger than themselves or with their “true self.”⁶ While they acknowledge a spiritual aspect to the world, they do not identify or understand their experience of the spiritual within any religious faith system. They are unlikely to attend “regular” indoor worship in Christian congregations. I will refer to this group as faith adjacent.

We have been successful in inviting faith-adjacent people to join Wild Church. These include faculty and families from our partner organizations, as well as others who do not regularly attend worship at AMC. Several of these attendees are young families with connections to The Language Garden. Over our first nine services, we had at least nine individuals or families attend multiple times. Wild Church attendance is generally higher than at regular worship services, despite some AMC attendees typically choosing not to attend Wild Church. One of these nine has begun regularly attending AMC’s weekly worship services.

In my view, faith-adjacent people have the potential to provide new energy and resources to congregations and their ministries. If congregations form relationships with them that do not require their participation in the religious life of the congregation, fellowship, advocacy, and

⁴ Pew Research Center, “Spirituality Among Americans,” December 7, 2023, accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>.

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Spirituality Among Americans.”

⁶ Pew Research Center, “Spirituality Among Americans.”

shared work could develop around shared values, even as Christians ground these in their faith and faith-adjacent people do not. However, the Church has traditionally been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. The Wild Church movement may be an exception to this lack of imagination, and Wild Church worship seems likely to appeal to faith-adjacent people whose spirituality is experienced in nature. However, there are relatively few studies of how faith-adjacent people experience Wild Church. A better understanding of the spirituality of faith-adjacent people who participate in Wild Church would help congregations to imagine possible ways of becoming communities of faith with space for their participation.

Problem Statement

In this context, the problem on which this study focuses is that the Church has been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how the Church can imagine creating new communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent.

This professional dissertation may be of interest to any Christian congregation willing to go “out” to engage faith-adjacent people in becoming a new kind of spiritual community, rather than trying to draw them “into” existing expressions of Christian faith. The research questions that guided the study were:

- How do faith-adjacent people experience spirituality as they participate in Wild Church?

- How do their experiences within Wild Church lead faith-adjacent people to reflect on or revise their understandings of their spirituality?
- Are there common characteristics of their spirituality that faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church identify?
- Is there alignment between the common characteristics experienced by faith-adjacent Wild Church participants and those experienced by AMC attendees who participate in Wild Church?

These questions enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the spirituality of faith-adjacent individuals attending Wild Church at AMC, including how their spirituality compares with that of those who regularly attend AMC. With this understanding, it is possible to imagine new ways to create a new and broader spiritual community.

Chapter Two

Biblical, Theological, and Missiological Reflection

The purpose of this study was to explore how the Church can imagine creating new communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. A primary theological conviction that undergirds and informs my interest in this research project is that Christians are called to share God’s love with all people, but do not need to convert those we love to the Christian faith.

Jesus taught that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that the second is like it: to love our neighbors as ourselves.⁷ In his farewell address to his disciples, Jesus gave them, and us, a “new” commandment, to love one another just as Jesus loved us. Love is clearly at the heart of Jesus’s teachings. Parker Palmer, in *The Courage to Teach*, talks about teaching as gathering around “great things” that have a “life of their own—an inwardness, identity, and integrity that make them more than objects, a quality of being and agency that does not rely on us and our thoughts about them.”⁸ As I read Palmer’s book, I realized that the “great thing” that I feel called to invite people to gather around is God’s love.

On the one hand, this realization brings with it a hint of evangelicalism that I had not previously recognized in myself. I desire to introduce people to God’s love, to invite them to experience and reflect on it. On the other hand, I trust that God’s love has its own agency and power to move people. I do not need to convince people that the Christian story about God’s love is the right one.

⁷ Matt. 22:37–40, referencing Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18.

⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), chap. IV, Kindle.

This differs from traditional evangelical theology that emphasizes the necessity of conversion. As historian David Bebbington summarizes,

Conversion was bound up with major theological convictions. At that point, Evangelicals believed, a person is justified by faith. Because human beings are estranged from God by their sinfulness, there is nothing they can do by themselves to win salvation. All human actions, even good works, are tainted by sin, and so there is no possibility of gaining merit in the sight of God. Hence salvation has to be received, not achieved. Jesus Christ has to be trusted as Saviour.⁹

In contrast, I emphasize that humanity is created “very good” by God, as illustrated by the first creation story in Genesis.¹⁰ We sin when we choose to turn away from God’s love. However, we are fundamentally good and beloved by God. Our justification is by faith, but all this requires is to turn toward God’s love. As I explain below, turning toward God’s love need not require epistemological assent to any particular doctrines about Jesus or Christianity. Theological doctrine can helpfully elucidate our Christian faith for those who share it, but I have found that it is generally more winsome to share God’s love with others than to seek to explain it. In this kind of evangelicalism, I am simply called to introduce people to God’s love. I strive to do that authentically through my presence and relationships, allowing people to recognize the ways that God’s love motivates me, so that they may know that I am a Christian by my love, as the Gospel of John puts it.¹¹

This emphasis on allowing God’s love to show through me reflects my own faith story. After almost a decade of agnosticism, I realized that I had become willing to identify the love I experienced from Christians, motivated by a desire to share God’s love, as itself an expression of God’s love. I returned to faith with an emphasis on 1 John 4:7–8, which says that anyone who

⁹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1988), chap. 1, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ambs-ebooks/detail.action?docID=179445>.

¹⁰ Gen. 1:26–31.

¹¹ John 13:34–35.

loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love. I seek to invite others to do the same, to consider whether the best of who we are as loving human persons might point through us to a divine love that motivates our best selves. I do not wish to circumscribe what it means to be our best selves much beyond centering it in love; the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) also elucidate what this means to me.¹²

This desire to share God's love means that I am not content to share it only within the congregation that I pastor. AMC is a beautiful small group of people sincerely seeking to "follow the way of Jesus Christ, welcoming all to join in God's work for peace and justice," according to its mission statement. The word "welcoming" in our mission statement is not one that I would have chosen. It feels passive, indicating that we are happy to welcome anyone who cares to join us in our efforts to follow Christ, but not actively seeking to share God's love beyond our own circle. It may also be implicitly transactional, requiring participation in our expressions of religious life as the price of admission into being community with us. As I began pastoring AMC, I encouraged the congregation to intentionally think about additional people we can lovingly engage, perhaps by inviting them to worship with us, but also in fellowship or shared work beyond our worshipping body.

We do not need to convert others to the Christian faith in order to develop loving relationships with them. These loving relationships are an expression of God's love, which Jesus modeled for us. Jesus emphasized God's love and compassionate care for others over religious beliefs. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, love of God and neighbor is emphasized, and mercy to others is the criterion for whether one loves as a neighbor, not correct belief.¹³ John

¹² Gal. 5:22-23.

¹³ Luke 10:25-37.

3:16, perhaps the best-known scripture in the Bible, says that whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. I think it is best to understand this belief in terms of relationship with Jesus, rather than doctrinal assent. John 15, in which Jesus compares himself to a vine and his followers to branches who should “remain” in him, metaphorically illustrates the intimate relationship we are called to better than any assent to right doctrine about Jesus. Scripture also suggests that we need not understand how our care for others participates in a divine economy of salvation. When Jesus teaches about future judgment, those who are received into God’s kingdom do not know why they are accepted, and Jesus explains that whenever we care for “the least of these” we also care for Him.¹⁴

We can trust the agency of God’s love to work in people’s lives as they need it to. The Spirit moves and brings new birth as it wills.¹⁵ We can trust that God’s love encompasses people where they are. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, and this is a sign of God’s unconditional love that we are called to imitate in loving even our enemies.¹⁶ The sinner is not received with condemnation, but with encouragement to sin no more.¹⁷ We can trust that anyone who does their best to love others is not far removed from the love of God, even if they do not identify their love as motivated in this way.¹⁸

Early Anabaptist theologian Hans Denck wrote that one cannot know Christ without following Him, and cannot follow Christ except insofar as one already knows Him.¹⁹ Christians can introduce people to Christ by showing them the love that Christ motivates in us. When people recognize and trust our love for them, they may be open to a conversation about the

¹⁴ Matt. 25:31–40.

¹⁵ John 3:1–8.

¹⁶ Matt. 5:43–48.

¹⁷ John 8:1–11.

¹⁸ 1 John 4:7–8.

¹⁹ Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, vol. 47 (E. J. Brill, 1991), 113.

divine love that inspires it. They will probably not be open to such a conversation until they recognize our love for them.

I desire to share God's love while trusting that it is powerful enough to move people without needing me to convince them to understand it in a certain way. In terms of religious plurality, I am sympathetic to German theologian Karl Rahner's claim that there are "anonymous Christians," although I find the term somewhat patronizing.²⁰ That is, I believe that the Christian story about salvation and a loving relationship with God is broadly correct, but that persons need not explicitly believe in this story for Christ to mediate their relationship with God. I view this belief in Christianity as consistent with the religious pluralism of British philosopher John Hick, who argues that our particular personal and cultural lenses may mediate our diverse experiences of a single Ultimate Reality. Furthermore, sharing our varied experiences and insights may allow people to become aware of aspects of the Real they had not previously experienced.²¹

I am unapologetically Christian because I find the Christian faith attractive and compelling. I believe loving relationships are the key to human flourishing, and my faith in a trinitarian and lovingly relational God supports that belief. I am grateful and amazed that God entered into our frailty in solidarity with us in the person of Jesus, showing us what divine love looks like in human form. God's Spirit is present in my life and in the communal life of the communities of faith in which I participate. The Christian faith makes sense to me and provides a framework for my spiritual experiences and for the values I have chosen to live by. My sense of God's presence sustains and guides me. However, I do not feel that non-Christians must assent to Christianity as a belief system to be in a loving relationship with God. If the Christian framework

²⁰ Karl Rahner, "Religious Inclusivism," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (Oxford University Press, 2007), 605–6.

²¹ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (Oxford University Press, 2007), 612–14.

is not helpful to them, I am glad to find whatever language is helpful for drawing them closer to the divine love that I believe is at the heart of God's calling to all of creation.

I believe that Christians can learn from non-Christians' ways of relating to God or the divine. I engage the world as a "critical realist" as described by American theologian Tim Sensing. "I understand how language and perceptions determine how we see reality; however, I am not persuaded by the notion that reality is nothing but a social construct. There is a construction of the knowledge about reality but not a construction of reality."²² In more theological language, while there are objective truths about reality that God knows, we all see as through a glass darkly, and must be epistemologically humble.²³ As AMC engages in Wild Church with faith-adjacent people, I expect that those of us who identify as Christian may well learn new ways to experience God's presence from those who do not identify as Christian.

In this study, I aim to understand how faith-adjacent individuals experience their spirituality, as they report it. While I hold beliefs about God and how God relates to us, I have no privileged access to the truth of these beliefs over alternative beliefs expressed by those I have interviewed. I believe that I have engaged participants with genuine curiosity about their experiences and beliefs, without judgment.

The biblical, theological, and missiological convictions I have outlined here are especially salient for Christians today. As I will detail further in Chapter Three, the role of the Church in society is changing. As fewer people attend religious services and those who do attend do so less often, congregations cannot assume that people will prioritize participation in a community of faith in the same way as they did in previous generations. If, as I believe, we are called to share God's love without needing to convert people to Christian religious beliefs, then

²² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research, A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 2nd ed. (Cascade Books, 2022), 200.

²³ 1 Cor. 13:12.

the decline of the Christian religion's structures can be an opportunity to experiment with new ways of sharing God's love. We can be at the forefront of imagining new ways of living in loving community. Perhaps, as American author Phyllis Tickle suggests, we are in the midst of an every 500 years emergence of a new form of Christian faith. She suggests that this emergent form will be more relational, with networked authority emerging from ongoing conversations among its members, rather than more statically located in scripture or tradition.²⁴ Emerging from the powerfully transforming experiences of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, spirituality beyond the confines of organized religion is a significant strand of this emergence.²⁵

Wild Church is a particularly promising experiment in forming a new kind of loving community in which spirituality can be explored. Wild Church is less concerned with religious identity than with a common experience of belonging in and with nature. It is a space where people can form a community around shared experiences of nature, which are often understood to be spiritual, especially by those who identify as spiritual but not religious.²⁶ Certain biblical passages assert that creation manifests God. Romans 1:20 says that God's eternal nature is shown and can be understood by reflecting on creation, and Psalm 19:1 begins by saying that "the heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork." These passages inform my faith, but others need not see God reflected in the Earth's beauty, even if they experience natural beauty as a spiritual experience. Without insisting that such experiences be interpreted in particular ways, Wild Church invites people to experience and reflect on them.

The theological conviction that Christians are called to share God's love with all people but do not need to convert those we love to the Christian faith undergirds this research project.

²⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2012), Kindle. See especially chapter 7, "The Way Ahead."

²⁵ Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 83–85.

²⁶ Pew Research Center, "Spirituality Among Americans."

This conviction creates theological space to examine how the Church might envision forming new communities of faith that make space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals.

Wild Church is an opportunity for Christians and faith-adjacent people to explore their spirituality together, without any expectation that faith-adjacent people will attend more traditionally Christian worship or adopt Christian theological beliefs.

Chapter Three

Literature Review

The primary literature providing context for this phenomenological study of the spirituality of faith-adjacent people participating in the Wild Church experiment at AMC comes from three fields. The first is church engagement, encompassing several surveys that outline the landscape of religious engagement in the United States. Second, literature about the Wild Church movement provides context for AMC's experiment in inviting faith-adjacent people to participate in Wild Church. This literature is relatively limited, as the Wild Church movement is only about a decade old. Finally, literature in ecospirituality provides a broader context from which the Wild Church movement has emerged and offers background for understanding how interviewees articulate their spirituality.

Church Engagement

I am interested in exploring whether the Church can imagine creating new communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent because there are more such people today. Fewer US residents identify with or participate in Christian communities of faith today than they did in prior generations. The percentage of people in the United States who say religion is important in their daily lives is now under 50 percent. A recent Gallup poll measured positive responses to this question at 49 percent, a 17-point decline from ten years ago.²⁷ An average of 2023 Gallup polling to a more general question about religion's importance "in your life" showed that 45 percent of Americans identified religion as "very important" in their lives, and an additional 26 percent said that it was "somewhat important."²⁸ In 2021, the

²⁷ Benedict Vigers and Julie Ray, "Drop in U.S. Religiosity Among Largest in World," Gallup, November 13, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/697676/drop-religiosity-among-largest-world.aspx>.

²⁸ Jeffrey P. Jones, "In U.S., 47% Identify as Religious, 33% as Spiritual," Gallup, September 22, 2023, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/511133/identify-religious-spiritual.aspx>.

Pew Research Center found that almost three in ten Americans identified with “no religion,” instead identifying as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.”²⁹ These “nones” include 22 percent of Americans who identify as “spiritual but not religious.”³⁰

Younger Americans are significantly more likely to identify as religiously unaffiliated than older Americans. The 2024 PRRI Census of American Religion found that almost four in ten 18-29 year olds identify as religiously unaffiliated, and just over one-third of 30–49 year olds, compared to roughly 20 percent of those older than fifty, with percentages continuing to decrease with age.³¹ Among those who identify as religiously unaffiliated, only 9 percent affirmed that “I am looking for a religion that would be right for me,” according to a PRRI 2023 survey.³² Globally, Christianity continues to increase in total adherents, but its percentage of the population is decreasing as “nones” increase, particularly through younger adults choosing not to continue to affiliate with the Christian faith.³³ According to Conrad Hackett, the lead author of the Pew report outlining this trend, “Among young adults, for every person around the world who becomes Christian, there are three people who are raised Christian who leave.”³⁴

Church participation has also generally declined. In Pew Research surveys conducted by telephone in 2007, 2014, and 2018–19, respondents reported attending religious services at least

²⁹ Pew Research Center, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” December 14, 2021, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

³⁰ Pew Research Center, “Spirituality Among Americans.”

³¹ Public Religion Research Institute, “2024 PRRI Census of American Religion,” May 5, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://prri.org/spotlight/2024-prri-census-of-american-religion/>.

³² Public Religion Research Institute, “Religious Change in America,” March 27, 2024, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.prri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/>.

³³ Conrad Hackett et al., “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020,” Pew Research Center, June 9, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/#age-profile-of-religious-groups-in-2020>.

³⁴ Angie Orellana Hernandez, “Islam grows, Christianity slips as share of world population, survey finds,” June 9, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/09/islam-christianity-global-population-pew-survey/>.

monthly at rates of 54 percent, 50 percent, and 45 percent.³⁵ Since then, Pew has mailed paper surveys, making a direct comparison of results impossible. In each of the years 2020–2024, between 30 percent and 33 percent of respondents reported attending religious services at least once a month.³⁶ Gallup’s polling over the same period indicates that roughly two in five adults participate in religious services at least monthly.³⁷

Some recent surveys suggest that the decline in religiosity in America, and in Christianity in particular, is leveling off. The latest Pew Religious Landscape Survey finds that a little more than six in ten Americans identify as Christian, and that a little under three in ten identify as “nones.” Both of these are plateaus over the past few years, compared to prior sustained growth among “nones” and a steady decrease in Christian affiliation over the past decades.³⁸ This plateauing is due to changes in religious affiliation among the youngest age group surveyed. There is the same percentage of “nones” among those born in 2000 or later as among those born in the 1990s. In contrast, previous generations had shown a trend of increasing disaffiliation with religion.

Furthermore, in this youngest group, men and women have very similar levels of religious affiliation for the first time, compared to all older Americans, in which religious affiliation has been higher among women than men.³⁹ Christian groups that teach traditional or complementarian gender roles are especially finding that young men are swelling their ranks.⁴⁰ Socially conservative online influencers are pointing their listeners toward Orthodox churches,

³⁵ Pew Research Center, “Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off.

³⁶ Pew Research Center, “Decline of Christianity in the U.S.”

³⁷ Gallup, “Religion,” accessed November 28, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx>.

³⁸ Pew Research Center, “Decline of Christianity in the U.S.”

³⁹ Ruth Graham, “Christianity’s Decline in U.S. Appears to Have Halted, Major Study Shows,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/26/us/christianity-us-religious-study-pew.html>.

⁴⁰ Ruth Graham, “In a First Among Christians, Young Men Are More Religious Than Young Women,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2024, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/us/young-men-religion-gen-z.html>.

leading some priests to struggle with how to acculturate them to parish life in less politically strident ways. “Don’t be an Orthobro,” one priest advised a new convert.⁴¹ (For those unfamiliar with “bro” slang, it is generally used to refer to young men who develop a strong interest in a particular ideology or lifestyle through internet engagement, without necessarily developing an understanding of this ideology or lifestyle in the communities that practice it.) In one recent poll, the rates of religious disaffiliation in younger adults have not only reached parity between genders but flipped. The Survey Center on American Life recently found that 5 percent more Gen Z women identify as “nones” than do the same age range of men, 39 to 34 percent.⁴² Interestingly, the faith-adjacent individuals that I interviewed reflect this predominance of women, with five of the six being women.

These statistics suggest that some, like the young men returning to more conservative expressions of Christianity, are recommitting themselves to traditional expressions of faith while others, particularly women, are exploring new expressions of spirituality. As Church participation declines, this project focuses not on renewing the religious commitments of prior generations but instead speculates on whether communities of faith might include those who identify as spiritual but not religious without requiring their conversion. The potential for a new form of Christian engagement along these lines is evident in various places. College chaplains report that they “have never felt more needed,” finding themselves counseling not only the religious, but also people who are spiritually curious or who simply identify the chaplain as a listening ear.⁴³ *Anabaptist World’s* “Five Things Friday” column recently shared learnings from a

⁴¹ Ruth Graham, “Orthodox Church Pews Are Overflowing With Converts,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/19/us/orthodox-christianity.html>.

⁴² Daniel A. Cox and Kelsey Eyre Hammond, “Young Women Are Leaving Church in Unprecedented Numbers,” Survey Center on American Life, April 4, 2024, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/newsletter/young-women-are-leaving-church-in-unprecedented-numbers/>.

⁴³ Cornelia Powers, “The New Spiritual Leader on Campus,” *The Atlantic*, May 18, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2025/05/college-chaplain-secular-students/682825/>.

Mexican pastor who studied at Canadian Mennonite University, traveling in Switzerland for Anabaptism's 500th anniversary, emphasizing the need for connection, deep conversation, and meaningful relationships beyond the confines of "church."⁴⁴ It is not difficult to find anecdotal observations like these that illustrate the space for communities of faith to constructively engage those who identify as spiritual without a desire to participate in formal expressions of religion.

Wild Church

Two sisters, Victoria Loorz and Valerie Luna Serrels, have emerged as leaders of the Wild Church movement in North America. Loorz co-founded the Seminary of the Wild and founded the Center for Wild Spirituality. Serrels is co-founder of the Wild Church Network. In *Church of the Wild*, Loorz outlines her own journey to redefining church as a place "where Mystery is experienced, not explained" as participants read from "the first book of God—which is what the ancients called nature."⁴⁵ Loorz emphasizes our interconnected relationship with creation, and the hope of systemic transformation of our world beginning with widespread changes of heart. In *Field Guide to Church of the Wild*, Loorz and Serrels outline the primary movements of a Wild Church service, address practical questions, and include reflections from Wild Church leaders across North America and Europe.⁴⁶ These are the only two book-length explorations of Wild Church of which I am aware. The one family that has found AMC's Wild Church by intentionally searching for "Wild Churches in Atlanta" mentioned being aware of these books.

A few articles have been written about Wild Church or Forest Church, as it was initially labeled in England. The earliest articles engage the relationship between Wild Church and the

⁴⁴ Andrea de Avila, "Five Things Friday Roundup: New Learnings for the Church, from Switzerland," *Anabaptist World*, June 13, 2025, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://anabaptistworld.org/five-things-friday-roundup-new-learnings-for-the-church-from-switzerland/>.

⁴⁵ Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred*. (Broadleaf Books, 2021), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁴⁶ Victoria Loorz and Valerie Luna Serrels, *Field Guide to Church of the Wild*. (Broadleaf Books, 2025), Kindle.

Christian tradition. While she was a doctoral student in missiology at Cliff College (Manchester University), Cate Williams argued that there are ample resources in the Christian tradition for grounding Forest Church expressions of worship, including the incarnation.⁴⁷ Paul Cudby, an Anglican vicar, discusses how Forest Church can appeal to spiritual but not religious people. He emphasizes supporting community rather than providing expert instruction, but also argues that this relational commitment can and should lead toward some type of deeper commitment that might eventually lead to Christian faith, rather than seeking the next experiential “hit.”⁴⁸ I affirm Cudby’s desire to “tread a fine line that provides a relational framework in which a contemplative spiritual experience can lead into a deeper commitment according to the place on the path that the individual occupies.”⁴⁹ However, I advocate for even greater caution than Cudby in seeking to draw people engaging with Wild Church into a congregation’s religious life and faith. This is because, in light of my theological convictions outlined in the prior chapter, I do not believe that Christians need to convert faith-adjacent people. We should only encourage the religious framework that surrounds our sharing God’s love to the extent that those with whom we are sharing find it helpful.

Mennonite pastor Katerina Gea (formerly Friesen) echoes Williams’ defense of the Christian bona fides of Wild Church, and Cudby’s emphasis on community over instruction. She suggests that “taking time to delight in *being*” allows “people to ‘get out of their heads,’ so to speak, and come into a different way of knowing and listening to the Spirit in their hearts and

⁴⁷ Cate Williams, “Brueggemann, the Land and the Forest: a Forest Church Perspective on the Theology of the Land,” *Practical Theology* 11, no. 5 (2018): 462–476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2018.1536350>.

⁴⁸ Paul Cudby, “Forest Church: From Dogmatic Desert to Spiritual Discipline,” *Anvil: Journal of Theology and Mission* 35, no. 2 (2019): 32–35.

⁴⁹ Cudby, “Forest Church,” 35.

bodies.”⁵⁰ This emphasis on experience over explanation, to which both Gea and Cudby point, is a hallmark of Wild Church.

Finally, American theologian Wanda Stahl provides the most extensive research on Wild Church to date. She employed a mixed methods approach (survey, observations, and interviews) to study seven Wild Churches. One of her questions is closely related to mine: “Were there distinctive elements of their spiritual experiences that appeared not to be as readily available or nurtured in traditional indoor congregations?”⁵¹ She answers in the affirmative and found that Wild Church attendees experienced an increased sense of panentheism or Creation as a manifestation of God, Creation as neighbor rather than other, salvation and healing as a communal experience, an increased commitment to the priesthood of all believers, and the lack of walls leading to increased authenticity, vulnerability, and connection.

Ecospirituality

Literature on ecospirituality provides a broader context for understanding the intersection of nature and spirituality in Wild Church, as well as for hearing how interviewees articulate their spirituality. Religion scholar Julia Iteel ties spirituality to authenticity and the agency of individuals to choose their own systems of meaning. “The autonomous individual – the true culmination of the modern project – now has the privilege of choosing who he or she wishes to become and of composing his or her own system of meaning.”⁵² In light of this individual agency, ecospirituality can be understood as the reflection on how people choose and identify what is most deeply meaningful to them in connection with nature.

⁵⁰ Katerina Friesen, “When Ducks Come to Church: Worshipping with Wild Church.” *Direction* 49, no. 1 (2020): 77, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/f72gke/viewer/pdf/nn7rkfbm3j?route=details>.

⁵¹ Wanda J. Stahl, “Healing Our Divide with the Non-Human World: Theological Foundations and Pedagogical Practices within the Wild Church Network.” *Religious Education* 117, no. 1 (2022): 62.

⁵² Julia Iteel, “Ecospirituality in French-Speaking Europe: Linking Ecological Thought with Alternative Spirituality,” *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023): 2.

An early article on ecospirituality discusses the possibility of reverence for creation without extending that reverence to a Creator. Environmental ethicist Ned Hettinger writes, “This earth is an awesome, magnificent, and wonderful place that should elicit our love, our thanks, our support, and our humility. We should cherish the earth, and have reverence for life on it.”⁵³ However, he argues, these feelings do not need to be felt toward a Creator or assume agency in the Earth. They are appropriately felt spiritual responses to a wholly natural world. “Salvation is to be found in an altered understanding of and relationship to this earth, not in getting in touch with or finding a way to attain something beyond this world. This view is naturalistic in the sense that it accepts that nature is all that is. But the nature it accepts is a sacred and precious nature.”⁵⁴ Other writings, from a Christian perspective, argue that Christian faith can embrace ecospirituality. Portuguese theologian Teresa Messias reflects on Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si* encyclical to suggest that its ecotheology expresses an ecospirituality that can be “significant and inspirational beyond a Christian realm of meaning.”⁵⁵ Religion scholar Sarah Werner and theologian Lisanne Winslow, discussed below, can be understood as articulating how Christian theology can and should embrace ecospirituality.

Bron Taylor coined the term “Dark Green Religion” as “religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care.”⁵⁶ These values are

generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of

⁵³ Ned Hettinger, “Ecospirituality: First Thoughts,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 9, no. 2 (1995): 91, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/f72gke/viewer/pdf/yhvyq4hkuv?route=details>.

⁵⁴ Hettinger, “Ecospirituality,” 84.

⁵⁵ Teresa Messias, “From Ecotheology to Ecospirituality in *Laudato si* – Ecological Spirituality beyond Christian Religion,” *Religions* 15, no. 1 (2024): 1.

⁵⁶ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press, 2010), preface, Kindle.

interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics.⁵⁷

Taylor believes that we may be in the midst of a significant change in worldviews, in which Dark Green Religion becomes a “powerful social force,” or “social epidemic,” and replaces much of traditional monotheistic religion.⁵⁸ In support of this possibility, he writes, “As the present study has amply demonstrated and as Jonathan Benthall put it, ‘Almost all strands of the environmentalist movement affirm a sense of the sacred, the spiritual or the aesthetic – however it is defined – in the cosmos,’” and “large numbers of people in Europe and the United States express ‘deep trust in nature as inherently spiritual or sacred.’”⁵⁹ This constellation of values, which recognizes nature as sacred, underlies the Wild Church movement.

German religion scholar Jens Koerhsen considers Dark Green Religion and whether it is present among persons involved in an urban energy transition process in northern Germany seeking to establish more sustainable, low-carbon energy systems and reduce overall energy consumption. Koerhsen finds that while his interviewees do not fully articulate Dark Green Religion, elements of it are present in their views of nature. He concludes that “while traditional religion in the form of local Christian Churches plays only a minor role in the urban energy transition, eco-religious worldviews and feelings appear to predispose some of the pioneering actors to undertake their transition activities.”⁶⁰ Ecospirituality is present and influential among those interviewed by Koerhsen, even if not in exactly the form Taylor outlines. Furthermore, it is a greater motivation for working toward a sustainable climate than Christian religion is.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, chap. 2.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, chap. 9.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, chap. 9. Taylor is quoting Jonathan Benthall, *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age is Haunted by Faith* (I.B. Tauris, 2008), 139, and James Proctor, “Religion as Trust in Authority: Theocracy and Ecology in the United States,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (2006): 193.

⁶⁰ Jens Koerhsen, “Eco-Spirituality in Environmental Action: Studying Dark Green Religion in the German Energy Transition,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 12, no. 1 (2018): 50.

Taylor, reflecting a decade later on the possibilities outlined in *Dark Green Religion*, identifies progress in its spread among artists, academics, and political processes. “It is clear that cultural creatives have continued to promote dark green spiritualities and values,” Taylor writes, before also pointing to a new collaborative ecocentric journal that aims to bring diverse scholarly work to a wider audience.⁶¹ Politically, the “Rights of Nature movement” has taken hold in legislation and jurisprudence in various places around the world, including Ecuador, Bolivia, New Zealand, India, Bangladesh, Uganda, and Colombia.⁶² Taylor concludes the article by sharing his continued sense that only with the help of dark green spiritualities might we slow or halt widespread environmental destruction.

The theme that an ecospirituality-embracing shift in worldview is essential to saving our planet, which Taylor articulates and Koerhsen finds in his research, also appears in other writings on ecospirituality. Religion scholar Layli Maparyan claims that change in our world must come through a shift in consciousness, “and a change in the energetic quality of the material world our consciousness builds.”⁶³ From a Christian perspective, Sarah Werner argues that our relationships to creation and to one another must change, becoming more communal, slower, and embodied. In discovering the sacredness inherent in all of creation, in falling in love with it, we can imagine a new heaven and earth and work toward it.⁶⁴ Lisanne Winslow similarly argues that an ecotheology that understands God as communicating Godself through the natural world can motivate humans to move away from patriarchal ideologies of domination and toward living more interdependently with Creation.⁶⁵ American theologian Allan Effa argues that today’s

⁶¹ Bron Taylor, “Dark Green Religion: A Decade Later,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2020): 502.

⁶² Taylor, “Dark Green Religion,” 504.

⁶³ Layli Maparyan, “Seeds of Light, Flowers of Power, Fruits of Change: Ecowomanism as Spiritualized Ecological Praxis,” *Worldviews* 20 (2016): 50.

⁶⁴ Sarah Renee Werner, *Rooted Faith: Practices for Living Well on a Fragile Planet* (Herald Press, 2023).

⁶⁵ Lisanne D. Winslow, “An Ecospirituality of Nature’s Beauty: A Hopeful Conversation in the Current Climate Crisis,” *HTS Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023): 1–6.

church needs to reacquaint itself with the sacramental nature of the created world, as Celtic Christians and Aboriginal peoples did. “Action directed toward the preservation of creation will flow from a more mystical orientation toward the world.”⁶⁶ In Effa’s case, the ecospirituality he considered included not only “a deepened sensitivity to the Holy Spirit,” but also “an expectation of God’s intervention in day-to-day events.”⁶⁷ This latter sense may not easily map onto either those who recognize nature as sacred without believing in a deity beyond it or those who believe in a Creator but do not believe that God directly intervenes in day-to-day events.

A final theme that recurs in the ecospirituality literature is an embodied awareness of nature. Sarah Werner writes, “Our true home is not in some ethereal mental realm, but knee-deep in the beautiful muck of the earth. When we feel at home in our bodies and on the earth, we are more aware of our connection to the sacred creation and to the Creator.”⁶⁸ Julia Iteel understands ecospirituality as characterized by an intuitive knowledge in which “doing nothing” affords embodied awareness of the natural world. “When I ask, ‘What is nature to you?’, most people say, like Céline, ‘But nature is me! I am nature’; and when I ask, ‘What do you do in nature?’, most do nothing. At most, they walk and hike. Many meditate, contemplate, observe, and blend into the environment. They put themselves in a state of readiness to access full presence.”⁶⁹ This intuitive knowledge can coexist with scientific knowledge, but it provides a vital awareness of our connection to creation that scientific knowledge does not.

⁶⁶ Allan Effa, “Celtic and Aboriginal Pathways toward a Contemporary Ecospirituality,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 41, no. 1 (2017): 59, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2396939316658602>.

⁶⁷ Effa, “Celtic and Aboriginal Pathways,” 55.

⁶⁸ Werner, *Rooted Faith*, 124–25.

⁶⁹ Iteel, “Ecospirituality in French-Speaking Europe,” 8.

Summary

These three areas of literature—church engagement, Wild Church, and ecospirituality—provide the background for understanding and reflecting upon this research project. The church engagement statistics provide insight into the context that Christian congregations in the United States face. Identification with the Christian faith and participation in the church are declining. A significant percentage of people identify as spiritual but do not desire to explore their spirituality within traditional religious structures. In this context, it is a problem that the Church has been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent.

Wild Church is a recent movement that invites people to experience nature as sacred. Participants experience Wild Church as an egalitarian community that facilitates authenticity, vulnerability, and connection with one another and with nature. The Wild Church literature provides the immediate context for understanding Atlanta Mennonite Church's experiment with Wild Church, which it has undertaken with the hope of creating space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals.

Finally, ecospirituality explores the underlying themes that inspire Wild Church. Nature is sacred, and shifting our worldview to one of greater reverence for nature is essential to its preservation. An embodied intuitive knowledge of nature facilitates this sense of reverence. This area of literature provides a broader context for understanding how faith-adjacent participants in Wild Church express their sense of spirituality and for envisioning a new kind of community that might engage with their spiritual experiences.

Church engagement statistics provide the broad context in which the problem addressed by this project arises: the Church has not been able to imagine ways for faith-adjacent people,

who are not interested in religious participation, to participate otherwise in communities of faith. The Wild Church literature describes a movement that may be an alternative form of participation, and the ecospirituality literature explores concepts for understanding the spirituality of faith-adjacent people participating in Wild Church.

Chapter Four

Qualitative Research and Assessment

The problem on which this study focuses is that the Church has been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. The purpose of this study was to explore how the Church can imagine creating new communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. The research questions that guided the study were:

- How do faith-adjacent people experience spirituality as they participate in Wild Church?
- How do their experiences within Wild Church lead faith-adjacent people to reflect on or revise their understandings of their spirituality?
- Are there common characteristics of their spirituality that faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church identify?
- Is there alignment between the common characteristics experienced by faith-adjacent Wild Church participants and those experienced by AMC attendees who participate in Wild Church?

I begin this chapter by outlining my methodology. I then share themes that emerged from my interviews with faith-adjacent individuals, including their perspectives on spirituality and religion. After discussing the themes that emerged from these individual interviews, I outline those that emerged from a focus group interview with people who regularly attend AMC and have been involved in planning Wild Church services, as well as reflect on whether the themes that Stahl observed in several Wild Churches are present in AMC's Wild Church experiment. I summarize my findings, especially attending to similarities and differences between the responses of faith-adjacent individuals and AMC attenders. Finally, I turn to a discussion of my

data, considering how the findings of this study might suggest ways for Christian communities of faith to create space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals.

Methodology

This study was an inductive phenomenological investigation into how faith-adjacent individuals understand their spirituality while attending Wild Church at AMC. Interviews with faith-adjacent participants provided the primary data for this study. I intentionally phrased interview questions in ways that do not assume particular experiences of spirituality or theoretical categorizations of them. Interviews were semi-structured, with prepared questions guiding the interviews, but a focus on exploring respondents' answers. I interviewed six people who identify as faith adjacent and had not regularly attended other services at AMC.

I also conducted a focus group interview with five people who regularly attend AMC and have been involved in planning our Wild Church services. This focus group interview included similar questions to those I used with faith-adjacent people. Conducting the focus group interview enabled me to compare the perspectives of those most involved in Wild Church from AMC with those of the faith-adjacent interviewees. This group interview also allowed me to explore whether people from AMC affirm specific characteristics of Wild Church spirituality that Stahl has previously identified in her research.⁷⁰

All interviews were recorded using a cell phone "Recorder" app created by Google. I made transcripts by editing the automatic transcriptions created by the Recorder app. I noted nonverbal communication during the interviews and subsequently indicated it in the transcripts. I assigned female pseudonyms to each interviewee to preserve their anonymity and consistently use those pseudonyms and female pronouns throughout my notes, in the transcripts, and here.

⁷⁰ Stahl, "Healing our Divide."

In addition to the interviews, I also made observations of Wild Church services at AMC. I made notes during the services and wrote memos capturing my reflections on the services as soon after each service as possible.

Common Themes from Individual Interviews

Certain themes emerged across many, and in some cases all, of my interviews with faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church at AMC as they described their spirituality. Each faith-adjacent individual that I interviewed had previously identified as “spiritual but not religious,” and I asked about this theme explicitly in my interviews. As I read through interview transcripts and then the excerpts that I had identified with initial codes, several other themes emerged, often as combinations of my initial codes.⁷¹ Individual interview questions appear in Appendix A. Figure 1 provides a Word Cloud of the codes used for the individual interviews with faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church at AMC. The larger the word, the more frequently that code applied.



Figure 1. Word Cloud of Codes Used for Individual Interviews with Faith-Adjacent Individuals

⁷¹ See Appendixes C-F for the development of these themes.

Common themes of the spirituality of faith-adjacent people I interviewed included (1) Nature; (2) Feelings Versus Intellectual Reflection; (3) Slowing Down and Being Attentive; (4) Seeking Without Needing to Know; (5) Community; and (6) Being Spiritual but not Religious. I discuss each of these themes, and subthemes that emerged within each, in the pages that follow. Appendix G, “Frequency of Codes Leading to Individual Interview Themes,” outlines how often I assigned these codes, and themes that emerged from them.

Nature

Nature is essential to the spirituality of all the faith-adjacent people that I interviewed. All of them experienced nature as itself spiritual or a primary locus of their spiritual experiences. Several expressed ways in which nature facilitates other aspects of spirituality. Five of the six people I interviewed shared a deep sense of spirituality connected to the particular land where we meet for Wild Church, in particular, as well as for the communities it hosts. Finally, several people identified a desire to live in ways more attuned to natural rhythms.

Nature as Spiritual

Lisa, Amelia, Ava, and Charlotte described direct experiences of nature as spiritual. Lisa described discovering beavers at a lake near her home and returning to that space regularly. She described this as “one of those things where you just kind of disconnect from everything else and just be in the moments. Enjoying, enjoying this family of beavers swimming around.” The sense of “peace and wonderment” that such moments bring to Lisa is the heart of how she understands spirituality, and occurs primarily in nature.

Amelia described a forest bathing class, and becoming aware of slight movements through the tree she was touching. Forest bathing is a Japanese practice of immersing yourself in

the experience of nature through the use of all of your senses. Amelia's class guided her in immersing herself in the sensory experience of nature, one sense at a time, and as she explored touch, she reported, "I just had this sense of feeling the slight movement through the tree that I was under, having this connection with the tree. And feeling this little bit of movement that was connecting us all." This moment felt spiritual to Amelia, and she was attracted to Wild Church because of its openness to exploring "an ignored connection between Christianity and the natural world, as if those were just completely separate universes."

Ava expressed an intimate connection with nature and with the land where AMC worships and hosts Wild Church. At one point, she said, "I feel so connected to this land. That's a part of my spirituality, even like, sometimes this land just feels like a part of my body." She went on to say, "I feel that when I'm in nature a lot, when I'm in the forest every day, I'm like, I'm being held. I'm being cared for. So it's kind of more, like, spatial. It's all around me." Ava experiences nature as spiritual, and her sense of connection with nature feels supportive and caring.

Charlotte began our interview by saying that "Being outside is sort of my spirituality at this point." She feels "drawn" by nature, and expressed a spiritual experience she had in the midst of our interview. As we sat in the sanctuary of AMC, Charlotte said, "I wouldn't get the same thing in this room ... I've even like, that *little* window that I can see that little sun coming through the leaves, that's where ... I'm feeling drawn. And that's, I don't know. Inviting me to breathe is the best way I can put it. Um, kind of, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense, I guess."

Emma is trying to become more attuned to feelings of spiritual connection with nature. She expressed that any type of somatic connection with nature does not come naturally to her,

but that she is working on being more attentive to this possibility. At one point in our interview, Emma closed her eyes and paused for an extended period of time before describing the “relief valve” of her spirituality as a “digging in and opening” at the same time, by which she meant being present to everything around her. When I asked her about this moment later in the interview, she said, “I think that I just am personally working on, like, being more attuned with how that might feel ... Because it is not something that comes naturally to me. So I kind of have to work at understanding how something might feel ... especially, like a somatic feeling, like a body response.”

Olivia sees natural beauty as conducive to a feeling of spirituality, but not as essential to it. She said, “When it comes to nature, I feel like, sure you feel the feeling I'm talking about in a beautiful place, maybe more often than in, you know, just wherever, but like, I've also felt that in my backyard, and it's like, I have a nice backyard, but it's not like, you know ... amazing!”

Nature Facilitates Other Aspects of Spirituality

Interviewees identified several ways in which nature facilitates other aspects of their spirituality. They emphasized that nature promotes presence or slowing down and being attentive to see things differently. They also talked about how being in nature helps them to experience feelings of connection, wonder, or peace. Ava expressed appreciation that Wild Church facilitates this, but also concern that many of those participating in Wild Church are just beginning to explore their spirituality in nature.

I still felt like people are, this may or may not be true, but just like people are *trying* to connect with the land that maybe don't get to connect with the land very often is something I felt like, too, when I was there. So it was, like, um, this is still kind of new to people, and it's still, which I also used to feel (voice rises) really disconnected from plants and animals and things like, we're outside, and now what do we do? Well, that's a really beautiful tree. And it is, it is, and like the depth, like, you can keep going deeper and deeper and deeper. Um, it feels kind of new still.

Connections to *This Land*

Five of the individual interviewees shared a deep sense of spirituality connected to the particular land where AMC hosts Wild Church. All five have prior connections to the land: three work for partner organizations that lease the land from AMC for an urban agriculture program and for a forest preschool. Two are parents whose children attend or previously attended the forest preschool. Charlotte referred to the land as sacred. “My kids went to preschool here, and now they’re at Paideia, so they come back for the farm. And this has always felt like, I mean, even as someone not religious, I don’t have qualms about saying a sacred space. It feels so special to me in my life, but also kind of, I don’t know, there’s something spiritual here.”

Olivia said, “I think this is such a special place. I think the land here, like, it’s beautiful. It’s, I mean, it’s peaceful. It’s incredible, that it exists among everything else.” Emma described it as a place where care can be asked for and given. Amelia spoke about the “gift of this land.” Ava described the land as a safe place:

I feel a strong connection to this land, and I do know other people who have also felt that way. It’s like, it is a *safe place*. I think, even when I go home, and I read the news, if I come here, it’s like, it’s okay. Things are not okay, and there are places where things are okay and thriving, and good, and the earth is taking care of the little people, like, all the joy of the children in the forest. Like this is *promising* to me when I think of like, “oh no!”, when I get dismal about the world, I can come here and it’s like, this is happening, too. And this is, this is hopeful when things look not hopeful.

The feelings of connection to the land that faith-adjacent individuals expressed are clearly related to their sense of appreciation for the communities, especially the forest preschool, who gather there. Olivia shared that the “trust signal” of an invitation to Wild Church coming from the forest preschool was essential to her willingness to try it. Several people expressed a sense of not knowing AMC well, but having a sense that we must be different from other churches, given

our partnership with the urban agriculture farm, and especially with the forest preschool. Emma's identification of it as a place where care can be asked for and given expresses this sense of the interplay between this land and those who share it.

Spirituality as Being Attuned to Natural Rhythms

Finally, some of those I interviewed believe that recognizing and living in harmony with the rhythms of nature is important to their spirituality. Amelia shared about a spiritual experience in which she was learning about how indigenous people reflect on cardinal directions:

One was a view of the cardinal directions, and how just this circle of the directions, how deeply connected it was into the thought and the daily practice of indigenous people. And just getting this light, this little glimmer of back, long ago, how this connection because you were just in the natural world. These thoughts were just woven into everything you did. Um. It's hard to explain how that felt spiritual at the time, but it, it ... it was this emphasis on like, to gain any of this knowledge, or to gain more insight into this, we need to slow down. We have to take things slower and ... allow things to unfold more.

When we stumbled upon the topic of natural rhythms in our interview, Ava responded with excitement and taught me a new word:

Yes! Yes! Yeah! Phenologically. I was telling a friend this, this phenological calendar: so in the fall you're observing, oh, the trees aren't growing any new leaves, they're slowing down, they're kind of, they're getting quieter. The *animals* are getting quieter. And this is the harvest time. Like, squirrels are storing their acorns. Humans are also, would be in the past, storing food. In the winter time, the sun goes down earlier. Humans go to sleep. You sleep longer in the winter. You aren't like doing lots and lots and lots of things. And in the summer, you are kind of, you're out more. You're doing more. And I, I really do think about that regularly.

Emma talked about the connection between the death of a friend and her work harvesting sweet potatoes while her friend was dying. Each year since then, the time of harvest is an opportunity to reflect not only on her friend, but on how Emma has changed since then:

I was digging sweet potatoes and there was something about that that was really powerful to me. There wasn't really, I couldn't sort of linger in the awfulness of it. But I also could be, it could be there with me as I was also digging sweet potatoes. And there is also growth to acknowledge in myself given the cyclical nature of nature and seasons. So that

every year, when I'm digging sweet potatoes? ... (*tears in voice as continues*) I am like revisiting that feeling, and acknowledging, like, how it's different from how it felt that year.

Connecting with the rhythms of nature was not mentioned by everyone, but was a significant part of the attentiveness and presence to nature for some.

Feelings Versus Intellectual Reflection

Faith-adjacent individuals generally identified spiritual experiences in terms of feelings, rather than intellectual reflection. All of the interviewees mentioned how spiritual moments *feel*. The feelings identified clustered around three primary concepts: connection, wonder, and peace.

Feelings of Connection

All of the faith-adjacent individuals that I interviewed talked about feelings of connection as central to their spirituality. Most shared about particular moments of connection with nature that felt spiritual. Some also identified feelings of connection within a community as spiritual. When they talked about God at all, these faith-adjacent individuals had diverse senses of whether they felt connected to a being they might label “God.”

The faith-adjacent people that I interviewed described several types of feelings of connection, including a direct sense of connection with nature; connections between events as “coincidences;” connections with other people; and how their senses of connection relate or not to a conception of God.

Ava used “connection” as the primary word to describe her experience of spirituality as we began our interview. “I feel *connected* to something bigger than me. I feel connected to something beautiful. I feel connected to something that holds me. But sometimes even naming that “God” is something that is hard for me to do.” She feels an intimate connection with nature,

even feeling that the land is part of her body, as quoted above. She also talked about this connection in terms of feeling held and cared for by “something more.”

Amelia has also explicitly felt a connection with nature, as described above in her experiences of connecting with a tree while learning about forest bathing and her appreciation for the sense of connection that indigenous people had with the natural world.

Lisa talked about how connecting with nature allows her to *disconnect* from everyday tasks and stress related to them. In response to my asking which comes first, the appreciation or the disconnection, she felt that it is the appreciation. “I think it's still just the appreciation for something that I find beautiful or fascinating. Um, and maybe the disconnect from, like, the stresses of life. I think that's ... For me, that happens, but it's really just a matter of, the primary part is really just appreciating what I’m seeing, and experiencing.”

Charlotte described her spirituality as a feeling of oneness with both people and nature, that everything is connected. “Yeah, I think for me lately, it’s been sort of just like a oneness. Feeling that people are all connected, but also that we're all connected to the Earth, to everything on the Earth.”

Olivia also talked about connections with nature. “I've always felt like, okay, like, nature's connected to it, like, that's a place of spirituality.” She described how fleeting moments of spiritual connection feel: “Little points of connection or points of, like, coincidence, I guess. But to me, what is more than a coincidence, I think.” She also talked about these more than coincidental connections as glimpses of how something is meant to be.

Several faith-adjacent interviewees also discussed feelings of connection in terms of connecting with other people within a community. In talking about “digging in and opening” at the same time, which is the closest Emma came to describing how spirituality feels for her, she

identified “opening” with “an opening to whomever I am at that moment and ... Um, whomever, whatever is with me. In the moment.” That includes nature, she said, but also the people with her. Charlotte stressed her desire for connection with others in community. “I think what I would like most is just to hear how other people make sense of that in their own ways and times and, how they've come to that and what their specific experiences are. Like, to me, it's very, people based and connection based.” In response to what she yearns for in experiences of spirituality, she said, “Yeah, I think peace. Calm, I think is tied to that for me. Beauty. But connection. I think connection is the big one for me.”

Some people talked about how their sense of connection might or might not relate to God. Emma disclaimed any sense of connection to any type of “divine intervener.” Amelia has had past experiences of connection that she would have then identified as a connection with God, but is now open to different ways of understanding those experiences, as well as open to different kinds of experiences of connection. Ava was hesitant to identify the connection she feels as with God, especially with her prior sense of God as “maybe like an elderly wizard looking man,” which she now feels is “an image that's not true. Not that God isn't true, but that that image wasn't true.”

Feelings of Wonder

Several of my faith-adjacent interviewees associate a feeling of wonder with their sense of spirituality. This took two forms: a sense of awe and a sense of openness. Lisa used the term “wonderment” for her feeling of spirituality and others expressed a similar sense of awe or being “filled up.” Some interviewees talked about a sense of openness or exploration. In some cases, this latter feeling of wonder was facilitated by the former.

I asked Olivia whether what she experienced in moments she described as spiritual was a mix of everyday emotions or something else. She responded,

I think it's different. Yeah. I think it is, like, bigger, or different, because it's not like, just happy or sad or whatever. It's more of, like, truly like ... When I was saying whatever was meant to be, that you were meant to be here or whatever. It's more of that feeling, and it's like it fills you up, like all the way, and not just like, oh, okay, I'm having a good day type of thing. It's, it's different than that.

This sense of a feeling that “fills you up” is similar to Lisa’s discussion of moments of “peace and wonderment” that “hit you” and “stick with you.” She notes that, “After I've been in nature and seen something that I really think is amazing, it sticks with you.” She also tied this sense of wonder to a sense of smallness in the universe, which she sees as contributing to perspective and peace.

So, as I understand Buddhism, you know, um, one of the central tenets is you kind of have to let go of, um, your own business. It's not just suffering, but it's the desire for things is what causes tension and pain and suffering. Um, because you desire something, but you may not get that. So kind of being able to let go of things. And I think that sense of wonderment, that sense of smallness, allows you to, um, sort of, let go of your ego. A little bit. Hard to do that. Entirely.

Amelia called what she feels in spiritual moments “awe,” and connected this sense of awe to opening new ways of thinking. The awe leads her to stop, and pausing allows her to see things in different ways or to wonder about them. Here, wonder in the first sense of awe leads Amelia to wondering in the second sense of exploration. In other cases, the practice of slowing down leads to wonder.

Charlotte emphasized the second sense of wonder as openness or expansion. In her response to a question about whether she desired spiritual growth, she said:

Yeah, I mean, I think grow is a good word. I tend ... more to use openness because ... because I don't have expectations per se. But I think the curiosity and the openness, um ... is expanding ... me. If that makes any sense. Which I guess when I think of expanding, that's growth, you know, synonyms? (laughs) Um, so, yeah, I think I'm, seeking further expansion. But without expectation, without timeline, without ...

pressure, I guess.

Openness to spiritual experiences is “expanding” Charlotte into something more and different than she is now. She is trying to remain open to this developing in whatever ways it does, without putting pressure on herself for it to happen in particular ways.

Ava also identified the space to wonder, in the sense of exploration, as a key to deepening relationships with nature. “I think it takes a lot of stillness. And a lot of freedom to just wonder.” Ava also expressed a sense of awe or wonder in the first sense, describing feeling connected to and held by something that she does not need to understand.

Feelings of Peace

The final feeling that I heard repeatedly from several faith-adjacent interviewees was a sense of peace or release. Lisa summed up the heart of her spirituality in terms of experiencing moments of “peace and wonderment.” Her experiences in nature help her to feel “emotionally recharged” long after she is in the physical place where she found peace and wonderment. Emma expressed the sense of “release” or a “relief valve” that practices of presence offer in response to the stress of life. She also expressed a sense of peace that comes from knowing that she can’t know everything. “The more that you know, the more you know what all you don’t know, which for me brings quite a lot of peace. It doesn’t contribute to feelings of anxiety for me. It’s more like, there’s no way I could possibly know it all, so that’s, great! (laughter)” Peace and calm were two words that Charlotte offered when asked what she yearns for in spirituality.

When I asked Ava to express how her sense of spirituality or connection feels, Ava began with peace:

Um, a sense of peace (tone rises). A sense of ease. A sense that I’m being taken care of. Um. A sense of like, there is something I am like, partnering with in this world, and I don’t know what it is, but that, it continues to bring, bring me to the next place in my life.

That is beautiful and meaningful, and I, I feel like I'm growing with whatever it is that I'm, um, connected to.

In contrast, Olivia said that peace isn't necessarily part of her sense of "that's it" or that things are "meant to be." "I don't mean it's necessarily like a purely happy feeling, or like, you know, super peaceful or anything. I think things tend to elicit a really strong like, emotional reaction and kind of a like, oh my God, like, yes."

Faith-adjacent interviewees spoke often of feelings of spirituality, including feelings of connection, wonder, and peace. While the specifics differed, they all emphasized feelings as an important part of their spirituality.

Slowing Down and Being Attentive

All the faith-adjacent people I interviewed emphasized the importance of slowing down or being mindfully attentive to what is before them as an important part of their spirituality. Nature, and Wild Church in particular, invite them to slow down and pay attention to nature and their relation to it. They reported that slowing down often facilitates feelings of wonder or connection.

Amelia appreciates Wild Church because it "has more of an inner focus of, like, checking yourself out. Um, and just uh, can I calm my mind? Can I stop and can I see this space in a new light?" Emma similarly appreciates the way that Wild Church invites her to "take a beat" and remember what she appreciates about working on the land. "And it is a job, and it is ... sometimes hard for me to take a beat and remember, sort of what drew me to this and why I do this and appreciate the ... beauty, honestly, of it." Slowing down allows her to "dig in and open" at the same time, being present and attentive to her surroundings. Lisa described spiritual experiences as, "If I'm out there to see nature, I'm like, you know, just, yeah, slowly drifting

along so I can see what's around and not disturb, disturb nature.” Later, she described this as “focusing without focusing,” in which “I’m just kind of letting my brain relax and enjoy the moment. Enjoy the beauty of where I am.” Ava talked about noticing how the natural world slows down in the fall and the evenings, and how she loves to make candles because of the slow process of repeatedly dipping them. She will slow down if she feels “off.” “It’s like I need to slow down and like, make myself some tea and light a candle and maybe write or read some. And I even like, sometimes pray.”

Charlotte and Olivia discussed Wild Church as a space that enables them to slow down amidst raising young children. Charlotte began by talking about slowing down in similar ways to those just quoted above. “I think as far as being in nature, I think kind of the pace is partly what I’m drawn to. Like it just slows things down. Encourages you to breathe and take in what’s around you. Listen, be still. Um, and I really liked that about Wild Church.” She later went on to connect this with having children:

I always say that my kids break my brain because they’re always interrupting me with every moment, and the time that they are most at peace, sort of, is when they are just being free in nature. Part of why being in nature brings *me* peace is that it like literally brings me peace. (laughs) Like, I can actually have some quiet and some moments, because I feel like I need a little bit of a stretch of time without fragmented thoughts. Um, and there’s only so many “Mommy”s you can hear without fragmenting your thoughts.

Olivia similarly expressed appreciation that Wild Church is a space where she can bring at least one of her kids, rather than asking her husband to watch them while she attends. “Knowing, too, that it was a place I could bring at least one of them and not have to make it be another ask when he’s, like, oh my God, you want to go do what?” The ease with which children are able to participate in Wild Church is a key factor in allowing parents to slow down and be attentive in Wild Church services.

Slowing down often facilitates feelings of wonder or connection. Olivia connected a sense of “stillness” with amazement. As she reflected on aspects of her experience of Wild Church, she said,

I think the stillness, like walking back in the forest, for sure, is just a huge one. I think it was the first one where we had to collect the ten little items, and looking at things on such a small, small scale and just the wonder of like, you know, oh my God, you think that's a purple flower, but if you actually look at it up close there's purple, and then it fades to white, and then the center is yellow but there's different hues of yellow. Like, the real amazement at, kind of, the world, um ... I love that part of it.

Emma put her appreciation for slowing down in this way: “I think that being outside and being in nature promotes presence, promotes being present, promotes appreciating what is in the present moment. Um, acknowledging what's in the present moment and, with all parts, the good, the bad, the ugly, the hard, the easy.” Slowing down facilitates being attentive, or present to all that is around us.

Nature, and Wild Church more particularly, facilitate pausing to slow down and be attentive in ways that interviewees otherwise would not. Each person that I interviewed identified this as important to their spirituality. Several persons attributed feelings of wonder or connection to taking the time to slow down and be attentive.

Seeking Without Needing to Know

All of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed expressed a sense of seeking regarding spirituality, and most also expressed that they do not need to know or figure out exactly what their spirituality is. Some suggested that trying to understand something intellectually can prevent them experiencing it in ways that feel spiritual. Amelia said, “I'm just sort of leaving it open to see where it goes. I'm trying not to, I guess, define everything.” Charlotte would like to experience spirituality more, but is intentionally reminding herself that she can't force it.

I'm seeking further expansion. But without expectation, without timeline, without ... pressure, I guess ... Like, man, I really wish I had more time to just sort of pause and process and get to it. And then I'm like, it's okay. You don't ... Rome wasn't built in a day. Like, I'm looking at your little sticker [on my laptop]: "find your way." What will be will be, get there in our own time.

Emma similarly experiences release and peace from reminding herself that there is much that cannot be known. This allows her to enjoy exploring with curiosity without feeling like she has to figure everything out. "I think that the pressure of knowing is relieved so that the curiosity can flourish," she said.

Lisa expressed a sense that her intellectual curiosity can sometimes impede her feelings of being present and connected to nature. She distinguished between the spiritual moments of peace and wonderment that she has experienced and times when intellectual curiosity predominates. "I sometimes feel like the intellectual curiosity takes over more than the just sort of let everything go and, and just be there. Be present in the moment."

Ava expressed a similar sense of how not trying to understand something facilitates her feelings of connection. She reflected on not knowing why there is evil or suffering in the world and being unable to reconcile God's allowance of it: "And so I just can't hold that as true, while also feeling that there is presence in the world that is holy. So it's just like I can't understand it, so I'm not gonna try to anymore." Later, I invited her to return to how she thinks about suffering now. She said, "There is more space to not have to make sense of anything, so there is also a wild amount of grief. But that almost feels better than, than trying to justify God's plan to me. Like, I have space where I can just kind of cry about it!"

While most interviewees expressed comfort with perhaps never finding definitive answers about what they experience in terms of spirituality, Olivia spoke more of a desire to

figure out what “that thing” is. She has kept track of moments that she identifies in this way for decades, and would like to “figure it out.”

Like, I hate not having all the answers or having the plan, or like knowing the thing. And so, I think, for me, some of it is like ... wanting to like, have that figured out. Um ... Or ... I don't know. I mean, not necessarily wanting it to feel like that all the time, cuz I'm like, you know, you have to go to work, like, no one's gonna feel that in a business meeting, or, I mean, I guess, maybe very rarely. Um ... But I think, for me, I feel like you're getting a glimpse of the big picture, or the connections that you're supposed to have or something like that, but it's kind of fleeting. And so, I think, the longing is like ... that it's not ... gonna last, or that you'll have this again, but it's gonna be another fleeting moment. And can you put it all together and make sense of it?

Olivia expressed a greater desire to make sense of the fleeting moments of “that thing” that she experiences. With young children, Olivia does not feel able to hike or read more about spirituality, which she feels could help her make sense of her experiences. She hopes that Wild Church will be a space to make progress in that exploration.

All of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed expressed a sense of seeking regarding spirituality, and only one expressed a desire to know or figure out exactly what their spirituality is. Some suggested that trying to understand something intellectually impedes experiencing it in ways that feel spiritual.

Community

The importance of community in spirituality emerged from my interviews with faith-adjacent people in a few ways. Everyone talked about the value of the community that is gathering for Wild Church. Some experience the community as spiritual as they experience a spiritual sense of connection in this community. Some also appreciate community as a space to reflect on spirituality together. Lastly, some appreciate that children are welcome, and the ease with which children are included.

Value of Community

All the faith-adjacent people I interviewed expressed appreciation for those attending Wild Church. All those I interviewed have had previous contact with at least one of the partners on the property, and have a sense that those partnering are a caring community. This appreciation for the kind of community that is gathering for Wild Church was central in all of my interviews. Several also identified participating in caring community as an important act of hope in the face of a world that feels divisive. Charlotte reflected on this at length.

Yeah, I mean, I think it's just a reminder of, you know, humanity, goodness... Like, again, thinking historically, like, maybe this level of jarring stuff (laughs) has always been happening, and we just happen to know more about it. Which, I mean, is, for sure, true. Um, but also in that historic context, you know, people had their communities that they leaned on and could see more of the day-to-day goodness and people helping each other. Um, and so it kind of feels like, right now we're in our own little bubbles, and we're just constantly consuming the negative being created with it, and we're not, we don't have that kind of support structure to lean on of being reminded that there is still good and ... But I feel like in the face of all of that jarring reality, I've been thinking, like, what do I do? Like, how, not only how can I help? Which in a lot of ways is feeling like ... I don't even know how I can help in any meaningful way. But leaning into the smaller communities and trying to create spaces and hold spaces for that kind of hope and ... positive ... time. It's the best I can think of.

Emma expressed the need for communities of care: “And it's nice to be, to have a place where ... people consider you, and are considerate of each other and thinking about each other and curious about each other. It's a space where, hopefully, care can happen. Care can be asked for. Care can be given. Care can be received.”

Olivia also identified gathering for Wild Church as an act of hope:

I think also, and I can't remember, actually, if it was something that was truly said at the first one I came to or if it was something Mindy and I were talking about. But um ... just in terms of, in a world where, politically, right now, what a disaster everything is, and how much cruelty, and all of that ... But, something about this being an act of hope, coming together like this, and that ... There's more to it than that. But whatever that was, was also really resonant for me in the moment, and another one of those, yes, you're here for a reason.

It is clear that these interviewees are seeking community among people of care and kindness in the midst of a world that often does not feel that way.

Community as Spiritual

Some interviewees expressed a sense of community as itself spiritual. Charlotte experiences togetherness as spiritual, whether or not the group is intentionally reflecting on spirituality. “I like the idea of having some regular time carved out for just being together and talking, and you know, sharing, and ... I don’t, I don’t care that it's even about spirituality or religious experience, or anything. I just feel like, the togetherness is almost the spiritual experience.” She offered several ideas for other ways to gather, including that there could be a coffee and play time at 11, where those who came for Wild Church could stay, but others who don’t want that level of intentional spiritual engagement can join.

Ava expressed a spiritual sense of community in this way: “I want to be a human that's like connected to other humans. I want to be a human that, shares, finds food, and shares food. I want to be a human that makes things. And has shelter. And to me, that kind of defines being alive!”

Emma expressed the goodness of developing community in nature. “Yeah, I really appreciate having this be a place where I'm growing relationships. And I think that the nature of being outside with people, and being outside with people who have chosen to gather in a place. With lemonade and cookies, you know? Is, um ... is good.”

On the other hand, Lisa expressed a sense that it is easier to experience spirituality on one’s own than in a community. She said, “It's nice to be able to share that sense of wonderment with somebody, but, for me, it's not necessary. It's not necessary. And, in some ways, it may

even, having somebody there might actually get in the way. Be distracting.” At the same time, Lisa remained curious about exploring spirituality in nature with others, and welcomed the chance to do so in Wild Church.

Actually, after all I've just said I think I've enjoyed the few times I've been. And I think actually, after I just told you it's more of an individual thing, I think this is an opportunity to get the social and the spiritual and connect them. I think, for me, it's probably hard. But I do see that as an opportunity to kind of put the two together because I think both are important.

Lisa values the community of Wild Church, and wonders how it might facilitate her reflection on spirituality, even while feeling that she primarily experiences spirituality in nature on her own.

Community as Space to Reflect on Spirituality

Some who attend Wild Church are interested in how the community that gathers there might facilitate reflecting on their spirituality. Charlotte began our interview by saying,

The faith adjacency part, I think to me is more about community and um, consistency. Like, I know a lot of people find a lot of comfort in rituals, and to some extent I do too. But I think just being, together, and sort of ... reflecting, thinking, being intentional about being together and thinking about what we believe and why and what it means in our lives. Sort of where I'm at now.

Charlotte desires to reflect on spirituality with others. Amelia spoke about her desire to learn from others while exploring the connection between Christianity and nature, a topic she feels has been overlooked. Ava wants to participate in rituals that mark a shared sense of connection with both people and nature. She identified the aspect of communal ritual as a part of her attraction to Wild Church:

I was drawn because I am really curious ... about thinking about ways of connecting with people (tone rises) and nature together intentionally. Um, and calling it church. (laughs) I think, I think taking a pause and, um ... It's like ritual. It's this marking something meaningful by doing something that might not seem practical or productive ... (laughs) um, does something for the human soul, body, person.

Olivia and Lisa aren't sure how Wild Church might facilitate their spirituality, but are curious to

see if it might. Olivia hopes that attending Wild Church with others who are interested in exploring spirituality in nature will help her to experience more of the moments of “that thing” or meaningfulness that she associates with spirituality.

Most interviewees expressed some level of desire to reflect on their spirituality in community, but in different ways and to different degrees. Even those who value Wild Church for the opportunity it brings to reflect on their spirituality together express different hopes for how that might happen.

Children Are Welcome

Several interviewees noted the ease with which children can participate as an important aspect of Wild Church community. Olivia included this as she talked about her sense of AMC being a community of care.

I think also in ... the kind of the ways that it seems like people in the church here are present for each other and interact with each other. I mean, the openness to the kids, and kids being kids. [My daughter] screamed “I hate everyone” during the last one ... (laughter) But, like, you know, no one's batting an eye ... thank you, um. And then, Mindy said a great deal about just the people, and that that's what keeps her, kind of keeps her together. Yeah, I mean, a lot of it is feeling based. Obviously, I have not been here much. But it has a really good feeling to kind of start out with at least.

Ava feels this land is a safe place, and feels hope in coming onto this land and seeing the joy of children playing in the forest. Both Olivia and Charlotte expressed gratitude for the inclusion of their children in Wild Church in ways that allow them to be more present.

All of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed talked about their appreciation for Wild Church as a community. Everyone talked about the value of the community. Some experience the community as spiritual, some appreciate community as a space to reflect on spirituality together, and some appreciate that children are welcome.

Spiritual but not Religious

The faith-adjacent people I interviewed have different feelings about religion, but none of them would describe themselves as religious. All of them are most familiar with Christianity as a religious tradition, and all of them participated in organized Christian faith as children. In terms of religious structures and spiritual experience, they generally do not feel that religious structures facilitate spiritual experiences. Some see church as constraining, even when they also find some value in it. Several noted that AMC is different from other churches they have experienced.

Religious Structures and Spiritual Experience

Several of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed expressed a sense that religion requires structure that does not support and is perhaps antithetical to their spirituality. They think of Church as generally disconnected from their experiences of spirituality. Lisa said,

Yeah, well, it's a formal structure. Both physical structure, and then also an organizational structure that rarely resonates with me. I was raised Catholic. I would go to these services and there was nothing that I connected with. And maybe that's my Catholic upbringing because you go back the next week and they changed the words, but it was basically the same thing the next week. Um. And so, yeah, it just never connected with me. I can see why people do it for social connections.

Olivia discussed the lack of spiritual connection through religion in this manner: "But like I said, reading the Bible by itself does not necessarily make me feel that, like, big sense of connection. Or, I think sometimes in a sermon you'll feel it, but not always or not maybe often at all in the church I grew up in, or in my parents' church."

In general, the faith-adjacent people I interviewed did not think that the structured expressions of Christianity they had experienced were conducive to their sense of spirituality. Some mentioned an occasional experience of church or a sermon being meaningful, and Amelia especially valued continuing to think about the reflections offered in worship services. However,

there was a much stronger sense among all the interviewees of experiencing spirituality in nature and outside of the structured confines of Christian religion.

Church as Constraining

Several faith-adjacent individuals reported that they experienced church as constraining. Some used words like “repelled by” or “abhorrent” for particular experiences of Christianity. For Amelia and Emma, their experiences were shaped by a sense that certain Christians do not sufficiently care for people in need. For Olivia, it was that some Christians are exclusionary of LGBTQ+ persons, or don’t allow women to participate in equal ways. Ava compared church to a fishbowl, where she kept bumping up against the glass, and her experience of spirituality now as “being in the ocean.”

I feel like in the past, I kind of felt like I was a fish in a bowl that kept running into the glass. And now it feels like I'm in the ocean. Oh my God. I feel more submerged into something. And that *I don't have to know*. (almost whispers) Because if God is God, I don't have to understand. If I feel connected to that thing. That's right, I guess that's where I am. (laughs)

Emma expressed her concern about religion in strong terms: “I think it can constrain people, and I have seen it, and I think there are very obvious examples of how that is happening and contributing to ... a downfall of our society.” Both Ava and Emma were careful to allow the possibility that particular expressions of religion might be different from their past experiences, but are clearly skeptical and cautious about any church engagement.

There were positive experiences of religion as well, including among those who used the most strongly negative language to describe religion. Amelia appreciates the “nuggets” that services provide to think about, and has had past experiences that she identified at the time as being connected to God. Olivia sometimes has strong emotional responses to elements of religion: the church her grandparents attended for decades and where they are buried, the music

in a Christmas service. Charlotte appreciates the time she spent in a Presbyterian youth group. Lisa can recall moments when a sermon felt meaningful, though she says these are the exceptions in her experience. While many acknowledged religious experiences that had been meaningful, they all felt that these are occasional, and less likely than their experiences of spirituality in nature.

AMC is Different

In contrast to their prior experiences in church, several of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed mentioned ways in which they felt that AMC differed from their past experiences. They noted this as a significant factor in their willingness to try Wild Church. Because of her past experiences with church, Olivia talked about the need for “trust signals” that Wild Church would be a safe space for her. These included signs that AMC had put up indicating that LGBTQ people are welcome and that we care about immigrants, as well as what’s on our website. However, it primarily came from people she trusted in the forest preschool, who vouched for us.

I probably would not have come had I not already known like, Language Garden, and its director ... I mean, obviously, I did not love my religious upbringing, but I trusted that she would not have brought that up in the school newsletter if this was, like ... you know, a judgmental place or a, you know, like ... There felt like a degree of ... sureness that, you know, at the worst, it would be an hour, and it's, like, oh, I don't want to go again. It wasn't like, oh wow, I'm gonna go and I'm gonna get proselytized to or I'm gonna get judged. I think that invitation coming from where it came from, was enough of a, like, a trust signal or whatever.

Amelia commented on when she had occasionally attended regular services at AMC in the past, as well as Wild Church. “What I have experienced here is, it does, it feels genuine. People feel genuine. Here, it is more of a yearning of say, reading the scripture and seeing, how does that really lay onto 2025. How does it? What does it mean for a reaction to climate change or immigration or your relationships with your neighbors? All these things.”

Ava expressed feeling that AMC is different from her past experiences, and gratitude for its willingness to experiment with Wild Church:

I'm just really glad you guys are *doing* it. I'm glad that it exists. I'm glad that, I think it's really beautiful that you are trying this, like everyone's, okay, we'll do this! I appreciate that, too, because I think the last church I went to here in Atlanta, it was like, you know, you get your fancy coffee, and you get your fancy bagel, and then you have your worship music people. And then the sermon, and then you like, walk out. You're like, the sermon was okay. The music was great this morning. But it just feels like you're ordering something to go at a restaurant, and taking it home and then making decisions about if you liked it or not. And that doesn't feel like this church to me. It feels like this church is not going to feel a sense of loss if they come to church and it's not the same. Like, oh, well, we didn't get like, the bagels and the coffee and the particular worship person singing songs and the particular pastor saying particular things that we like. It feels more human and more like, yeah, just really human, and I like that so much! (laughs) It feels alive to me.

Ava uses the term “alive” and Amelia the term “genuine,” to identify a similar way in which they experience AMC as different from other church communities they have experienced in their past. Other interviewees echoed this sense of AMC being a different kind of church as they talked about appreciating what they know of the congregation or the people who attend AMC.

The faith-adjacent individuals I interviewed have had a mix of negative and positive experiences with church, but generally do not feel that church is conducive to their sense of spirituality. Recognizing that AMC is not like their past negative experiences of church has been important to them in deciding to attend Wild Church. Prior relationships of trust, and trust signals in how AMC relates to the other groups that share our land, gave them a sense of the type of community they would find at Wild Church.

In my interviews with faith-adjacent people, six categories of their spirituality emerged.

- (1) They all experience their spirituality in nature.
- (2) Their sense of spirituality is tied to particular feelings, especially of connection, wonder, and peace.
- (3) Slowing down and being

attentive allows them to experience nature spiritually. (4) All of them are interested in exploring their spirituality, but most do not feel an urgency to figure it out. (5) The Wild Church community is important to them in a variety of ways, especially as being a community of care. (6) Finally, all the faith-adjacent interviewees see religion as generally unhelpful to experiencing spirituality.

Common Themes from the Focus Group Interview

In addition to six individual interviews, I conducted a two-hour focus group interview with five people who regularly attend AMC and have been involved in leading our Wild Church experiment. This allowed me to explore my fourth research question, “Is there alignment between the common characteristics experienced by faith-adjacent Wild Church participants and those experienced by AMC attendees who participate in Wild Church?” I also explored whether the focus group felt that AMC and our Wild Church experiment exemplify certain characteristics that Stahl had observed in several Wild Churches.⁷² Focus Group interview questions appear in Appendix B.

Figure 2 shows a word cloud from the focus group interview. Note that it significantly overlaps with Figure 1 (Word Cloud of Codes Used for Individual Interviews with Faith-Adjacent Individuals).

⁷² Stahl, “Healing our Divide,” 66-67.

of everything, and I never meet up with any of them. And now, oh, look, there's no expectation, just be ourselves. So that's what I *greatly* appreciate. And just too, I feel like the rest of the birds are singing with us. Like, we're part of things. I just feel more connected and open, not just confined.

This ability to be ourselves extends to children, and the ease with which children can participate is appreciated by AMC attenders. Mia said, "It's really neat to see the children. Um, like, crawling all over in the grass (laughter) and just being totally bit and scratched up. It's beautiful. How they're at one with nature." Isabella noted, "It definitely is an intergenerational experience, and I think, we as a culture tend to define ourselves by different age groups and not have so many intergenerational opportunities. So that's another ... cross current of connection that Wild Church invites us to."

In addition to being inclusive of children, focus group interviewees suggested that Wild Church invites a more child-like engagement from adults than regular worship, which is more intellectually theological. It allows people to participate authentically without feeling that they have to know the right words or accomplish anything. Evelyn articulated this thought first:

It's a wonderful way to return to your childhood roots, you know, and to actually allow yourself to engage in something that maybe isn't pretending to be, like ... (tone rises) very theological and spiritual and, like, I'm gonna use big words now. (laughter) You know, it's basic in the best sense. Yeah, we're just down to brass tacks, and you do get something different out of that than you would out of, you know, a reading.

Mia picked up on the same theme of Wild Church inviting a more basic engagement that does not require productivity (parenthetical comments are interjections by other focus group members):

I like being brought back to basics, too. Like, just using our senses, that's very primitive, and working in a baby room, that's all we do is discover our senses, and it's really neat to just be allowed to do that. I feel like so often, I have to plan my wasted time throughout the day, you know? (Laughter, yeah!) And, because I have to be productive, productive, productive, and it's hard to feel justified in not having productivity. (Yep) And, and that's all children do. Nothing they do is productive. (laughter) Except, you know, they're learning and learning and learning. (yep, yep, yep) But it's hard to like, take that burden

off (yeah) and be like, I don't have to have anything come out of ... (I don't need to produce anything) this next half hour. But actually, we're producing, like, mental health. (laughter)

These comments, and the affirmations and shared laughter from others in the focus group, illustrate an appreciation for the simplicity of engaging Wild Church. While the focus group also expressed appreciation for aspects of regular worship, they emphasized the ways that Wild Church makes authentically entering into community easy and enjoyable.

Appreciate New People

AMC attenders appreciate that new people are participating in Wild Church. When asked to express hopes for the future of Wild Church, Mia responded, "I hope that we're able to keep bringing new people in. Not just the new people that we've already brought in, but maybe, you know, new new people." When I asked what "bringing them in" meant to her, she clarified. "Just to attend. They don't need to stay. We don't need to convert them, right? But just to continue to make it an inclusive experience."

Evelyn reflected on how wandering at Wild Church and the sharing time that follows is an inclusive experience that feels less religious than inside church:

I think it's a wonderful way to allow people to share if they so choose using words that we can all relate to and understand. Because you know, you all just spent 15 minutes outside, and you know, listening to the songs or hearing the one or two things that were spoken, shared to the group, without feeling like if you aren't particularly Christian or religious, like, I'm gonna sound stupid because I don't know what the words are. You just say what you feel and say what you experienced. I think it makes it more inviting and more open to people being able to be themselves and not feel like they have to put on a mask, which I feel like sometimes comes with more organized religious services.

The openness to people sharing whatever they find meaningful is appreciated by AMC attenders, for themselves and for the way it makes it easy for others to participate.

Some AMC attenders expressed valuing new people for the opportunity to learn from

them, especially those who know more about nature than they do. Sophia expressed appreciation for people “who are insanely smart about the things outside, so I feel like I'm learning more stuff about the forest.”

AMC attenders appreciate the inclusive community that Wild Church is and invites. It allows people to show up without having to meet expectations. This includes children, and invites adults to a more child-like engagement. AMC attenders are grateful for the ways that Wild Church facilitates new people attending, and hope that this continues.

Pause and Open

Several AMC attenders shared that Wild Church is helping them to pause and be open to nature and the divine in new ways. Wild Church services invite this, and this reflection also leads some AMC attenders to pause more often to be attentive to nature in their everyday lives. Additionally, Wild Church is opening AMC attenders to an increased appreciation for the spirituality of the land AMC owns and stewards.

Opening in Wild Church

Noel shared that Wild Church encourages a “willingness to be more open just to whatever, whatever comes along.” Isabella talked about her spirituality and Wild Church in terms of exploring in fresh ways. “It's not only my personal being, but my connection with the divine that is an important piece of the spiritual and one of the things that I think Wild Church does is let me explore that, let all of us explore that in fresh ways.”

A couple of people expressed appreciation for the contemplative nature of Wild Church. Noel described her spirituality as “contemplative” and shared that her response to our first Wild Church service was, “I’ve been looking for this my whole life.” AMC is also experimenting with

Taizé worship, and Mia expressed appreciation for both it and Wild Church as contemplative expressions of worship. “I think Taizé and Wild Church, although they're kind of polar opposites of each other in a lot of ways, they're kind of both similar in that they connect with your senses and the contemplative, meditative outside.”

Opening Beyond Wild Church

As a result of attending Wild Church and being invited to cultivate attentiveness to nature, some AMC interviewees indicated that they are now pausing and engaging with nature more frequently at other times. Sophia reported,

I think I'm doing it a lot more. At home I'm taking moments and like, you need to just sit down and enjoy the birds flying in the front yard, or you need to just sit down and close your eyes and meditate because it's weird, like, my head does clear when I'm making myself be still. So, yeah, I think that's what has built in my spirituality from the experiences.

Evelyn aspires to pause and be more open more often. She said, “I think it is reminding me to slow down. I don't know if it's worked yet, but it's at least reminding me, and if I get reminded enough times ... Like if I see an ad for a product enough times, I'll go buy it. So maybe if I'm reminded to slow down enough times, eventually I'll do it.” Evelyn feels that Wild Church invites attentiveness in ways that she does not normally bring to daily routines.

I find if I am outside just for [my] own purposes, I'm not paying attention as much as I do when I'm in Wild Church. Like, I am very much invested in the moment and in the time that we've been given. I feel like I notice more, I see more, in terms of like, there are ants on that tree, and I would have never stopped to watch them otherwise, had I not been given, you know, this specific twenty minutes of time to go out and wander and connect and be.

Appreciating our Land

As AMC interviewees indicated their appreciation for experiencing spirituality in nature

through Wild Church, they also expressed an increased appreciation for the spirituality of the land AMC owns and stewards. Isabella said:

I have a better sense of place. Not only in experiencing the property more fully, but that there's like worshipful things going on and creative things going on all over this property. And I don't think I had an awareness of that, and so there's something about ... I'm not articulating it well, but there's something about a sense of place that has been broadened. At the same time that the worship has been broadened. And there's something about where the worship happens that has another level of meaning that I don't think I get from coming into a building.

AMC is in the process of discerning how to sell or divest its property, as we can no longer afford to maintain it. Reflecting on that, Mia shared:

The process of figuring out what to do with the property because we have this big decision to make, and yet, you know, like [Isabella] said, you come to church and kind of ignore the property. So for us to get that chance once a month to go out and be like, oh yeah (exclaims with higher tone), this is a really cool thing we have here. Oh, this is something amazing we're doing. Oh, this and this and this. And we need to keep that in mind as we do this discernment process. And I think a lot of us, you know, are really into preserving the property, but to be taking advantage of everything that it offers regularly.

Shared Experience

AMC attenders shared a sense that connection with nature is important to their spirituality. They also expressed a strong sense of connection to those participating in Wild Church, and value their shared experiences of nature and the divine. They expressed that at Wild church they *feel* a sense of shared experience or connection and contrast this with the more intellectual reflection that they experience in regular worship. This experience of connection to each other and the divine is an attractive aspect of Wild Church. While some AMC attenders emphasized feelings of connection, others focused on the joy of sharing experiences together.

All of the focus group participants noted a sense of connection with nature as significant to their spirituality. Sophia said, "So, my spirituality, I get most of it, like from nature and outside and things, and my connections to everything else. So, I kind of feel like God is *everything*, and

so I'm related to it all and have to put myself in other positions and take other perspectives.”

Noel talked about fellowship or kinship with creation. Isabella emphasized spirituality as focused on being rather than doing, and tapping into who she is rather than what she does. She then said,

I think I tap into that most readily through a community of believers that have common values and common priorities. And while that's rooted in a Christian tradition, I don't feel like that's the only possible option. I also tap into that with yoga. And with time in nature, whether that's gardening or hiking or sitting on a mountaintop and looking at the view, or being at the ocean.

Evelyn reported that many of her spiritual experiences were in natural settings, such as church camps. While joking about the heat and mosquitoes, Mia included nature in her experience of spirituality as “any time that I'm not attached to my phone (laughter).”

Several focus group participants also said that the shared sense of connection to nature and the divine with other people is important to them. Mia expressed her sense of shared connection in this way:

It's different than just like, doing this practice, the wandering and wondering, at home alone. It's different to kind of have witnesses to your experience. Whether or not you talk about what all you experienced afterward, it's neat to kind of, um, I don't know, feel the peace among everyone? Like, you can kind of tell that after everyone has gone out for 15 to 20 minutes. When they come back, it feels different. It feels like everyone has kind of had a little meditative practice. You can feel it in the air. I can feel it. (laughs) And so I think that's neat as a group.

Evelyn referred to this as a “collectively shared individual experience.” Sophia discussed a shared experience with some hunters, who felt a similar connection with nature as her, albeit for different reasons, and compared that to her experience of Wild Church.

So, like, um, it always surprised me that some of my best friends were hunters. They hunted, and I'm like, how do I love these hunters? (laughter) But it's because we have the same *love* of the outside. I'm like, I feel a deer coming, and this hunter's like, yep, there's about two or three. And they'd come walking out and really, oooh. (laughter) And it's just the connection. So we're not the same person whatsoever, but we have that same exact feeling, but it's for *totally* (voice rises) different reasons. And so that's kind of what I like

[about Wild Church]. You're not telling me we have to thank God for this tree right here. There's just so many different reasons [to come], and it's all invited there.

Sophia feels that at Wild Church, people experience the same sense of shared feeling, without needing to share the same reasons for having their feelings of connection to nature.

Isabella shared a specific example of how Wild Church can facilitate shared delight, which adds a sense of meaning to the experience for her compared to if it was experienced individually.

So, I had an experience at the last Wild Church that reminds me of why it's fun, and fun's not the only word, maybe gives deeper meaning, if you travel with someone. Because you have someone to share your memories with or your insights with, or you discover together, or that kind of thing. So, at the last Wild Church, I discovered a native plant that's quite rare, called a Striped Wintergreen and I was so excited because I had a plant app on my phone. I'm, like, oh, look at this plant! Well, it just happened that Ella was nearby. And so, Ella and I are so excited about this plant, (laughter) but it's the kind of thing where that discovery can be shared in a sense of delight together. That gives a sense of connection that, it would have been cool to find on my own, but has a different meaning, I think, when you discover it with someone.

The focus group interviewees drew a clear contrast between the ways AMC attenders experience Wild Church through feelings and the ways they reflect more intellectually in regular worship.

The emphasis on feeling became more explicit when I asked the group to compare how regular church and Wild Church engage their sense of spirituality. Sophia responded first, setting up a contrast between feeling and thinking. "I think my difference is I feel like inside church I'm learning, and outside, I'm more feeling. It's my comparison. Or my focus is more learning, and my focus is more feeling." Others picked up this contrast. Isabella said, "I would say that regular church tends to be more cerebral. And that's both good and bad, probably. I feel like there's some sort of theological reflection that goes on."

Noel reflected on the distinction between feeling and thinking in terms of simply being within nature versus reflecting on issues.

AMC worship services tend to be fairly issue-oriented. I think Wild Church—there is a sense of being—pardon me for putting it this way—free from the damn news. Being able to just be among these other creatures that have no other business but being. And not having to have an opinion on everything, or a plan, or figure out whose plan I should join up with. And so we're on the one hand kind of less informed about each other's thinking; on the other hand, we're able to be a little freer from our own thinking. And worries.

Wild Church is often a shared experience of joy and peace for those attending AMC.

Evelyn highlights the joy feelings of connection with nature and others as they experience nature together: “I think the experience itself is very enjoyable and it feels like it doesn't require work. You know, that's just enjoyment. And you know, getting to be in a peaceful space and place with people who I feel safe with. And that in itself is an avenue for spiritual growth as well, and I do acknowledge that.”

Life of AMC

Much of the discussion in the focus group interview touched upon how AMC attenders experience spirituality in Wild Church in comparison to regular worship at AMC. Those interviewed stated that they miss aspects of regular worship, even as they also expressed appreciation for the diversity of worship experiences that we now have. They expressed a sense that planning Wild Church services takes more work than planning regular worship, and wondered whether it should, given their appreciation for a spirituality of just showing up.

Missing Aspects of Regular Worship

All of the AMC attenders that I interviewed noted that while they are grateful for Wild Church, they miss some aspects of regular worship when attending Wild Church. They miss sharing joys and concerns in worship, and some of them also miss the inclusion of a reflection/sermon. They feel that AMC's regular worship provides a more intimate sense of

community. Noel said, “There's more of a sense of human community, I think, in regular worship than in Wild Church for me.” Isabella commented on both the depth of community and of theological reflection:

I feel like if it was outside all the time, I wouldn't have a good sense of what's going on in people's lives. Or perspectives on topics that we are having discussion on, or the reflection is presenting. So, it seems like it gets a little, maybe it gets a little deeper (voice rises as a question) into the, both the community aspect and into the, sort of the theology of what we're doing I guess, inside.

AMC attenders expressed a desire to deepen the sense of community with those who attend Wild Church, but they recognize that this will take time.

There were different feelings among AMC attenders about Wild Church involving less explicitly Christian language. Mia has just begun attending church regularly again and shared her appreciation for the fact that there is less talk about Jesus or the Christian faith in Wild Church.

I've always had trouble with a lot of these words. Christianity. God, Jesus. And like, God and Christian are two words that have, like, made me cringe for a lot of my life. Just now recently, am I like, okay, I can go to a church that says God. But I still feel so much more comfortable when these words aren't mentioned. So this is my kind of church where ... I enjoy not having to talk about these things, even if we're still kind of talking about these things. Like [Evelyn] said, you don't realize that they're not included, but some people do realize when they are included. (laughs) And that's me. So I like that it's more inclusive without necessarily having to exclude things.

On the other hand, in contrast to what Mia expressed, Noel hopes that eventually, Wild Church could be more “Jesusy.”

Long, long, long range, I hope we're able to make it, pardon me for putting it this way, a little more Jesusy. Um, (laughs) to find a way to make an inviting way of getting some of the wildness (tone rises) that's always been here and there in corners of Christianity, up into the open. Yeah, and not in any way that would turn off anybody at all, and that's why I'm saying long, long term because it takes a long time to think about how, if, something like that could be done.

AMC attenders generally welcome the ways that Wild Church makes space for non-Christian

senses of spirituality, but some expressed missing explicit reflection on Jesus.

Diversity of Worship

Several AMC interviewees stated that they appreciate the diversity of worship experiences that we now have each month. Mia enjoys engaging worship experiences without knowing what to expect. “I enjoy not knowing what to expect. I've never been one to like, I don't know, keep track of what Sunday it is or what not. I just go to church and experience whatever it is. But it's neat to be, like, oh, it's Taizé week! Oh, it's Wild Church week!” Isabella identified the variety of worship experiences as facilitating spiritual growth. “Yeah, I would say that Wild Church, and Taizé, and the variety of services that we have, because they are varied in sort of how we experience worship, in and of itself, kind of seems to nurture spiritual growth. Sort of stretches us in different ways that we might not stretch ourselves if the church wasn't calling us to worship in new ways.” The diversity of worship is experienced as enjoyable and as inviting us to stretch in ways that facilitate spiritual growth.

Planning Wild Church Services

Those in the focus group generally felt that planning Wild Church services takes more work than planning regular worship services. They wondered together about how their desire to plan fits with a spirituality of just showing up, for which they had expressed appreciation. Isabella explained that planning Wild Church is harder because it is new; with less of a sense of established rhythm to Wild Church services, more elements have to be thought about rather than assumed:

Well, there's more moving parts. So, for example it's not even presumed where it's going to happen. (mmhmm) So you got to figure out the logistics of where is it going to happen and what needs to happen in terms of how accessible is that and how many chairs do we have to have, or do we need to move picnic tables? And so even the setting becomes a

whole conversation. Then, we always have a theme for a regular worship service, are we going to have a theme? Is there something that needs to weave its way through? You could argue whether that's necessary or not. But if we have a theme, then that requires doing some research around readings around that theme and songs that fit with that theme. And so ... I don't know. It just seems like a lot of the things that you are able to take for granted in planning a regular worship service, none of that is for granted. You have to question all of it. (laughter) And that's what takes time. As someone who's done a ton of worship planning over the years, I kind of know what to expect. And Wild Church has definitely stretched me. Because I don't know what to expect. (laughs) Which is probably healthy. But, like I said before, it's also very time consuming. Who knows though? I've only done it once. Maybe if you do it enough times it, it doesn't feel as big.

The focus group then talked about whether it was desirable for Wild Church to develop established rhythms, or whether it would be better to continually experiment with it. When I asked how this conversation connected with what they had said earlier about enjoying simply showing up and engaging nature without expectations, the group responded with banter that acknowledged the tension between planning and just showing up:

[Evelyn] We're trying too hard. (laughter) Maybe.

[Mia] Too much perfectionism?

[Noel] Yes, that, that Mennonite, uh, albatross around our neck or whatever it is, we're thinking it really has to be perfect every time.

[Evelyn] I thought that was just a me thing.

[Noel] See, I was about to say that too. We all thought it was just us. (laughter)

Shared Leadership, Authenticity, Vulnerability, Connection

The focus group interview allowed me to compare AMC attenders' experiences of Wild Church with themes that Stahl observed in Wild Churches that she studied: shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, and connection.

All of the AMC focus group members affirmed that Stahl's themes are present in our congregation and in Wild Church. We had an extended conversation about vulnerability, in particular. Several people said that they feel that it's harder to be vulnerable with people you don't know as well, but that Wild Church invites a different kind of vulnerability as we wander

and experience nature in ways that we might not regularly. Noel began the conversation in this way: “Vulnerability? I don't know. You're out there in the wide open spaces with a bunch of people you don't know. How vulnerable do you want to be? But there is also a certain vulnerability about just walking around in the woods, too. And you know, not knowing when you're going to face plant into a spider web.” (laughter)

Evelyn continued this thread:

I think I probably would piggyback on that, at least for Wild Church. Specifically, vulnerability can be a touch difficult. And I think that comes with, you know, consistency. And trust with the people that are there and that are around you. And if we do have new people coming in all the time, I can see that, um, being a little bit more challenging, but definitely not impossible, especially if we can, you know, as people who attend it regularly, can try and model that. (mmm) Whatever that might look like.

Amidst this reflection on the challenge of vulnerability among people we don't know as well, Mia added that our shared leadership facilitates vulnerability, as well as the other values, because everyone's voice is explicitly welcomed.

Yeah, I agree that AMC seems to be good at all of those, and I think the shared leadership—is that what it was called?—definitely helps with the vulnerability. Because everyone, I mean, to me, shared leadership means like everyone has a voice. And so that gives more opportunity to be vulnerable with each other. When we heard each other's stories and whatnot and, um, authenticity and ... (connection) Connection. Yeah, I think those are all kind of related to shared leadership. Because in the old church, where there wasn't as much shared leadership, I don't think there was as much opportunity for, at least the same amount of vulnerability. Or authenticity. (mmm)

As Mia continued, she echoed Noel's and Evelyn's points about the experience of nature also having a kind of vulnerability, and about modeling vulnerability. Mia then discussed these in terms of engaging in a more child-like way.

I think it's just a different kind of vulnerability that we have at Wild Church. Anytime we step into a forest in sandals, we have a certain amount of vulnerability to poison ivy and snakes and whatnot. And, I think the more we can connect with our child-like self, that shows a kind of vulnerability too. Creativity. Any of those, like, less stoic parts of ourselves. And I agree that we kind of have the responsibility of showing vulnerability to

the new people.

The focus group participants noted that they feel that it is harder to share authentically and vulnerably in Wild Church than in regular worship at AMC because there are more new people and there is no time for sharing prayer concerns as part of the service. They shared a desire to facilitate authentic and vulnerable sharing. Evelyn shared her hopes for this:

Who knows that people will actually show up because community takes intentionality and time and effort, and not everybody has the social battery to make that happen, and I recognize that. But I think it would be lovely to try and you know, maintain those relationships, so people know that we're always going to be here, and it doesn't just have to be a one or two time thing. Because I feel people are a lot less connected these days.

The focus group held a desire to facilitate vulnerable sharing alongside their recognition that Wild Church invites vulnerability in other ways.

As the focus group discussed shared leadership, Isabella pointed out that shared leadership in Wild Church can both require more work and be tremendously rewarding. She planned a service with a faith-adjacent person with little experience of worship services.

I found that she had *never* participated in *any* kind of role in a church ever in her life. And she was pretty intimidated by it. She was very up front with me. (yeah) She's like, I've *never* done anything like this. And I, and she did *such* a beautiful job. And she added *so much* to that, um, that I really feel like it expanded our shared leadership in ways that we haven't experienced before.

While Isabella didn't explicitly draw the connection, it seems that the faith-adjacent person was being vulnerable in participating in this new experience, and that Isabella was both facilitating that by sharing leadership and perhaps also being vulnerable herself by being open to new ideas.

My focus group interview yielded five themes. (1) AMC attenders value the inclusiveness of Wild Church and the ways it allows people to just show up as they are. (2) Wild Church is inviting them to pause and open themselves to nature and the divine. (3) They value the shared experience of Wild Church, and feeling a sense of connection with each other and

nature. (4) They both appreciate and wonder about the ways that Wild Church is different from regular worship. (5) They affirm the values that Stahl has identified in her study of Wild Churches: shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, and connection.

Observations of Wild Church Services at AMC

In addition to the individual interviews and the focus group interview, I took notes on what I observed in AMC's Wild Church services, and wrote memos about them as soon after the services as possible. As I re-read my observations of Wild Church services, I was struck by how many times I had noted an appreciation for the shared leadership of others bringing elements to our gatherings that I would not have thought to include. My observations highlight two themes in particular: the ease with which children engage in Wild Church, and the variety of sharing that takes place at the end of Wild Church services.

Many of our Wild Church services have involved tactile elements that children have enjoyed engaging with. In March, I observed that one child enjoyed eating birdseed from a bowl, and several children built rock cairns using rocks from a basket. In April, children played with gourds, corncobs, and rainbow blocks. During the children's story, one child began by putting rocks in the crevices of the "Mother Oak" stump, before gradually being drawn into the story and turning her attention to it. In June, I overheard one of the children who had previously attended the forest preschool exclaim, "Mommy, the swing is still there!" During a guided walk in August, while the adults listened to the person leading the reflection, all the children happily played alongside us at the "root monster," a fallen tree whose roots now pointed up into the air. Occasionally, children offered profound reflections to the adults. One parent shared that her daughter said, "Could I close my eyes and listen to what nature around me is saying?"

These few observations illustrate the enjoyment of children at Wild Church alongside

their families. After a few Wild Church services, we began bringing snacks and drinks to share. These were a hit with the children, especially, and they seem to have facilitated people staying longer after the service to talk with each other. I observed that this shared joy extends to others attending Wild Church and allows parents to feel comfortable bringing their children.

I also observed that at Wild Church, sharing is often more experiential, simply noting things that we would not have otherwise noticed. In April, I observed that humor was present as people noted the similarities in their experiences of wandering. In July, a parent shared that she had not known what kind of tree she was looking at, but that her three-year-old daughter had known it was a mulberry tree because she plays under it at the forest preschool. Sometimes, however, during our sharing time, people connect their experiences from our wandering time with reflections on their lives. Evelyn shared in one service that becoming damp as she walked under bushes in the rain led her to think about the ways our communities can help us hold hard things in a manner similar to bushes protecting us from some of the rain. Olivia found meaningful our framing questions in July about who provides shade to us and who we offer shade to.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this research provide insight into my research questions: (1) How do faith-adjacent people experience spirituality as they participate in Wild Church? (2) How do their experiences within Wild Church lead faith-adjacent people to reflect on or revise their understandings of their spirituality? (3) Are there common characteristics of their spirituality that faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church identify? And (4) Is there alignment between the common characteristics experienced by faith-adjacent Wild Church participants and those experienced by AMC attendees who participate in Wild Church?

Faith-adjacent people experience spirituality in Wild Church in a variety of ways, all related to its invitation to experience nature as spiritual. Appendixes C-E show the development of data from my interviews from a loose organization according to my initial coding, to a summary of how each faith-adjacent individual articulated their spirituality.

The faith-adjacent individuals that I interviewed had only attended Wild Church a couple of times when I interviewed them. Some said that Wild Church was encouraging them to slow down and be attentive in their lives more generally. However, for the most part, they did not feel that they had sufficient experience of Wild Church to identify ways in which their spirituality had changed as a result of attending.

Common characteristics of the spirituality of faith-adjacent people I interviewed begin with their emphasis on experiencing their spirituality in nature. Several experience feelings of connection, wonder, or peace. Slowing down and being attentive allows them to experience nature spiritually, and at times feelings of connection, wonder, or peace lead them to slow down and be more attentive. All of those interviewed are interested in exploring their spirituality, but most do not feel an urgency to figure it out. The Wild Church community is important to them in a variety of ways. These include the community itself being experienced as spiritual, the community providing an opportunity for reflection on spirituality, and especially the community as a locus of care. All the faith-adjacent interviewees see religion as generally unhelpful to experiencing spirituality, and so Wild Church also facilitates their spirituality simply by avoiding overtly religious framing of spirituality.

There is significant overlap between faith-adjacent individuals and AMC attenders in how they experience spirituality, as well as interesting differences. Both groups reported a similar appreciation for nature, emphasized feelings over intellectual engagement, appreciated

Wild Church as helping them to slow down and be attentive, saw the community of Wild Church as itself spiritual and as a space to reflect on spirituality, and affirmed the characteristics of Wild Church that Stahl identified. At the same time, they differed on how they relate to the land that AMC owns, on their sense of connection to community in Wild Church, on whether they desired spiritual growth, and on how religious faith interacts with their spirituality.

Areas of Overlap

Nature as Spiritual

The AMC focus group and faith-adjacent individuals indicated a similar appreciation for nature. AMC attenders emphasized nature as a ground of their spirituality. Nature is essential to the spirituality of all the faith-adjacent people that I interviewed, either as itself spiritual or a primary locus of their spiritual experiences. Both groups talked about ways in which nature facilitates other aspects of spirituality.

Feelings Over Intellectual Engagement

Both the faith-adjacent individuals and the AMC attenders emphasized a *felt* sense of connection with and in nature. Feelings of connection, wonder, awe, and peace emerged from both groups.

Slowing Down and Being Attentive

Both groups expressed the importance of slowing down or pausing, and said that nature and Wild Church invite us to slow down. Both groups talked about how slowing down helped them to be more attentive to their surroundings, especially nature. At times, slowing down facilitated the feelings of connection, wonder, awe, and peace that both groups identified with

their spirituality. At others, these feelings led them to pause and open themselves further to their surroundings. The emphasis that AMC folks highlighted on feelings and shared experiences in Wild Church, in contrast to processing intellectually in regular church, also aligns with a commitment to slowing down and being attentive.

Community as Spiritual

Both faith-adjacent individuals and regular attenders of AMC emphasized a desire for community and a sense that communities of care are needed. The faith-adjacent people I interviewed value community as a source of spiritual connection in itself, for its ability to reflect on spirituality, and as an act of hope in the current state of the world. Regular attenders at AMC also see community as an important part of their spirituality. They appreciate that Wild Church's inclusiveness supports these first two themes. They also emphasized the shared feelings of connection with nature and the divine that they experience in Wild Church. Both groups expressed an aspiration to continue to build community.

Stahl's Characteristics of Wild Church

Stahl identified shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, and connection as significant themes in the Wild Churches she studied. Those from AMC all affirmed these as important values within AMC, and particularly, within our Wild Church experiment. I did not ask the faith-adjacent people to respond directly to the values that Stahl identified in her observations of Wild Churches. However, faith-adjacent interviewees' emphasis on the openness of Wild Church, its welcoming nature, and the sense that people care for one another all suggest that they would affirm that Wild Church invites authenticity, facilitates connection, and is a space where they can be vulnerable.

Differences

This Land

One key difference between how AMC attenders and faith-adjacent individuals experience nature involves how the particular land where we meet engages their spirituality. Many of the faith-adjacent people already had deeper connections to the land where we are meeting, and these connections contributed to their willingness to try Wild Church. Some of them described this particular land as sacred or holy. In contrast, AMC folks are beginning to appreciate our land more through their participation in Wild Church. They are beginning to recognize ways in which the particular land that we own is deeply meaningful to those from the forest preschool and urban farm who spend much more time on it than we do.

Feelings of Community Connection

People in the AMC group interview emphasized much more strongly a sense of shared experience or feeling of being connected to one another as an aspect of Wild Church services. While faith-adjacent people deeply appreciate the community that is gathering at Wild Church, and while some expressed hope that they might experience spirituality in community, I did not hear them express having experienced this at Wild Church yet in the way that AMC attenders did.

As with their reflections on the particular land where we meet for Wild Church, there is an interesting contrast between how faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church view the community they find there, and how AMC attenders do. The faith-adjacent people are attracted to Wild Church in part because they already know and appreciate others who are attending. They have prior relationships with either the forest preschool or the urban agriculture program, and a

sense that AMC is a different kind of church. They have sufficient relationships that attending Wild Church doesn't feel like a complete unknown; they trust that the people they find there will be caring and open, and they are curious about forming new kinds of relationships with those who attend. AMC attenders feel some of this as well, and AMC attenders shared about more moments of felt connection with one another. However, they also have a sense of giving up aspects of intimate community that they appreciate in regular worship. There are enough new people that the intimate community of regular worship does not feel as easy, and Wild Church does not include the opportunity to share and pray for each other in the same ways.

Spiritual Growth

In the individual interviews with faith-adjacent people, most consistently expressed a sense of seeking spiritual experiences without the need to grow in particular ways. Similar to most of the faith-adjacent people, AMC attenders appreciate the ability to just show up to Wild Church in a child-like way, and to feel more than think or theologize about their experiences. However, when asked about spiritual growth more broadly, the focus group expressed a wider range of responses. Some expressed a similar openness to just experiencing spirituality, others aspired to this openness, and some continued to think of spiritual growth as something that requires more discipline or intentional practice.

The regular AMC attenders that I interviewed are less intentionally seeking new understandings of their spirituality than faith-adjacent individuals. They appreciate how Wild Church requires less theologizing and simultaneously appreciate the more intellectual reflections within regular worship. Neither group is unanimous in this respect, however.

Level of Comfort with Religion

AMC attenders spoke of having a greater level of comfort with identifying with religious elements of faith. For example, they are more comfortable identifying spirituality with experiences of God or the divine. They value aspects of regular worship not present in Wild Church. At the same time, a few of them spoke of their spirituality and sense of connection with a cautiousness about religion similar to what most of the faith-adjacent people expressed.

Discussion

The problem on which this study focuses is that the Church has been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. The purpose of this study was to explore how the Church can imagine creating new communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. This study was an inductive phenomenological investigation into how faith-adjacent individuals understand their spirituality while attending Wild Church at AMC.

My research found common themes of spirituality in how faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church experience their spirituality and overlaps between faith-adjacent individuals and AMC attenders in how they experience spirituality, as well as interesting differences.

My findings suggest several possibilities for how AMC might envision forming a community of faith that makes space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals. I begin by stating several implications that follow from the findings of this study and then share recommendations for AMC and suggestions for the broader Church.

First, Wild Church and interactions with faith-adjacent individuals at Wild Church offer an opportunity for Christians to learn from the spirituality of faith-adjacent people. Those who

regularly attend “regular” worship appreciate the opportunity to explore their spirituality in new ways in Wild Church, even as they also miss elements of regular worship. AMC attenders expressed appreciation for the ability to just show up and delight in shared discoveries at Wild Church. They expressed an awareness of being invited to slow down and open themselves to nature and the divine, and some of them indicated that they are doing this more often in their everyday lives as a result of attending Wild Church. A few said that they do not find regular worship as conducive to their spirituality as Wild Church. As AMC attenders explore their spirituality and learn from faith-adjacent people in Wild Church, they make space for the participation of faith-adjacent people, and indeed for their leadership.

Second, Wild Church is a space that invites us to slow down and be open to encountering the divine in ways that have more to do with experiential feelings of the divine than intellectual understanding. Both the faith-adjacent individuals that I interviewed and the AMC attenders appreciate the contemplative nature of Wild Church and the ways it invites them to pause and engage the world differently. Faith-adjacent interviewees generally emphasized a desire for experiences of spirituality, especially feelings of connection, wonder, and peace. They generally do not experience these in “regular” religious services. AMC attenders emphasized an appreciation for the shared feelings of connection they experience in Wild Church and for the child-like simplicity of engagement it invites as a welcome contrast to the more intellectual engagement of regular worship, though they would not wish to give that up entirely. Both groups can enjoy Wild Church together as a space that they can slow down and experience their spirituality.

Third, Wild Church is an inclusive community and there is the potential to develop a broader community through Wild Church. Wild Church offers an inclusive way of worshipping.

New people are coming, and through Wild Church we have an opportunity to expand community. People feel free to just show up without worrying about whether they know the right words or how they will be expected to act. Parents appreciate feeling freer to allow their children to just be and play at Wild Church, as opposed to in regular worship. I did not anticipate the degree to which faith-adjacent people would discuss the state of the world today, and the community gathering for Wild Church as an act of hope in the midst of a world that feels challenging or cruel. At the same time, people attending AMC expressed joy and appreciation for the intergenerational interactions that we are having. Those who attend Wild Church, both faith-adjacent people and regular AMC attenders, desire to be a community grounded in care. This can ground a broader sense of community, alongside a shared exploration of spirituality in nature. This broadening of community might begin with Wild Church services, but expand through other opportunities for fellowship and developing relationships. Several faith-adjacent people expressed openness to other types of gatherings that are not worship related.

Fourth and finally, the broader community that develops through Wild Church and other activities has the potential to bring greater energy for shared ministry than AMC has on its own, even if not everyone participating would use the language of “ministry.” Together, we can share work to care for the land or to demonstrate or advocate for values we share. Shared activities like these not only build relationships, but may give all of us a greater sense of solidarity and possibility as we strive to live in caring ways. A couple of people who work with the urban farm and the forest preschool, both of whom have sometimes attended Wild Church, have begun monthly “land-tending” days on our property. These are an opportunity for both connection and accomplishment of land stewardship tasks. AMC recently hosted a play about conditions at the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, which was attended by people from many

different circles, including those who attend Wild Church. Several of our members volunteer with el Refugio, a hospitality ministry for those visiting loved ones who are detained at Stewart. This event not only helped build relational ties, but also invited people to consider this ministry. As a broader community develops, we can invite one another to consider shared work, and in sharing that work, our community will continue to deepen relationships.

Recommendations

These implications suggest possibilities for how AMC might envision becoming a new kind of community of faith that makes space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals. This new community, comprising Wild Church and AMC, could explore spirituality in new ways. It could seek *experiences* of the divine more than understanding of it. AMC could expand from thinking of itself as primarily a worshiping community to thinking of itself as a new kind of community of faith invested in developing a broader community around the exploration of spirituality, opportunities to build relationships based in the land, and shared values of care. As these relationships develop, there is also the prospect of shared work or ministry engaged by this broader community.

This new kind of community of faith differs from more traditional forms of outreach in that it explicitly does not seek to draw faith-adjacent people participating in the broader community into “regular” worship or the Christian faith. To build the broader community sketched above, I believe it is essential that AMC refrain from proselytizing faith-adjacent individuals into attending regular worship services or sharing our religious beliefs unless explicitly asked. Suspicion that AMC wants to draw them into our regular worship or convert them to our understanding of faith would drive faith-adjacent people away. Neither should this be a hidden intent nor hope of our community. Exploring spirituality is common ground upon

which Christians who regularly worship at AMC and faith-adjacent people who only attend Wild Church services can meet. From there, we can build community in other ways that develop relationships and share in work around shared values. Some faith-adjacent people may choose to engage in more traditional worship or faith formation practices as they explore their spirituality, but I believe that it is important that AMC be very intentional about not seeking this.

AMC has certain advantages that have facilitated successfully drawing new people into Wild Church, and that also make it possible to explore developing a broader sense of community. We share our property with both an urban agriculture program and a forest preschool. These partners foster a sense of connection to the land we share through their work, which in turn provides a draw to their families to try Wild Church on this land. There is also already a sense of partnership among our organizations that could develop into an increased sense of community. Some people already have relationships that overlap between our organizations. The urban farm and forest preschool run a pumpkin sale at the front of our property each October. These preexisting relationships provide material with which to build a stronger sense of community.

There are also costs and questions for AMC as we explore building this broader type of community. Some congregants prefer regular worship and choose not to attend Wild Church. I wonder if our small congregation has sufficient energy to invest in building new relationships and fostering a broader sense of community. To my knowledge, none of our regular AMC attenders have yet joined the land-tending workdays mentioned above. Can we invest enough energy to begin to see a return on that energy from the broader community that results? In terms of our experiences of Wild Church, will we increasingly experience feelings of connection with nature and with one another? Will Wild Church increasingly feel like worship, or an encounter with the divine, both to regular attenders of AMC and to faith-adjacent people who just attend

Wild Church? I can envision a virtuous cycle of an increased sense of community fostering a shared sense of spirituality in Wild Church, which in turn helps us feel more connected to one another within our shared community. Will we be able to enter this virtuous cycle?

Already, AMC has decided to take some steps toward developing this new kind of community. Over the next year, AMC will strive to foster a deeper sense of community with faith-adjacent individuals attending Wild Church by adding non-worship events. I am hopeful that faith-adjacent individuals will become involved not only in attending but also in leading Wild Church and helping to facilitate additional gatherings. We will also begin providing childcare during Taizé services to lower the barrier for faith-adjacent parents who might otherwise be deterred from trying these services. Our hope is that we will feel like a larger community with more opportunities for joyful fellowship, reflection together about how we engage the world, and greater resources for responding to needs based on shared values even if not shared faith.

What of this might be helpful for the broader Church's reflection? I will end this chapter with two recommendations for anyone interested in exploring a similar path in which the worshipping church community becomes a part of a broader community. First, I believe it is important to emphasize exploration rather than answers. Faith-adjacent individuals may be seeking openness and the facilitation of spiritual experiences, rather than answers or understandings of those experiences. This is in contrast to Cudby in his article on Forest Church, which, on the one hand, emphasizes supporting community rather than providing expert instruction, but on the other hand, also argues that this relational commitment can and should lead toward some type of deeper commitment, rather than seeking the next experiential "hit."⁷³ In

⁷³ Cudby, "Forest Church," 35.

light of my interviews with faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church at AMC, I would be cautious about trying to lead them to a deeper commitment.

I believe that the findings of this study show that the Church should emphasize building relationships and facilitating spiritual experiences. We should also remain open and inviting to any who desire to explore questions about their spirituality in terms of how a Christian framework might make sense of them, but we need not, and I think should not, encourage this framework. There is enough suspicion of Christian religion that we should be crystal clear that faith-adjacent people need not engage our faith any more than they want to in order to participate in our broader community

Second, I believe it is important to emphasize trust signals and relational connections when inviting people to engage in Wild Church or other activities. The faith-adjacent people I interviewed expressed a deep wariness of religion, born of their individual experiences and of the sense that Christianity is too often identified with values antithetical to theirs. To overcome this wariness, trust signals and relationships are vital. Churches need to consider how they can effectively communicate their values. A church's website, social media content, and signage on the church property may all be important to how people view a congregation. In many cases, this still may not be enough for faith-adjacent individuals to try something like Wild Church or to show up for any activity associated with the Church; rather, invitations from people they already trust are essential. In AMC's case, the inclusion of an invitation to Wild Church by the director of the forest preschool was key to certain people deciding that it is something they'd be willing to try. Word of mouth from those who have attended continues to help bring in new people. On the other hand, we recently had our first person attend who was specifically looking for Wild Church and had found us through a Google search.

Wild Church is a promising option for engaging spirituality in new and more open ways. If congregations can identify existing relationships through which they can invite faith-adjacent individuals into new experiences that foster an openness to seeking spiritual experiences, then there is the possibility of developing a broader community within which the congregation plays a key part. The values of shared leadership, connection, authenticity, and vulnerability that Stahl identified, and which AMC attenders affirm, align with the sense of openness and the desire for community and connection that faith-adjacent people share.

Limitations of This Research

Qualitative research is by its nature limited to the context in which it takes place. My findings are not necessarily replicable, although the coherence of my research with prior research on Wild Church supports its validity. My recommendations are only for those who identify their contexts as suitably similar to mine to warrant similar experiments in forming a broader community in which faith-adjacent people can take part.

This research has at least two additional limitations as well. First, those I interviewed were predominantly women, with only one man among the six faith-adjacent individuals I interviewed, and only one man among the five AMC attenders with whom I did the focus group interview. I did not find significant differences in how the two men I interviewed described their spirituality compared to the women. However, it is possible that there are gender differences in how we engage spirituality that I did not observe. The religious engagement literature I reviewed points to younger women more often identifying as spiritual but not religious in comparison to younger men who more often seek traditional religious expressions. My interviewees ranged widely in age, but it is possible that the predominance of women among those I interviewed reflects a gender difference in spirituality suggested by the statistics discussed in Chapter Three.

Second, all of the faith-adjacent individuals that I interviewed had some familiarity and experience with Christian churches, at least as children. This study thus is not able to explore whether those without this experience might have different perspectives on spirituality.

Conclusion

This study sought to address the problem that the Church has been unable to imagine creating new kinds of communities of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent. Through a phenomenological study of faith-adjacent individuals participating in the Wild Church experiment at Atlanta Mennonite Church, this study sought to examine how the Church might envision forming a new community of faith that makes space for the participation of faith-adjacent individuals.

The findings of my study suggest that Wild Church and interactions with faith-adjacent individuals at Wild Church offer an opportunity for Christians to cultivate their spirituality in new ways. They suggest that Wild Church invites us to slow down and be open to encountering the divine in ways that have more to do with experiential feelings of the divine than intellectual understanding. They point to the potential to develop a broader community through Wild Church. Furthermore, this broader community has the potential to bring greater energy for shared ministry than the prior community of faith had on its own, even if not everyone participating would use the language of “ministry.” The study also suggests that in order to develop this new kind of community of faith, it is important to intentionally avoid seeking to draw faith-adjacent people into Christian expressions of faith and worship, even as we remain open to their exploration of spirituality.

Chapter Five

My Growth as a Leader

I have grown as a leader through AMC's experiment with Wild Church and my reflection on it for this professional dissertation. In this chapter, I share how I have grown in Being, Doing, and Knowing. I first reflect on Being through consideration of my vision statement for the D.Min. program, which is also my personal rule of life. I then explore Doing through a discussion of change leadership, and the interplay of Being and Doing in my commitment to collaborative leadership. Throughout, I note places that Being and Doing are informed by Knowing, especially in terms of what I have learned about change and collaborative leadership.

I have generally heard and seen these three aspects of ministry presented in the order of Knowing, Being, Doing at AMBS. AMBS not only teaches content (Knowing), but cares about each student as a person (Being), and aims to equip them for ministry (Doing). Throughout the D.Min. program, I have recognized that Being is especially important to me and that Doing is a growing edge in my leadership, while Knowing comes easily to me and informs how I am and what I do as a leader. I prioritize Being in all of my interactions as a person and a leader. Being is important both to my sense of identity as a leader who engages authentically and vulnerably, and also as a leadership practice that increases my effectiveness through engaging people with a loving, joyful presence. I want my Doing to flow from a sense of Being in God's loving presence, and have become more intentional about Doing, especially as I engage in change leadership. I am constantly learning, and Knowing informs who I am and what I choose to do. This is true as I begin to consider any particular action, but also through periodically reflecting on my leadership in its present circumstances and recalibrating how I lead.

I developed a personal rule of life in January of 2022 as part of the Center for Clergy Renewal program. This program is hosted at Holy Wisdom Monastery, located outside of Madison, Wisconsin, and is grounded in Benedictine spirituality. As I began my D.Min. program in January of 2023, I chose the same short statement as my vision statement: “I try to live with joy, love, and presence.” This vision statement attempts to capture my sense that Being has always felt most foundational to my leadership. How I am present to others matters greatly in how they respond to me. I am best able to lead to the extent that others can see that my faith grounds a deep joy for life, an abiding love for them and for all people, and presence centered in an awareness of God’s presence. In my experience, people generally respond to this stance with trust, openness, and collaborative curiosity.

In AMC’s Wild Church experiment, we are similarly attempting to share a particular kind of presence with faith-adjacent people. As we plan Wild Church services, we have not explicitly discussed being joyful and loving, but I think of Wild Church in these terms. I hope that in and through Wild Church, we are creating a community that is joyful and loving as we explore what it means to be present to the beauty of nature and to our sense of spirituality. My interviews with faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church at AMC show that they see us as different from other churches, and have a feeling that we are a community where, in Emma’s words, “Care can be asked for. Care can be given. Care can be received.” People enjoy Wild Church and appreciate the ease of participation for themselves and their children. We have been successful in sharing a joyful, loving, contemplative presence with those attending Wild Church.

The positive response that AMC has experienced to its Wild Church experiment confirms for me the importance of Being—how I and we are present to others. The ties of community we already shared with partners on our property have been an enormous asset to us, and also

confirm my sense that how we are in relationship to others is paramount. Some of the faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church were already familiar with and trusted us. Others came because this first group vouched for us. Only a few have sought us out without prior connections. As Olivia stressed, these relationships of trust are essential for many people to risk showing up to try something new with a group of people they don't know well. This is especially true when that group is a church, and when individuals have had negative experiences of church. What type of congregation AMC is seen as being is a significant factor in whether people are willing to risk engaging us.

AMC's Wild Church experiment, and my leadership of it, have confirmed my sense that I lead best from an emphasis on how I am—the particular presence that I bring to my interactions. I work on forming and supporting this presence through spiritual practices, including daily meditations, frequent walks that give me space to reflect, and monthly retreat days. Diverse relationships invite me to consider whether I engage with people from different backgrounds from a core and constant sense of self grounded in God's love. Many of these relationships are ones where I can also invite reflection on whether I am doing this well.

Over the past year, as AMC has experimented with Wild Church, I have continued to deepen my sense of who I am as a leader. I am most fundamentally a beloved child of God called to share my sense of God's love with all people. This sense of identity or Being, as a beloved child of God called to share my sense of God's love with all people, deepened during my work on the Teaching Leadership Competency, and through AMC's Wild Church experiment. In Chapter Two, I discussed how reading Parker Palmer helped me recognize that the “great thing” I desire to invite people to gather around is God's love, without requiring them to convert to the Christian faith. This recognition was a moment of growth in understanding who I am and desire

to be as a leader, in which new Knowing supported growth in my Being as a leader. I am glad to share God's love with people and am pleased if they also experience the Christian faith as a helpful framework for thinking about their spirituality and relationship with the divine. But I do not feel any need to draw people closer to the Christian faith if they do not find it helpful. This both-and understanding of what it means to share God's love has continued to grow through AMC's Wild Church experiment. I regularly find myself conveying to faith-adjacent individuals both an invitation to engage with AMC in any way they would like and reassurance that we have no expectation of them doing so beyond Wild Church. Several have commented that this is a fine line to walk, but that they sense sincerity in my sharing both of these. As we seek to develop relationships with the faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church, I anticipate each event we invite them to will be another occasion to convey this both-and sense of desire for relationship, with the reassurance that there are no expectations for them to engage in our religious practices.

My hope that AMC's Wild Church experiment might enable us to build a broader community that includes faith-adjacent people without expecting them to participate in our other worship services is grounded in who I am in relationship with God (Being) and how I understand that relationship (Knowing). It is also grounded in Being in my sense that a contagious, joyful energy is possible as we build community through Wild Church and extend it into additional opportunities to gather as a broader community.

Recently, a large tree fell on our property. A dozen people, equally representing AMC and the forest preschool that meets on our property, showed up on a Saturday to clean up the tree and line paths in the forest with sections of branches and trunk. Some of the families who came have been part of Wild Church, while others were new to me. There was a joyful energy and gladness in interacting as we shared this work, including among the young children present.

There was joy in a sense of shared accomplishment and in what is possible when larger groups work together, rather than the weight of tasks falling to just a few. I hope that moments like these will be infectious, leading to a sense of shared joy and energy within a broader community. As a leader, I want to show up in a winsomely joyful way that invites people to learn from and enjoy one another.

To facilitate this hope, I need to balance my groundedness in Being with an emphasis on Doing. As part of my Resilient Leadership Competency, I invited people who know me as a leader to reflect on my vision statement. As we talked about joy, one woman suggested that joy is “peace in action,” and peace is “joy at rest.” She and others I was interviewing easily see my “joy at rest” in the sense of a peacefulness about my being. They invited me to lean into the more active joy of putting that peacefulness into action. What I have learned about change leadership through the Leadership Theory Course and the Change Leadership Competency in this D.Min. program informs this balance.

Reflections on change leadership by John Kotter and Ronald Heifetz are particularly important Knowings that inform how I move from Being to Doing. John Kotter outlines eight steps of change processes in *Leading Change*.⁷⁴ The sixth and seventh of these, generating short-term wins and consolidating gains in order to produce more change, are particularly salient for me. There was significant skepticism among some at AMC about whether Wild Church would “work.” Several encouraged us to go slow, perhaps adjusting worship a little, but keeping it fairly similar as we moved outside. At our first Wild Church service, there were as many people who do not regularly attend AMC as there were people who do. The service was quite different from our usual worship, and people enjoyed it and found it meaningful. One skeptic

⁷⁴ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change with a New Preface by the Author* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), Kindle.

came up to me afterwards and said, “I didn’t think this could work, but I was wrong. This is great.” Reflecting on the first service, Noel shared in the group interview that she had a feeling of “I’ve been looking for this my whole life.” The success of this first service in inviting new people and demonstrating that we could worship in significantly different ways was an important early win as AMC began its Wild Church experiment.

The continued participation of faith-adjacent people throughout the year has consolidated the success of engaging new people. This win still needs to be translated into additional change, building a broader sense of community that encompasses not only those who regularly worship with AMC, but also faith-adjacent individuals who attend Wild Church, and hopefully others from our partner organizations on the property. The overarching goal I have tried to communicate is the creation of such a community, where we can discover new energy for our communal life and new resources for engaging in work around shared values together. That process is a focus for this year.

While continuing to be present to one another in joyful and caring ways, I also need to lead us in creating opportunities to gather as a broader community. While remaining grounded in a particular kind of Being, we also need to focus on Doing. I need to plan events that make it easy for people to attend and interact with one another. Some of these events may be shared work on the land, and are already missional in that they join in God’s care for this land. Some of these events may simply be for fellowship. Others may invite learning something together. In Kotter’s language of consolidating gains in order to produce more change, these events will hopefully consolidate the gains we have made in developing new relationships through Wild Church as we also broaden our sense of community. If that is successful, we can explore additional change by identifying ways we want to work together in support of shared values.

Kotter emphasizes that change is iterative and requires time to become embedded in an organization's culture. As I reflect on change leadership and engage in this Wild Church experiment, I recognize, or more deeply Know, that what we do supports developing into who we want to be. I have grown in my recognition of the importance of planning activities (doings) that facilitate how we are together, and the iterative nature of planning Wild Church each month supports that recognition. I hope that I am also growing in my proficiency in planning or facilitating these types of events. I do not enjoy event planning, but I do enjoy coordinating, encouraging, and amplifying people's ideas and gifts. There may be some entirely new events that I plan. More often, I anticipate seizing on events and ideas that others have already begun, and seeking ways to invite greater participation. Here are some examples:

The forest preschool holds a Lantern Walk each fall, during which participants carry lanterns and sing songs as they walk to a bonfire, then hear a storyteller share a tale. We held Wild Church on the Sunday morning of the Lantern Walk, and invited people to attend it on Sunday evening. Only I attended from those who regularly attend AMC and don't already have significant relationships with the forest preschool. More people joined the tree clean-up I discussed above. In a couple of months, AMC will host a performance of a play about immigration and our detention system, which someone from AMC who also works with the forest preschool brought to my attention. I am hopeful that over the course of the year, we can offer and participate in a variety of events that gradually build a sense of shared community broader than those who attend worship at AMC most Sundays. Kotter stresses that consolidating gains sufficiently to embed them in culture is challenging. Over time, I am hopeful that we will embed in our congregational culture an awareness of being a broader community that shares values and works together, as well as being a worshipping community that meets each Sunday.

In addition to what I learned from Kotter, learnings about change leadership from Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky also are part of the Knowing that guides my leadership and ongoing reflection on it.⁷⁵ I frequently use their metaphor of “getting on the balcony” to remind myself to step back from the daily decisions on the “dance floor” and reflect on the bigger picture. I began taking monthly retreat days as part of my Resilient Leadership Competency, and have continued that practice. These are often opportunities to reflect on the horizons of what I am trying to accomplish as a pastor, to remind myself of what values are most important to focus on, and to recalibrate the tasks that serve those values. I can step back and reflect on Being, Doing, and Knowing in a process that Donald Schön labels “reflection-in-action” while still in the broad moment of the “action present” in which I am engaging ministry.⁷⁶ As reflection leads to new choices about how to lead, and then back to reflection in light of what results, I engage in a form of what David Kolb describes as an Experiential Learning Spiral.⁷⁷ Retreat days serve as an opportunity to engage Knowing in these reflective ways “from the balcony.”

Heifetz and Linsky also emphasize the importance of leading non-anxiously and giving work back to the right people to do it. Retreat days are also a chance for me to center myself in God and in the kind of Being I want to share with others, so that I am non-anxious. And they are an opportunity to consider whether I am overfunctioning in areas of Doing that could or should be left to others.

All of these broader reflections have been especially important to make time for over the past year, as AMC has engaged in multiple significant change processes. Alongside Wild Church, we are discerning how to sell our property. The process of exploring options to divest

⁷⁵ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line with a New Preface: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), Kindle.

⁷⁶ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Basic Books, 1984).

⁷⁷ David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. (Pearson Education, 2014), 50–52, 61–64.

our property has been thorough and careful. I have led this process in collaboration with our Leadership Council and, in particular, our moderator. This discernment process has required most of the time for reflection that we have asked of AMC at congregational meetings and in other ways. This has meant that I have had to carefully choose when and how to invite congregational reflection on our Wild Church experiment, as I sense that there is limited capacity for extended engagement with questions about Wild Church alongside broader questions about the sale of our property. I have been careful to ask for and receive affirmation for focusing this year on building broader community ties with those who attend Wild Church. However, I continue to wonder how much of the energy for those efforts will initially have to come from me. Hopefully, as people from AMC experience the joyful energy that I believe will result from developing relationships with faith-adjacent people, others from both AMC and the broader community will collaborate with me.

Collaborative leadership is vital to me, and what I know about it informs how I lead. I believe that we almost always achieve better results from diverse, gifted people collaborating than from a single individual, regardless of their level of giftedness or expertise. Additionally, I believe that collaborative leadership increases the chance that a group will embed change into its culture. Sarah Lewis describes collaborative leadership as “a psychological view of leadership as a relational activity,” and suggests that “a consultative and collaborative process ... initiates change more slowly to begin with but gathers momentum as the story of who we are, what we are about and what we need to do begins to cohere within the group and as the shared commitment to action develops.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Sarah Lewis, *Positive Psychology and Change: How Leadership, Collaboration, and Appreciative Inquiry Create Transformational Results* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), chap. 2, Kindle.

Central aspects of Christian theology also suggest a collaborative leadership model. We understand God to be trinitarian and lovingly relational in Godself. We understand that the Church is the body of Christ whose parts have varied gifts that work together.⁷⁹ God has created each of us with gifts to share. I believe that Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them,” means that God’s Spirit is present whenever we gather to discern God’s will together, and that we discern God’s will best in community as we draw on the wisdom and diverse experiences of one another.

What I Know about collaborative leadership, both in terms of leadership theory and theology, informs my Being as a leader who seeks to lead collaboratively as much as possible. I know that communal reflection that draws on diverse gifts and experiences is almost always better than what even the most gifted leader can plan on their own. I know that this approach exemplifies a commitment to share God’s love while welcoming and encouraging everyone’s perspectives on spirituality. In Wild Church, in particular, I am confident that collaborative leadership broadens the ways we engage with God in nature beyond what I might imagine on my own. Involving diverse leadership increases the likelihood that we can all learn to encounter the divine in new ways.

In the first months of my pastorate at AMC, I invited us to discern potential experiments to create new points of engagement with people beyond our worshiping community. A key element of this process was asking people if they would be willing to help lead these experiments. As we settled on Wild Church as one of our experiments (alongside Taizé worship and small groups), five people agreed to help lead this. Generally, I invite one or two members of this group to lead and plan each service, with me serving as a resource to them and willing to help in any way they request. Amelia, one of the faith-adjacent people I interviewed, has also

⁷⁹ 1 Cor. 12:12–27, Rom. 12:4–5, Eph. 4:15–16.

taken an active role in planning Wild Church, while a couple other faith-adjacent people have occasionally helped to plan and lead services. Our diverse leadership has increased the scope of what we try in Wild Church compared to what it would have been if I were leading each time. Additionally, others from AMC have suggested and, in some cases, helped plan aspects of services. I am hopeful that we will continue to increase the diversity of leadership of Wild Church. We are Doing what I Know and how I am committed to Being as a collaborative leader.

Being, and a particular kind of presence expressed by my rule of life, grounds my leadership. Especially as we engage in change at AMC, marrying that Being to Doing by planning events that foster a broader sense of community is essential. Knowing about change leadership has been helpful to me as I consider how to lead change processes at AMC. Knowing is also important in inviting me to trust in collaborative experimentation, especially as the horizons of what might develop stretch farther than I can clearly see myself. For Wild Church, I easily remain curious to see what new things develop through collaboration with others, and how we might engage and learn about spirituality in new ways. In our property discernment process, I am reminding myself to trust my Knowing that collaboration with new partners will bring better results as AMC and I prepare to relinquish a significant amount of control.

I hope that who I am (Being) and what I Know about leadership will serve us well as AMC continues to actively navigate significant changes (Doing). I am a non-anxious leader and have the trust of AMC. Being, how I am as a leader, continues to be the core of my leadership. I continue to lean into my growing edge of Doing, especially as I lead change collaboratively. And all that I Know about leadership and about Wild Church continues to shape how I do so. My knowledge of change leadership and collaborative leadership informs how I lead, and I am genuinely excited about possibilities that may emerge from selling our property, which I do not

have the skills or energy to explore. I hope that through continued collaboration with those attending Wild Church and with new partners that emerge through divesting our land, AMC as part of a much broader community will continue to grow into a joyful, caring community while exploring together what it means to be present to this land and to our sense of spirituality. In doing so, we will be creating a community of faith with space for the participation of those who are faith adjacent.

Appendix A

Individual Interview Questions

Interviews were semistructured, with the following questions guiding the interviews, but a focus on flexibly exploring respondents' answers. In individual interviews, I aimed for one hour but allowed fifteen to thirty minutes additional time as needed.

Interview Questions:

- Do you understand yourself as spiritual but not religious? How do you understand that phrase? How would you describe your sense of spirituality?
- Why did you choose to participate in Wild Church at Atlanta Mennonite Church?
- How has participation in Wild Church engaged your sense of spirituality?
- Has your sense of spirituality changed in any ways that you feel are connected to your participation in Wild Church?
- What would it mean for you to grow spiritually? Is this something you seek? What would facilitate that type of growth?

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Questions

The focus group interview was semistructured, with the following questions guiding the interview, but a focus on flexibly exploring respondents' answers. I allowed two hours for the focus group interview.

Focus Group Interview Questions:

- How would you describe your sense of spirituality?
- How has participation in Wild Church engaged your sense of spirituality?
- Has your sense of spirituality changed in any ways that you feel are connected to your participation in Wild Church?
- How does “inside church” engage your sense of spirituality, particularly in comparison to Wild Church?
- What would it mean for you to grow spiritually? Is this something you seek? What would facilitate that type of growth?
- Wanda Stahl did a study of several Wild Churches and identified spiritual values of shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, and connection as emphases in these Wild Churches. Are these spiritual values important to your faith? Do you feel that these are spiritual values of Atlanta Mennonite Church?
- Do you see these spiritual values of shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, and connection as present in our Wild Church experiment? How so?

Appendix C Thoughts on Codes

These were my thoughts on each of the codes that I used as I read through all the excerpts coded with them in Dedoose.

Connection	127
Religion	99
Land, Nature, Place	97
Mindfulness	93
Community	87
Wonder	84
Seeking	71
Trust, Hope, Healing	58
Peace	58
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Reflect Together	45
Slow Down, Breathe	42
New Paradigm	41
Don't know or need to know	34
State of World	31
Joy	30
Inclusive	28
AMC is different from other churches	21
Wild Church not yet spiritual	11
Appreciate religious tradition	8

(Note that the enumeration above was as I began reading through each code and making notes below. As I went, I occasionally added codes to excerpts.)

Don't know or need to know:

- Seeking and not wanting to presume what will find (Amelia, Charlotte, Mia?)
 - Particularly in light of past experiences with religion
- Present to something without understanding/explaining it (Lisa, Sophia, Noel)
 - No expectations—just be self / be
- Smallness in the universe (Lisa, Emma?)
- Spirituality includes recognition that there's more than we know or can know (Emma)
 - But Olivia would like to know what “that thing” is

- Curiosity to learn, but comfort in can't learn everything (Amelia and Lisa and Charlotte too?)
- Even more important to make meaning from what I do know
- Need new mindsets/paradigms (Charlotte)
- Feeling (or trust) rather than understanding (Ava)
 - Applies to grief over suffering in world too

Connection, openness, not needing to think or understand—just be

- *In light of our smallness—universe, current events*

Slow down, breathe:

- Need to slow down to see differently / learn / understand / make choices / seek guidance (Amelia, Charlotte)
 - Noticing relationships
 Wild Church provides this space (Emma, group interview)
- Slow down to recharge / remember why this is important (Lisa, Emma)
- Presence, appreciation (Amelia, Lisa, Emma, Ava)
- Nature slows us down (Charlotte, Lisa)
 - Allows children to be, and thus parents to have peace and space to reflect
- Slow down to be community (Charlotte, Ava)
- Mental health (medication can also help slow down) (group interview, Charlotte?)

New Paradigm:

- Connected to wonder/awe? (Amelia)
- Nature creates openness in thinking (Charlotte, Amelia)
- Sudden interest in spirituality (Charlotte)
- Seeking new paradigm to make sense of things; but more interested in hearing how others do so (connection, community) (Charlotte)
 - Current events are jarring
- Freedom (fish in bowl, now swimming in ocean) (Ava)
- Wild Church as oxymoron—freedom and structure (Ava)
- Spirituality as putting self in the perspective of others (Sophia)
- Wild Church as opening to wonder/awe/seeing things in new ways (Isabella); also intergenerational; but also can be intimidating because new (Sophia, Mia); simply worshiping in different ways stretches us and grows us spiritually
- Sharing leadership with different perspectives / new eyes

Group interview more—experience of Wild Church as a new paradigm that opens sense of spirituality in new ways? (Along with Ava fish bowl image?)

Seeking:

- Desire to find something spiritual, sense of something missing (Amelia)

- What's the point? (Lisa)
- Suddenly important (Charlotte)
- Looking for guidance (reflection on scripture, etc.) (Amelia)
 - Community with/through whom to seek (Amelia, Charlotte!, Ava, Emma?)
 - If I knew this worked, I might do it (Olivia)
- Prior experiences of divine that felt real (Amelia)
- Want to repeat what have experienced in moments; poignant (Lisa, Olivia)
- Why does it have to be one path/religion? (Charlotte)
- For community, and nature and spirituality through them (Charlotte, Ava)
- Seeking to grow as individual, more present (Ava, Emma?)
- Wild Church as opportunity to learn/discover; as something looking for all my life, as helpful for mental health (Isabella, Noel, Sophia)

Sense of something missing, seeking guidance in/through community, how can repeat what have glimpsed?; Wild Church an intriguing opportunity to explore

Curiosity:

- Courses in college to explore different possibilities (Olivia)
- File in inbox where notes “that thing” for twenty years (Olivia)
- But trust signal (TLG director) is important (Olivia)
- Eager to do interview to talk about spirituality (benefits in interview protocol) (Olivia)
- Open to new paradigms; “Why can’t we question everything?” (Charlotte)
 - Curiosity and openness are expanding me (Charlotte)
- What do others think? (Charlotte)
- Wild Church—oxymoron—maybe different kind of church? (Ava)
- Different experiences of worship to reflect on, try (Mia, Evelyn, Noel, Isabella,

Exploration through different worship experiences; community reflection

Wild Church not yet Spiritual:

- Little insights, but no epiphanies (Amelia)
- Still kind of new to people (Ava)
- Harder to allow yourself to engage nature in community (Lisa, group?)

State of the World:

- Religion as escapism, nationalism, turning away from care, creating division, suffering somehow intended by God (Amelia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava)
- Peace/relief in midst of current events (Lisa, Emma, Charlotte, Noel)
- Can we talk about spirituality outside of religion? (Lisa, Emma, Charlotte)
- Gathering as act of hope, connection, meaning-making, reminder of goodness (Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Isabella)
 - Like-minded, open, able to be authentic, kids

Wariness of religion as not helping, or even exacerbating, what's wrong with world; seeking relief from that in spirituality; gathering as hopeful and connecting to something bigger, and maybe can't easily gather in those ways to engage spirituality outside religion

Religion:

- “Sour feeling” but recognize wisdom of Christian tradition, but it feels “odd” now (Amelia)
- Over-friendliness based in escapist faith (Amelia)
- “Repelled” (Amelia, Emma); “abhorrent” (Olivia)
- Structure without genuine connection (Lisa, Ava)
- Intellectual rather than spiritual (wonderment and peace, nature) (Lisa, Isabella, Olivia, Evelyn, Sophia, Mia, Isabella)
- Need “trust signals” (trusted people especially, signs of alignment) (Olivia)
- Exclusive (LGBTQ, one right path), hypocritical (Olivia, Emma, Charlotte), nationalist, moving away from helping most vulnerable (Emma, Charlotte)
- “Restraint” that gets people “stuck,” claims to have all the answers (Emma); fish bowl (Ava)
- Suffering part of God’s will (Ava)
- Bagels and coffee bar (Ava)
- Empty buildings (Sophia)
- Triggering words (Mia) or not knowing the right words (Evelyn)

Out of touch with world and values; structure without connection; intellectual rather than spiritual;

AMC is different than other churches:

- “Genuine” yearning to engage world in light of faith, welcoming, unassuming (esp. Wild Church) (Amelia)
- Enjoy everybody here—if I would find a way to engage spirituality in community, this would be it (Lisa)
- Methodist pastor who included parts of tradition that resonated, but not others (Olivia)
- Alignment of values (Olivia)
- Open to Wild Church being different; AMC is different; community that belongs to each other and cares for each other; more human (Ava)
- Shared leadership, connection, vulnerability, authenticity (group interview)

Engaging world, sense of connection and caring, genuine

Appreciate religious tradition:

- “Nuggets” to think about (Amelia)
- Past experiences within Christian faith that felt real (Amelia)
- Missing something had earlier in life, but want in a different way (Amelia)

- Openness to reflecting on spirituality, value in social connection (Lisa)
- Emotion sometimes when back in church (Olivia)
- “Wholesome” place to hang out as teenager (Charlotte)
- Contemplative, mystical, and biblical—offer different understanding of Christianity than what’s primary in our society (Noel)
- Reflecting together, sharing joys and concerns (group interview, Lisa)
- Singing hymns (Mia, group interview)

Some positive experiences in past for some faith-adjacent folks; less known elements of Christian tradition that we can share

Mindfulness:

- Pause to reflect / see differently / see new relationships (Amelia)
- Spirituality as being present in the moment and appreciating (Lisa)
- Disconnect and just be in the moment, let brain relax (Lisa)
 - Appreciating allows disconnection/peace from stress, etc (Lisa)
 - Sticks with me (Lisa)
 - Focusing without focusing (Lisa)
- Catching moments that feel holy—“that’s it!”—a glimpse, fleeting, fills you up (Olivia)
 - “Nod from the universe” (Olivia)
- Important to make meaning out of what is (Emma, Ava!)
- Practice of appreciation and remembering what’s important (Emma)
 - Digging sweet potatoes while reflecting on friend that died, personal growth/change over years since then
- “Digging in and opening at same time”—presence and openness (Emma)
- Presence, and allowing us all to be fully present (Emma, Ava)
- Intentional about community (Charlotte)
- Nature encourages slowing down, breathing, opening (Charlotte)
- Hold space for slow mornings, intentionally be out in nature (Charlotte)
- Slow down, get to things when we get to them (Charlotte)
 - “Yeah. Time. Slow. Open. Calm. Peace. Breathe.” (exhales deeply)
- Feeling like there is presence in the world that is holy, but not trying to understand it (Ava)
 - “Marking the spaces that may be holy” (Ava)
- Free because don’t have to know; can just trust, grow as a human (Ava)
 - Includes feeling grief at suffering, without having to justify
- Attuned to rhythms of nature (Ava)
- “Why not find out how to love and why not find out how to be together and why not find out how to live a beautiful life?”—want to be really present in the world (Ava)
- Group interview people pausing more often as result of Wild Church (Ava interview, Sophia)

- Focused on being rather than doing, “no other business but being” (Isabella, Noel)
 - More openness, relaxed (Noel)
- Interplay of experience and reflection, which is itself an experience (Noel, Mia)
- No expectations, and part of everything else (Sophia)
- Feeling without explaining, use our senses—don’t need to produce anything (Sophia, Mia)
- Settle in, be quiet, absorb (Evelyn)
- Wandering time focuses attention (Evelyn)

Pausing to reflect/remember/be/feel/appreciate; disconnecting from doing and stressors—“no other business but being,” don’t need to be productive; “catching” moments that feel holy; making meaning out of what is; “digging in and opening at the same time”; open; feeling rather than understanding/learning; no expectations; interplay of experience and reflection;

Connection:

- Between Christianity and natural world (Amelia, Noel!, Olivia)
- Experiencing things together, esp. with people with different perspectives, connecting social and spiritual (Amelia, Sophia, Lisa, Charlotte!, Noel, Isabella, Evelyn)
 - Lisa and Emma more personal
 - Shared feeling of connection with land with other people (beeswax candles, making brooms) (Ava, Sophia)
 - Discovery can be shared in a sense of delight together (Isabella, Sophia)
- Sensory experience of nature / nature bathing (Amelia, Ava, Charlotte, Lisa, Emma, Sophia)
 - Connection with movement of tree (Amelia)
 - Absorbing, appreciating (Lisa, Emma)
 - Trees expand our thinking (Charlotte)
 - Sometimes this land feels like part of my body (Ava)
 - Body is number one way we connect with nature (Ava)
- Connection with indigenous practices (Amelia, Ava, Sophia)
- Connection with natural rhythms (cardinal directions) (Amelia, Ava, Emma)
 - Human, animal creature, mammal passage; phenological (Ava)
- Facts don’t lead to changes / connection with people; stories are better (Amelia)
- Connection with God/divine (Amelia (in past), Noel, Isabella)
- Connection (feeling) with something bigger, beautiful, holding me, but not sure want to call that God (Ava)
 - Peace, ease, being taken care of, partnering with, brings me to next place in life; growing along with (Ava)
 - Sense of a presence that is holy—spacious, free (Ava, Sophia?)
 - Don’t have to understand if feel connected (Ava)

- Sometimes pray, though don't know to whom—put something energetically out there (Ava)
- Awe—opening a door to a new way of thinking, seeing new relationships (Amelia)
- Connection between scripture/religion and the world today (Amelia)
- Have to get beyond labels to build community and connect (Amelia)
 - Labels can tell you where you might connect, but also bring expectations (Amelia, Olivia)
- Structure of religion, scripture doesn't foster spiritual connection, perhaps social connection (Lisa, Olivia)
 - Stronger connection with people in regular worship (Noel, Isabella)
- With TLG and this land (Olivia, Ava, Isabella)
 - Trust signal (Olivia)
- Sense of “meant to be” (Olivia)
- Desire to more regularly connect with a feeling of “that's it” (Olivia)
 - “Connection” as descriptor of these spiritual moments (Olivia, Emma)
- With community in meaningful ways—“feeling based” (Olivia, Emma, Ava, Charlotte)
 - “Where care can happen” (Emma)
 - Youth group growing up (Charlotte)
 - Others who connect with nature (Ava)
- Knowledge and connection bring growth (Emma)
- In midst of huge unknowable universe, and of the challenges of this time, creating personal connections is important (Emma)
 - Parents tend to process when have a moment to do so, need support structures of community (Charlotte)
 - Existing as myself in beautiful experience of life (Ava)
- “Digging in and opening”—presence and connection to people and world in that moment (Emma)
 - Being outside promotes presence (Emma)
 - Shared experiences of working outside together (Emma)
 - Especially working with kids outside (Emma, Mia)
- Nationalism and religion (Emma)
- Between religious traditions (Charlotte, Sophia)
- Oneness—connection with all people and Earth and all that is in it (Charlotte, Sophia, Noel)
- Children connecting with nature through play (Charlotte, Mia)
 - Secular youth group? (Charlotte)
 - Kids leading Sophia (Sophia)
- Togetherness is spiritual; fellowshiping (Charlotte)
- Community, nature, spirituality all tied together (Charlotte, Ava!)

- “Being around other people, spending time together, marking the spaces that may be holy” (Ava)
- Interested in learning how to be in communion more with others and nature at the same time (Ava)
- Peace, calm, beauty, “but connection is the big one for me”—oneness, people and everything (Charlotte)
- People sharing “lived experience” of connecting (Ava, Isabella, Sophia)
- Connection to memories of engaging nature (Noel, Emma, Evelyn)
- Shared leadership facilitating authenticity, vulnerability, and connection (Mia, Noel)
- Not knowing one another as well, accessibility limit connection (Noel, Isabella)
 - But let’s try to build that! (Evelyn)

Connecting social, natural, and spiritual—experiencing connection with nature together with others, reflecting with people of different backgrounds on our experiences; connecting to nature through sensory experiences; connecting to nature through awareness of rhythms of nature; connection with the divine through nature; connection to this particular land; connections with TLG and others provide “trust signals”; connection as spiritual in itself; desire to build community in meaningful ways, especially in face of challenging world; nature promotes presence and openness to connection with people also; children connect with nature; connection to memories; shared leadership facilitates connection while accessibility and not knowing one another are challenges

Community:

- Enjoy the people who are coming (Amelia, Lisa, Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava, group)
 - Youth group wholesome place to hang out (Charlotte)
 - This space already a community hub (Charlotte)
- Glad children can easily participate (Amelia, Olivia, group, Emma, Charlotte, Ava, group)
 - Love helping others, especially children, connect with nature (Emma)
 - “Secular youth group” (Charlotte)
 - Kids leading wandering (Sophia)
 - Shared mission (Mia)
- Desire to be around people open to spirituality, esp. in nature, to connect nature, social, and spiritual (Amelia, Lisa, Emma, Charlotte, Ava, Isabella, Evelyn, Noel!)
 - But easier to experience spirituality of nature on own (Lisa, Emma)
 - Social connection as primary (only) benefit of religion (Lisa)
 - “Risky,” “edgy” to try to connect social and spiritual outside of church / religion (Lisa)
 - Community provides practice / intentionality wouldn’t otherwise do (Emma, Isabella)

- Experience connection with nature together (Ava, Sophia!, Mia, Isabella)
 - Shared sense of delight together (Isabella)
- Community as support (shade) and meaningful contribution to the world, yearning for community (Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava)
 - Given what can't know, important to make meaning, connections (Emma)
 - "Warm and nice" to experience things with others (Amelia)
 - People consider you; a place where care can happen (Emma)
 - It takes a village, reminder of goodness (Charlotte, Ava)
- Togetherness as spiritual experience (Charlotte, Ava)
 - "I want to be a human that's connected to other humans." "Why not find out how to love..." (Ava)

Enjoy the people; love that kids can easily participate; desire to be around people who are open to spirituality in nature; community as support and meaningful contribution to world; togetherness as itself a spiritual experience

Reflect Together:

- Guidance from people with more experience connecting nature and spirituality / Christianity (Amelia, Olivia, Charlotte, Sophia)
- Appreciate diverse perspectives (Amelia, Charlotte, group)
- Intentionality about being together and reflecting together (Charlotte, Amelia, Ava, Noel)

Desire to reflect with others, esp. diverse others, and perhaps glean wisdom from them.

Inclusive:

- Appreciate diverse perspectives, openness to them in Wild Church (Amelia, Charlotte, group)
- Have to get past labels and assumptions to create community (Amelia, Charlotte, Evelyn?)
- Give up hubris in order to connect with others (Lisa)
- Church as something that closes people off from others (Emma, Ava?, Evelyn?)
 - Experience greater connection in inside church because know people better, sharing joys and concerns (Noel, Isabella)
- Look for similarities between religions rather than emphasizing differences, oneness of humanity (Charlotte, Sophia)
- Shared leadership, equal voices in sharing (Isabella)

Appreciate diverse perspectives, and the openness of Wild Church; desire to get to know people better; focus on what we share

Land, Nature, Place:

- Interest in connecting spirituality and nature (Amelia, Noel!, Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava, group)

- Esp. with church, which doesn't often do so (Amelia, Noel!, Olivia, Charlotte)
- Outside, away from church-triggering things (Emma)
- Being outside is my spirituality at this point (Charlotte, Sophia)
- Marking the spaces that may be holy, interested in being in communion more with others and nature at the same time (Ava)
- Kinship with creation, wanting to offer this as Christian to others (Noel)
- Experience of nature as spiritual (Amelia, Lisa, Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava, group)
 - Do this work because of how it changes me, not how I change the land (Amelia reporting farmer)
 - Sense of wonder, don't need to explain, be in the moment, enjoy it, disconnect, sense of peace, it's healing, sticks with you, appreciation focusing without focusing (Lisa)
 - Catching moments that felt holy, stillness, peacefulness (Olivia)
 - Being outside promotes presence, working with children outside reminds us of our fundamental goodness (curious, tender, compassionate) (Emma, Isabella, Evelyn)
 - Wild Church focuses my attention more than on my own (Evelyn, Mia)
 - Nature slows us down, invites us to breathe, open ourselves, expands our thinking, oneness with nature, peace, children experience some of this too through play (Charlotte, Mia)
 - Secular youth group?
 - Can leave spirituality in background as invite people to be and connect
 - Feel "held" when in nature, sometimes the land feels like a part of my body, takes stillness, freedom to wonder (Ava)
 - Some people don't yet have this connection—it's new to them
 - The birds are singing with us, we're a part of things—feel connected and open; experiencing with others who are also *feeling* this (Sophia, Mia)
 - Spiritual experiences primarily in nature (summer camps) (Evelyn)
 - Nature allows us to be ourselves, share simply without worrying about the right theological words (Evelyn, Mia)
 - Shared leadership also (Mia)
 - Accessibility? (Isabella, Noel)
- This land / TLG is special (Amelia, Olivia, Emma, Charlotte, Ava)
 - Emotional reaction to grandfather's church (Olivia)
 - And the people in this place—a space where care can happen (Emma)
 - A sacred space (Charlotte)
 - Also Red's Farm
 - Sense of ease, safe space, a place where things are okay, joy of children in the forest (Ava)
 - Recognizing specialness (as in discernment process) (Mia, Evelyn)

- Cycle of life / rhythms of nature (Amelia, Lisa, Emma, Ava)
 - Trust in these, phenological structure to life (Ava)
- Remembering other times outdoors with people (Emma, Noel)

Interest in connecting spirituality and nature, perhaps especially connected to church which hasn't done that well; experiences of spirituality in nature; this particular land (TLG) is really special; participating in rhythms of nature

Joy:

- Spirituality as being outside and just enjoying nature, appreciation, wonder, peace, absorbing the moment, that I'm alive, feel more at ease and happy (Lisa, Evelyn)
- Enjoy the people, potentially join spiritual and social (Lisa)
- Children have deep connection through play in nature (Charlotte)
 - Kids directing wandering (Sophia)
- Feel held by nature: feelings of ease, peace, joy; why not find out how to love and be together and live a beautiful life? (Ava)
- Share a discovery with a sense of delight (Isabella, Sophia, Mia)
- Enjoying diversity of worship experiences (Evelyn, Mia)
- Enjoy Wild Church, look forward to it (Evelyn, Sophia, Mia)

Joy of nature, engaging nature with others, sharing discoveries with others, looking forward to Wild Church

Trust, Hope, Healing:

- Enough experiences that I believe there's something out there; seeking guidance; past feelings of connection that identified with God (Amelia, Ava)
 - Connected to something bigger, beautiful, holds me—*feeling*; peace, ease, being taken care of, partnering with, growing with, brings me to next place in life (spatial, not a person) (Ava)
 - True in grief as well, prayer as putting energy into world (Ava)
 - No longer glass bowl of religion; freedom to trust and grow as a human (Ava)
- Peace experienced in nature is healthy and healing, feel recharged afterwards, more at ease, happier (Lisa)
- Sense of smallness in the universe, wonder, lead to being a better person as let go of desire and ego (Lisa)
- TLG and this place are good at their core, beautiful, peaceful (Olivia); a space where care can happen (Emma)
 - Working with children outside—have to believe that we're fundamentally good (curious, tender, compassionate) (Emma)
 - Sense of ease, safe space, joy of children in forest, hopeful (Ava)

- Feeling of pieces fitting together, yearning for more of this meant to be sense, glimpse of the big picture, points of connection / coincidences that are mores; a feeling that fills you up, nod from the universe (Olivia)
 - Want to grow through community (Olivia, Amelia)
- Sense of hope in gathering for Wild Church (Olivia, Charlotte, Ava, Noel)
 - How can good come of this moment in our world? Processing with others. Hope but not yet faith. Connection and community. (Charlotte)
 - Looking for this all my life (Noel)
 - Also new and a little uncomfortable for some (Ava, Mia, Evelyn)
 - Joyful, peaceful, with people I feel safe with (Evelyn)
 - *Feeling* in the air of shared experience (Mia, Sophia)
 - Keep experimenting, be a bit more Jesusy (Noel)
- Time. Slow. Open. Calm. Peace. Breathe. (exhales deeply); seeking, and it will be (Charlotte)
- Trust in rhythms of nature, phenological calendar—structure for spirituality (Ava)
- Children can play and lead (Sophia, Charlotte)
 - People can be themselves, don't need to mask or produce (Evelyn, Mia, Isabella, group about shared leadership, parents about children)

*Sense of something bigger for some—being held or meaningfulness; peace; this place as good and safe—able to be self; **hope** in gathering for Wild Church; trust rhythms of nature*

Peace:

- Disconnect and be in the moment, appreciate what experiencing, wonder, joy, beauty, healing, sticks with you, more at ease, happier, focusing without focusing (Lisa)
 - Appreciation allows me to disconnect (Lisa)
 - Peace and wonderment (Lisa)
 - Harder to enter with other people? (Lisa)
 - Relief valve—digging in (presence) and opening (to connection) at same time (Emma)
- Wild Church as pause to remember / consider meaning, slow down, set aside “issues” (Emma, Charlotte, group)
- Land, nature as peaceful, contributing to stillness (Olivia, Lisa, Charlotte, Ava, Sophia)
- Recognition we can't know certain things can lead to opportunities for growth and peace about not having to figure it all out—curiosity can flourish (Emma)
 - Set aside ego (Lisa)
- Sense of connection brings peace (Charlotte)
 - Peace, calm, beauty, but primarily connection (Charlotte)
 - Time. Slow. Open. Calm. Peace. Breathe. (exhales deeply); seeking, and it will be (Charlotte)

- Children playing joyfully in nature (Charlotte, Ava)
- Connected to something bigger, beautiful, holds me—*feeling*; peace, ease, being taken care of, partnering with, growing with, brings me to next place in life (spatial, not a person) (Ava)
- Openness (several)

Disconnect and be in the moment, appreciate it; relieve from stressors; Wild Church as pause; nature contributes to peace/stillness; smallness, connection, openness all contribute to peace

Wonder:

- Mysteries of the world, openness to different experiences of divine, awe, seeing new relationships, opening a door on new thoughts (Amelia, Emma)
 - Can't know certain things (Emma)
- Sense of wonder: appreciate, be present without explaining, nature, beauty, fascinating, amazed, "jumped out at me," "just there," appreciation is heart of spiritual, "peace and wonderment" (Lisa, Olivia—amazement, Emma—appreciation)
 - Wonder leads to joy and peace—sticks with you (Lisa)
 - Harder to experience wonder with others? (Lisa)
 - "The moment hits you," "strikes me," "relax and enjoy the moment" (Lisa)
 - "Hit by" a lot of emotion, "catching moments that felt holy," "that's it," (Olivia)
 - Intellectual reflection at odds with sense of wonder, spirituality, but can lead to sense of wonder? (sermon about train choice) (Lisa)
 - strongly emotional reaction (bigger), feels special / sacred, stillness, fills you up (Olivia)
 - Sense of smallness -> let go of ego, desire (Lisa)
- Nature is a place of spirituality (Olivia, Lisa, Emma)
 - Focus on small things (mushrooms, Lisa) (flowers, Olivia)
 - Being outside promotes presence and appreciation (Emma)
 - Root monsters everywhere (Charlotte)
 - "Sometimes this land feels like a part of my body." (Ava)
 - Each Wild Church / outdoor worship—"some sense of discovery and wonder and awe" (Isabella)
 - Everyone can experience and appreciate it at different levels (Mia)
 - Same feeling for very different reasons (hunters and not) (Sophia)
 - Excited for Wild Church, reminds me to slow down (Evelyn)
- Sense of things being meant to be, right words, right place (Olivia)
 - Recognition / reminder that this work is good (Emma)
- Peace. Calm. Beauty. But mostly connection. (Charlotte)

- *Feel* connected to something bigger, beautiful, that holds me, peace, ease, joy, taken care of, partnering with, meaningful, growing with (Ava)
 - “There is presence in the world that is holy” but don’t identify it as a person/God, don’t try to understand it (Ava)
 - More connected, submerged in the ocean rather than a fish bowl (Ava)
 - Fully part of the world—freedom to respond, move, ask different questions, see how something *feels*; why not find out how to love and why not find out how to be together and why not find out how to live a beautiful life?—want to be really present in the world
 - “If God is God, I don’t have to understand. If I feel connected to that thing” (Ava)
 - Takes time and stillness and freedom to just wonder; “it’s kind of a relationship.” (Ava)
- I’m really drawn to the idea of being around other people, spending time together, marking the spaces that may be holy.” (Ava)
- Being instead of doing (Isabella)
- Feeling is the strongest part, enjoy sharing that with others feeling the same thing; inside I’m learning, outside I’m feeling (Sophia)
 - Sense of delight together, regular church more cerebral (Isabella)
 - “Amazing” (Mia)
 - “Jesus as mystical presence” (Noel)
 - Shared feeling after wandering—“you can feel it in the air” (Mia)
 - Childlike self, vulnerability (Mia)

*Sense of wonder, appreciation, presence; sense of something bigger; moment “hits you”; being held; **feeling**; nature as place of spirituality*

Appendix D Salient Themes

Below are my thoughts on themes that seemed most salient as I reflected on the [Thoughts on Codes](#) document I created. I initially printed out that document and made notes longhand on it, then organized them here.

Slow down!; mindfulness; wonder; feeling

Religion: structure rather than spirituality; intellectual rather than feeling

State of world—religion's role, need for community and hope

Connection: sharing experiences in community; with nature (children, shared leadership)

Community: explore spirituality together; care for one another—hope; children

Nature: spirituality, both experience and reflection on connection; *this* land

Seeking, not needing to know what will find

Individual interviews: summary of their spirituality:

Lisa: “peace and wonderment”

Moments of appreciation that stick with you

Amelia: There's something out there, I'm seeking, I don't need to know what it is;

guidance, community, nuggets to think about; sense of awe (and connection?)

Olivia: That's it! Catching fleeting moments of connection, wanting to find them more often;

“meant to be,” community as act of hope

Emma: Presence (“digging in and opening”), curiosity, connection with caring community,

reminder of what's valuable

Charlotte: Being outside is my spirituality, connection, community, slow down, open.

Ava: Connection to land, feeling held, free to make a meaningful life,

community that cares for each other, *this* land important, live phenomenologically

Lisa: “peace and wonderment”

- Sticks with you
- Focusing without focusing
- “I think if you define spiritual as being able to just sort of be present in the moment and appreciate, especially nature. That's kind of where I go, like you can go and sit there and see beauty and find something interesting. And not necessarily have a good explanation for it, but you just allow it to uh, you know, kind of let yourself be present in that and and enjoy it.”
- “Right, the other thing, I don't know if I mentioned this, but I think the other thing I think is, is there is a, the sense of wonder. That's where I think I mentioned, you know, not being able to explain it, but sort of being there and having this sense of wonder and not having to explain that. And that's definitely something I feel like more when I'm, um,

when I'm outside in nature. I think that's why, you know, the Wild Church appealed to me. That was a, that was a good entry."

- "But I think maybe, maybe that's what I described to you my sense of spirituality was, that's being able to be outside and just enjoy nature and explore things,"
- "I think I think it's still just the appreciation for something that I find beautiful or fascinating. Um, and maybe maybe the disconnect from, I mean, I want to say, disconnect, I think from, like the stresses of life. I think that's ... For me, that happens, but it's, it's really just a matter of, the, the primary part is, is really just appreciating what I'm seeing, and experiencing."

Amelia: There's something, I'm seeking, I don't need to know what it is; guidance, community, nuggets to think about all important; sense of awe (and connection?)

- "Um ... I don't know that I can fully say what I believe. (laughter) But um, you know, I, I've had enough experiences in my life that I do believe that there's something out there. That there's more than just, you know life, and then you die."
- "Um ... and I still don't know how it, how it all sits in my life. And I'm not trying to discern that necessarily. I'm, I am thinking about spirituality more and like reading things and looking at things and trying to spend time thinking about it. But I'm also letting it take its own path. I'm not trying to, um, come to a conclusion."
- "Um, one of the things I appreciate about either being at Wild Church or being, you know, coming to the church is um, I really appreciate, I am appreciating really also, the one, scripture reading. It has been a long time since I've heard them. And two, just the reflection on that. I mean, in Wild Church, it can be poems, different types of readings. But having a nugget to think about. Something to reflect on."
- "Um, I was really excited about the concept of Wild Church when you first brought it up. Um, the openness of it. Um, I mean, I, we have talked in the past, and I have had experiences that. that were spiritual that were connected with nature. And ... there's something I desire in my life that I want to like, that connecting more with nature, having more of those experiences. And then I also, I have, you know, believed a long time that it's almost, in my life, like an ignored connection between Christianity and the natural world, as if those were just completely separate universes. And, um, so to turn to nature as a source for spirituality, I was excited to experience that with other people who are interested in that, other people who have insight into that, and more wisdom around that concept. Um. And ... it also in, in the, and then on the more practical side, the concept of Wild Church also strips away some of the things I'm, I feel a little uncertain about, but still allowing that, the spiritual exploration."
- "You know, I haven't really, you know, it's like, this is like a, is a return for me to start coming to church. It's been years and years, and um, I know that there's something like, that I'm desiring. It's like a missing part of my life of, like wanting this, and I haven't thought really in terms of like, where will this go or in five years what would this look

like, or, it's just sort of in the moment. Um. Seeking this part of ... Some expression of ... This part of my life, like of having a spiritual aspect.

- [James] "Can you say anything more about what that spiritual aspect is or feels like or.. (long pause) [Amelia] Um. Um. Is it, you know, is pausing, in some ways, I mean, for me, it's like, on a, kind of practical level, would be pausing to think about the way I'm making choices, like, um, like even the fact that I'm, you know, either heard scripture or heard a reflection on it, or ... that then allows me to use that as a measure of making a choice or measure of how to react or, responding. And ... I haven't had a lot of emotion around it, yet. Or yeah, I haven't had an emotional experience with it, but um. Like, I guess there's a sense of seeking guidance, like, a way of kind of, like, I want to, like, not name it, not define what exactly what I'm looking for, but like, allowing for a little bit like, guidance in my life. In whatever form, or that, that starts to take shape. (laughs) Um.
- "I mean, I guess, in my past, when I was growing up and I just had this sort of unassumed belief of like, unquestioned belief about ... God (with expression) and how he, this is present in your life. I did feel like, you know, I did have moments of like, connection or feeling, um, a voice or an answer to things. And I do want to hold out like, that those they, they felt extremely real and hold out that that was real. But not name, but again, not naming or expecting or just seeking, these, you know, supernatural experiences.
- "[James] Are there alternative ways that you, kind of imagine spiritual experiences that, that don't involve emotion? Um, when, when you're talking about the cardinal directions or, uh, touching the tree, were there emotions as part of that? [Amelia] I think it's more awe. Just, yeah, just a realization of something or something that made me stop and think about things in a new way. It's like, I guess it is like seeing new relationships. It's like opening a door on a new thought.
- "I guess what motivated it is more just, just the desire to have ... I did like, you know, I guess it is sort of like having more community around me of people that are open to spiritual ideas and like, it's like a different type of wisdom and, um. Just like a missing part of my life.

Olivia: That's it! Catching fleeting moments of connection, "meant to be," wanting to find them more often; community as act of hope

- "And so sometimes I have trouble like squaring this whole part of my brain or heart or whatever with the, you know, the rest of it. But, like, I've always felt like, okay, like, Nature's connected to it, like, that's a place of spirituality. And that's something that, like, I felt like, you know, is not necessarily in, like, traditional, like the Church I grew up in.
- "But more of like, kind of catching like, moments that, like, felt holy, whether you're you know, like, hiking, and you have a moment of, like, oh my, God, like, look at all this or, you know, like, I was, like, a song that catches you, or like, you know, a turn of phrase in a book or that type of thing, like, catching these pieces here and there. And like, feeling, a certain feeling that I'm like, that's, like that's it. [James] Yeah, can you say more about

that certain feeling, like, how would you describe that? [Olivia] I don't really know. I've always called it, like, that thing, to myself. I actually, I have, like, a folder in my email, like, that thing and like, save, you know, save things to it.

- “I guess, I mean, like, I love finding those things. And, like, so finding it is a happy thing to me, but it's like, it could be ... ah ... like, I don't know, like poignant, I feel like is, maybe, like, closer to the feeling, or like ... I think sometimes there is like, a sadness in it, or like, a ... mm ... Like a, a longing almost, but it's like, it's to me. It's like, kind of a feeling of, like the pieces are coming together like, it's like, fitting together. It makes sense like, this is it, like it resonates. Um ... Yeah. (Laughter)
- “I don't know. I guess, feeling like, kind of like you were meant to be where you are, you were meant to be like, finding the words that you found or you, like, or meeting this person, or like, in this place experiencing whatever you're experiencing. It's like a feeling of like, meant to be, kind of.
- “I think it's different. Yeah. I think it is, like, bigger, or different, because it's not like, just happy or sad or whatever. It's more of, like, truly like ... I, like, when I was saying, I can't remember when, but when I said kind of like the whatever was like meant to be, that you were meant to be here or whatever. It's like, it's more of like that feeling, and it's like it feels, feels more like fills you up, like all the way, and not just like, oh, okay, I'm having a good day type of thing. It's, it's different than that, like ...
- “I think also, and I can't remember, actually, if it was something that was truly said at the first one I came to or if it was something Mindy and I were talking about. But um... just in terms of the, like, in a world where, like ... I don't know, like, kind of, like, politically, right now and just like, what a disaster everything is, and how much cruelty, and, like, all of that, that, like, what was it? But like, something about like this, being like an act of hope, and like ... Because honestly, like I, and I feel like, I kind of blame it on, like the stage of life we're in. But I'm like, to some degree. I like check out of the news because it's like, it's too much. Reading the news does not do anything good for me. I feel like you just like, obsess and worry, and like, you know, like, can really get really wrapped up in that, and I don't want to do that. So I don't do that, but then it's also like you feel, like, you need some awareness of what's going on, and like, at times, I'll feel guilty for not doing more, especially as like, a person with a great deal of privilege and life, um. And so anyway, whether it was talking with Mindy or something that was actually said at church, but like, that it's like, an act of hope, like, coming together like this, and that, like ... There's more to it than that. There was ... But whatever that was, like, was also like a really like, resonant for me in the moment, and like another one of those like, yes, you're here for a reason, like, this is you know ...
- “I honestly didn't know if, like, it was gonna be like, you know, too crunchy, and we would not, like, you know, connect with people, or like, you know how any of that would go, but it was such a beautiful community, and I think, like, we've been trying really hard to like, take part and show up and, like, you know, join the meal train for whoever, even

if you don't know them that well. And like, to be a part, you know, of the community, and I think, like, I don't have a good formulated idea of what it looks like to answer your question beyond, you know, like an hour, um a week or a month or whatever, but like, I like the idea, and I think so much matters on the small scale, and I feel like that feels much more approachable to me than what, you know, like, thinking about the big things I think, in the world right now. I personally don't feel like I can do much on that scale, but I feel like I could, you know, like, at a community level, I feel like you can do something really meaningful, and I think that's what I would want to do. And again, not like ...

- “Yeah, I think so. I mean, like, I think it, really, like, there's a lot of meaning there, and like, I love, like, these moments that I do find that, like, I love that so much. I love the sense of connection and of, like, sure, sureness and like, meant to be this, like, I, I would love to to grow that, um ... And I think, you know, for me, thus far, it has kind of happened on a like, you know, like I mentioned before, kind of coincidental, or like, almost by chance ... moment, and then it seems like more than a coincidence or more than by chance, once it's happening, or once you find it, um ... But it's something you know to the kind of the point about community and all of that, like, I do feel like, it could be grown, and I mean, I definitely like, want to do that, um, and I think it's more a matter of like, how? You know, other than for me, like, you know, right now, it's, like, oh well, you could go off, you know, hiking more often by yourself, or you could read more often by yourself, and like, things that are just not realistic. And you know, my stage of life, I think, but um ... But yeah, like I would. Yeah.

Emma: Presence (“digging in and opening”), curiosity, connection with caring community, reminder of what’s valuable

- “I think that for me, spirituality is, um, a recognition and acknowledgment that there's something more than what ... we know and can know. Um, and ... that the wondering about that, and the curiosity towards that can be, can lead to opportunities of growth and peace for me.
- “So, this is a practice of ... appreciation, and remembering ... why I do the job that I do, and what feels like, really important to me and central to my values and ... Um, and it also seemed like a really good opportunity to um, be more closely connected with members of the church as partners here.
- “Um. Yeah, I think that like, living on the planet as it is currently in the country that we live in, in the city that we live in, is really hard. Um. And I, I think that capitalism and imperialism and our patriarchy has made it especially hard for most of us. Um. It is a slog, I think, to get through life. Um. And yeah, so I think of my sense of spirituality as like ... helping to, yeah, have a bit of a release. A relief valve on the slog that is, that I feel, and that I think is like purposefully constructed. Um. By other humans. With a short-term goal in mind for themselves.
- “[Emma] (*long pause, closed eyes through this next section*) What does it feel like it? It,

uh ... I think it feels like an opening. I think that the um. It doesn't feel necessarily like running away. It feels like, sort of, like, it feels like, uh, digging in and an opening at the same time. And what practices allow for it? I don't, I don't know. I'm still working on that. [James] Is there any sense of, um there being. What are you digging into or opening to? Is there anything more that you can say? [Emma] (*eyes still closed*) I think the digging in part is like a presence, like being here and now. Um ... An opening to whomever I am at that moment and ... Um, whomever, whatever is with me. In the moment.

- “I think that, it's like, the pressure of knowing is relieved so that the curiosity can flourish.... Does that make sense?
- “Um. I think today was my third one, so I'm not sure that I know, yet, how it fosters that sense of spirituality that I was talking about. Um ... It, it does help, like, sort of force a practice for me of experiencing this place as more than a to-do list. Um ... It does help me foster connections with people that I want to have connections with, which I'm grateful for. Um, and it does, yeah, help me just kind of, like, see it, see the, um ... not only like see the place and the beauty of it, but also see the, um ... Remind me of the part of why I have chosen the life that I've chosen. Um, and the kind of work that I have chosen. And yeah. And is religion there, yes, and is it a tension for me? Yes.
- “Yeah, I think coming here, not to work here ... is really good for that. To get that reminder, and I wasn't doing that I was, I wasn't doing that on my own, and so the invitation to come for Wild Church is sort of like a, a way to practice that.
- “And it's nice to be, you know, like, to have a place where ... people consider you. You know, and are, and are considerate of each other and thinking about each other and curious about each other and, um, there, it's a space where, hopefully, right, that there's a space where care can happen. Care can be asked for. Care can be given. Care can be received.
- “I think that I am always going to be working on, um, presence, like being more present in the current moment. Um. And like allowing for all parts of myself to be, um, allowed to be there, uh, in the present moment and all other people who are there to be allowed to be there in the present moment. Free of judgment and um, yeah ... heartache. (laughter) So. And I think that being outside and being in nature promotes presence, promotes being present, promotes appreciating what is in the present moment. Um, acknowledging what's in the present moment and, with all parts, the good, the bad, the ugly, the hard, the easy. Cuz, yeah, yeah, I think a lot about, um, like my, um, I had a young cousin who five and a half years ago died of colon cancer. She was 24 when she died and when, that fall when she was dying, um, I didn't work here, but I worked at a different farm, and I, um, worked almost always by myself on that farm. And I was digging sweet potatoes. For like a month while she was dying. Um. In her, yeah, I guess it was just like two weeks of her, like, more active dying period. I was digging sweet potatoes and, there is, there was something about that that was really powerful to me that like, there wasn't really, I

couldn't sort of linger in the awfulness of it. But I also could be, it could be there with me as I was also digging sweet potatoes. And there's something also like, very, there is also growth to acknowledge in myself given the cyclical nature of nature and seasons. So that every year, when I'm digging sweet potatoes? ... *(tears in voice as continues)* I am like revisiting that feeling, and acknowledging, like, how it's different from how it felt that year. And it, yeah. Every year, they will grow. Sweet potatoes will grow and hopefully for many, many years to come, I will be digging sweet potatoes and, um, yeah, and it's not the only time that I think of her, but that's, I think there's something there, too, that's really important to me, is like, I grew up on 10 acres and, um, I have just, like, a lot of associations with the people who I love the most outside and can, and like, have connections to memories of them, and like, actual connections with them that are shared over like a practice of doing something together outside and often it is related to gardening or picking strawberries or picking blueberries or, yeah, harvesting sweet potatoes. Shucking corn, etc.

- “I don't think that you can work with children and believe that people are not fundamentally good. I mean, working with children is definitely, like, what helps me remember that at our core, we are, we are curious, we are tender, we are compassionate. Um. We are good. And I think that working with kids outside is like, even more. Gives me that belief even more. Um. Yeah.

Charlotte: Being outside is my spirituality, connection, community, slow down, open.

- “Um, and so I sort of went away for a long time. I was like, you know, I just need some space from this. Um, but I had always sort of had these feelings of ... why, you know, why does it have to be one path. Like, when a lot of these religions feel pretty similar to me, like, their conclusions are largely similar, and like, if it's creating division and friction and all those historic things that my dad's always been interested in in the world, like, why can't we look for the similarities and the consistencies? Um, because that to me is like what it's all about anyway, like the meat of it. Um, and so only in the last year, I would say, I've been starting to, I mean ... It might be because my best friend died. It might be, that was several years ago, um. My dad's been sick lately, like ... But I've just been feeling more of an openness and feeling more of a draw to like, see what else is around. Um, and I think community, like, I think that covid really made it so clear that, like, isolation is not what we need in our lives.
- “Yeah, absolutely. Um, my kids went to preschool here and now, they're at Paideia. And, um, so they come back for the farm. Um, and this has always felt like, I mean, even as someone not religious, I don't have qualms about saying a sacred space. Like, it feels so special, um, to me in my life, but also kind of, I don't know, there's something spiritual here. Um, and often, you know, like if Lauren's here working at the garden in the weekends or something, we'll just come be, like, just be with her. Help some, but also just like forest bathe, you know. It's just a special place, um, and so I loved the idea that Wild

Church was here and outside because that to me is the most ... Being outside is, is sort of my spirituality at this point. Like, that's how I kind of ground myself. I love that the kids can sort of be themselves here, um, because I think, probably because I have that background of feeling like I was dragged to church every Sunday when I was little, and I don't want that to be a stumbling block. Like, I want them to come to whatever they come to in their own time and in their own way. Um, and so to be able to sort of come and go and see what things are about, but not feel forced, um, and be in a, in a special place felt... good.

- “Yeah, I think for me lately, um, it's been sort of just like, a, a oneness. Feeling, um, you know, a feeling that people are all connected, but also that we're all connected to, to the Earth to the everything on the earth. Um, you know, I'm sure it has something to do with the kind of threats that we're experiencing to people and to the Earth like, that heightens, um, the, the feeling of like, connection, and like, kind of, clinging to that ... peace. Um, I think as far as being in nature, I think kind of the pace is partly what I'm drawn to, like it just slows things down. Um, encourages you to breathe and like, take in what's around you. Like, listen, be still. Um, and I really liked that about Wild Church. I liked that there was time built in for that, um, and also to reflect on that. Um ...
- “[James] Um. Do you engage ... so the space that you found carved out, set aside, um, to be here in Wild Church ... Do you take that kind of space in other ways in your life? Is that a spiritual practice that you're intentional about? Um ... [Charlotte] Um, I, I would never have thought of it as a spiritual practice (voice rises—questioning, thinking about), but um, but maybe it is. (voice lowers in affirmation) Um, because, yeah, we, we do that a lot. I think, I think our favorite thing to do ... Well, first of all, we, we're trying to really hold space for slow mornings in the, um, well, all through the summer, but also certainly on the weekends in this school year, because um, you know, life isn't slow. Um, but we would like for it to be. Um. ... Um, something about being outside with big old trees. It's just kind of like ex, expands your thinking. Um, like I, I guess I keep saying the word open. Um, and I think that being in those bigger spaces just makes me feel more open, um, in general. Especially, I don't know. There's something really special to me about those pockets within the city. Um, because I like the city and I like being in the city, but, I think that's a special thing that we have around here that not many cities have.
- “Like, the sharing and the community and my, my youth group leader used to call it fellowship. (voice rises) Um, just being together. And they missed that, and I feel like that's something that's really missing in the world today increasingly, and increasingly as, you know, organized religion is perhaps less of a focus for a lot of people.
- “Because I do think, I'm, I'm sure that other people feel that ... missing piece of, of nature as well. Like, I cannot be the only one. (laughs) Um, so I think, I do think they're all sort of tied together. Community, nature, spirituality. Um, I feel like leaning into those three things. But maybe, so as not to alienate people (laughs) keeping the spirituality part

separate. But available. You know? Um, but I thought y'all did a great job at Wild Church. Like I, it didn't feel at all um ... It felt like it was an invitation to think and reflect. And ... not, no, there was no pressure or pushing. Um, or even, like I still don't really know what y'all believe. (laughs) Sorry!

- “I think that the people that I know ... that I interact with most, are ... more ... I don't, I don't know what word to use for it. Um. Maybe skeptical is the word? Um, definitely more sort of like, science and like, researchy types, like, super type A. Um. So, I don't pick up on the spiritual part as much like, and maybe that's part of why I'm looking for it elsewhere, you know? Um, because I don't feel as open to talking and sharing with the groups that I already run in. Um, but I've been thinking about that some, too, because I'm like, probably other people are having these thoughts here. Like sometimes I'll mention it, and someone will be like, oh yeah, I've also been, you know, thinking and questioning. It's not something that gets talked about that much. Um. So, I would say lower on the spectrum. Um. But I would have said that it was a lot lower on my spectrum like, not long ago, and it wasn't even a gradual change. It was almost like ... a big ... moment, and I don't ... have a good explanation for that. (laughs) Um. But, I think all that is to say that, like ... I don't know what all that is to say. (almost whisper) I think it can be, it can feel very low down on the chain until it doesn't. Almost. Um.
- “For sure! Um. Yeah. Definitely would love that! Um. But I also, I think what I'm, what I would like most is just to hear how other people make sense of that in their own ways and times and, um. Like how they've come to that and what their specific experiences are. Um. Like to me, it's very, people based and connection based. Um. I don't, and I don't need to agree with them. I don't need to share that experience. I just like to hear it. Um. But I don't really think that there's a, a venue for that. Like, I don't. And maybe I just haven't looked. Um. But, you know, a space to share that and your thoughts and your questions.
- Um, so I feel like maybe the spirituality conversations that *I'm* seeking, um ... Like, for instance, I think that's something that I would be more inclined to, just, bring up, put out there, um, like, see where it goes, or what other people are thinking. Um. But I don't know that it has to be structured as such.
- “Yeah, I mean, I think grow is a good word. I tend ... more to use openness because ... because I don't have expectations per se. Um. But I think the like, curiosity and the openness, um ... is expanding ... me. If that makes any sense. Which I guess when I think of expanding, that's growth, you know, synonyms? (laughs) Um, so, yeah, I think I'm, I'm, seeking further expansion. Um. But without expectation, without timeline, without ... pressure, I guess. Um, I think, because some of like, some of the fact that this is kind of started coming back for me, sort of abruptly, it's been a little overwhelming, almost. Like ... um ... Like, man, I really wish I had more time to just like sort of pause and process and get to it. And then I'm like, it's okay. You don't ... Rome wasn't built in a day. Like, I'm now, I'm looking at your little sticker (on my laptop, from AMBS): “find

your way.” (I laugh) What will be will be, get there in our own time, um ... So, yeah, I think, maybe just the competing ... forces at work in our lives, um. Just the idea of slowing down, taking time. Getting to things when we get to it. Like, I think that there needs to be more of that in our world anyway. Um, and so I'm trying to just like, take the pressure off. Like, there's, it's a real disconnect with, like, my overachiever personality to not just like wanna ... full steam ahead into something. Um. But I think that that's okay. To not do that. Um. Yeah. Time. Slow. Open. Calm. Peace. Breathe. (exhales deeply)

- Yeah, I mean, I think it's just a reminder of, you know, humanity, goodness ... Like, again, thinking historically, like, maybe this level of jarring stuff (laughs) has always been happening, and we just happen to know more about it. Which, I mean, is for sure, true. Um. Um, but, but also in that historic context, you know, people had their communities that they leaned on and that they were like, could see more of the day-to-day goodness and people helping each other, and, um, you know. All of that. Um, and so it kind of feels like, right now we're in our own little bubbles, and we're just constantly consuming the negative being created with it, and we're not, we don't have that kind of support structure to lean on of being reminded that there is still good and ... Um, I mean, even like my good friends who we used to get together every Friday, like, now, we just live in our separate houses that are not more than 10, 12 minute drives away from each other. But everybody's got different schedules, and it's just hard to like, have that time. Um. But yeah, I mean, I feel like in the face of all of that jarring reality, I've been thinking, like, what do I do? Like, how, not only how can I help? Which in a lot of ways is feeling like... I don't even know how I can help in any meaningful way. But leaning into, like, the smaller communities and trying to like, create spaces and hold spaces for that kind of hope and ... positive ... time. It's the best I can think of.

Ava: Connection to land, feeling held, live phenomenologically, free to make meaningful life, community that cares for each other, *this* land important

- Yeah. Um. It's something I haven't, I don't think, haven't deeply thought about much, but I do feel like I am spiritual without religion. I think for me, it, I think of, like, I don't *know*. It's what I think of. I feel *connected* to something bigger than me. I feel connected to something beautiful. I feel connected to something that holds me. But sometimes even naming that God is something that is hard for me to do. Um, because of probably past affiliations with a specific, um, ties, I have to, to that. So yeah, so creating structure out of what I feel as spiritual, I think there's different. That's the difference. Because I don't really have a structure for it, something that I just feel.
- “Um, a sense of peace (tone rises). A sense of ease. A sense that I'm being taken care of. Um. A sense of like, there is something I am like, partnering with in this world, and I don't know what it is, but that, it continues to bring, bring me to the next place in my life. That is beautiful and meaningful, and I, I feel like I'm growing with whatever it is that I'm, um, connected to.

- “I mean, it’s, I, I feel, when I, when I feel a sense of ease, and when I feel a sense of peace, and when I feel, like, a sense of joy. But even like when I’m feeling sad or lost or confused, it’s like there’s just something deeper in my, in my body that I can feel. But like, it’s, it’s there. It is going to be okay. That things are being held. Even when things don’t make sense.
- “Yeah, something more! It’s, it feels like, it’s kind of I, I think of it. I mean, I feel that when I’m in nature, a lot, that’s, that is like if, when I’m in the forest every day, I do feel like, I’m like, I’m being held. And like I’m being cared for. Um, so it’s kind of more of, like, spatial. It’s like, all around me. I feel it in my home too. But I don’t, I don’t see a person when I think about that any, anymore.
- “Yeah, (laughs) it does! A lot! I feel more connected now than I did in the past. (Okay) I feel like in the past, I kind of felt like I was a fish in a bowl that kept running into the glass. And now it feels like I’m in the ocean. Oh my God. I feel more submerged into something. And that *I don’t have to know*. (almost whispers) Because, like, if, if God is God, I don’t have to understand. If I feel connected to that thing. That’s right, I guess that’s where I am, (laughs) but... I haven’t really thought about this much.
- “So that, that feels like, oh, I want to be, I want to be a human that’s like connected to other humans. I want to be a human that, like, shares, finds food, and shares food. I want to be a human that, like, makes things. And has shelter. And to me, that kind of defines like, being a, being alive! Um, and without being religious too, it’s, like, well, maybe you live once and you’re dead forever, so why not find out how to love and why not find out how to be together and why not find how to live a beautiful life like? (laughs) There’s something about that that’s really helped me, informed me to like, want to really be present in this world.
- “Um. I, I was drawn because I am really curious. I’d still like to come again too. Um, about thinking about ways of connecting with people (tone rises) and nature together intentionally. Um, and calling it church. (laughs) I think, I think taking a pause and, um... It’s like ritual. It’s, it’s this marking something meaningful by doing something that might not seem practical or productive ... (laughs) um, does something for like the human soul, body, person. Um. But, like, when we have like, birthday candles on the cake, it’s, it’s like that, but it’s, it’s like, a way of gathering together, and I, I do have, like, I used to have a group of friends that I would be called a moon circle and on the new moon, we would gather and just talk about that moon and talk about what was going on in the world that time and. Not, not politically, but like, seasonally, (mmhmm) when we would read a poem or we were singing a song, but it was not, um ... It’s not called church. It was just we would gather and it feels really connecting to me to have those moments because of how meaningful especially this particular land is to me. (mmhmm) I’m really drawn to the idea of being around other people, spending time together, marking the spaces that may be holy. And, and, and honoring, like, what takes care of us, which is the land! (voice rises) That’s where all our food comes from, and our water and our air, and the

sun.

- “Um, well, I loved being outside. Um. I thought that, I liked the songs we sang. It was about trees. I, I really loved that, um, someone read a Wendell Berry poem. We talked about, I thought it was beautiful, too, they were talking about the Muscogee people, because talking about land connection, because that's something, I feel so connected to this land. That's a part of my spirituality, even like, sometimes this land just feels like a part of my body. Um. And so, like, we're talking about the Muscogee. It's like, oh, they were the stewards of this place for so long. That feels meaningful. Um. I still felt like people are still, this is like, may or may not be true, but just like people are *trying* to connect with the land (mmhmm) that maybe don't get to connect with the land very often is something I felt like, too when I was there. So it was, like, um, this is still kind of new to people, and it's still, which I also used to feel (voice rises) really disconnected from plants and animals and things like, we're outside, and now, what do we do? Well, that's a really beautiful tree. And it is, it is, and like the depth, like, you can keep going deeper and deeper and deeper. Um, it feels kind of new still.
- “But I do think (tone rises) it's important for community to find ways of saying we belong to each other, and we take care of each other. And I briefly, like, the few times I've talked to Mindy, even about AMC, I've been surprised about, well, what about, like, gay people, and she's like, we've never, just, I forget how she explained it to me. But I was, like, wow, you don't have, like, 25 white pages (laughter) that talk about why a gay person can't be on the staff, but can come too the church? Like, that's cool! (tone rises) And how does that work? But it works, so I don't know..
- “I think it could! I think, like, if, if I could feel more, you know, connected with the people. Um, I think if, if I get, I have this vision of like, Wild Church could grow, (mmhmm) and it could deepen, and the connections could be more easily made between these elements of nature and ourselves, which are also nature. Like, um. I'm interested in learning how to be in communion more with others and nature at the same time. Like, I do think that that would be meaningful and just practicing that would deepen my practice as someone connecting spiritually with nature and others.
- “That's, that's, like, that's the thing I don't like, that's the ease, the sense of ease, and like, (laughs) there, it's just kind of like I, I feel a strong connection to this land, and I, I do know other people who have also (mmhmm) felt that way. It's like, it is a *safe place*. I think, even like, when I, if I go home, and I read the news, if I come here, it's like, and it's okay. It's not like, things are not okay, and like, there are places where things are okay and, like thriving (mmhmm) and good, and the earth is like taking care of the little people, like, all the like, the joy of the children in the forest. Like this is *promising* (mmhmm) to me when I think of a like, oh, no!, when I get dismal about the world, like, I can come here and it's like, this is happening, too. and this is, this is hopeful when things look not hopeful. And I spend a lot of time in a lot of places outside, even there's like a trail next to my house, but I still feel, and I spend a lot of time on that trail, but for some

reason, this land has something to me, personally, *really* meaningful to it that I don't really know. I don't really understand why. And I even came here like 15 years ago or something. Um, and I just, I'm like, then I also felt that way. Um.

Focus Group themes and spirituality:

Sophia: nature, connection—God is everything, stillness

Noel: biblically oriented, contemplative/mystical, kinship with creation

Isabella: being rather than doing, supported by spiritual practices and communities, esp. through a community of believers, but also yoga and nature; connection with the divine with a sense of wonder and awe

Evelyn: nature-centric spiritual experiences, music as emotional well-source

Mia: experiencing my body through yoga and exercise, meditation, nature, getting off my phone and out of my head

Inclusiveness and openness of Wild Church, especially including children, but also not including as much overt religious language; gratitude for new people engaging

Christian worship in nature, reclaiming engagement with nature present in Christian faith tradition—incarnation/Jesus as mystical presence

Wild Church as moment to pause and notice and connect differently—use senses, reminder to slow down in the rest of life, be open

Not necessarily engaging issues in same way as regular worship at AMC

Interplay of experiences and reflection on them

No expectations—just be and connect in different ways

Shared *feelings* with gathered group, even though perhaps different reasons/framings of these feelings; shared delight in discovery

Increased connection with this land

Appreciation for diversity of worship experiences, which in itself may nourish spiritual growth

Shared leadership, authenticity, vulnerability, connection.

Vulnerability different (walking outdoors but don't know people as well)

Shared leadership contributes to others—everyone with voice

Connection and accessibility?

Build community and connection with new people

Appendix E

Initial Summary for Individual Interviewees

Thank you all for allowing me to interview you. As I look forward to beginning to write my dissertation in the next couple of weeks, I would like to test what I have heard with you. Here are some common threads that I heard running through my interviews with you. If you have further thoughts about any of these that you would like to share, please respond to this email with them. And while not all of what is below is attributed to all of you, if there are particular things to which you want to clearly say, “that’s not me,” please do that also.

Nature and Spirituality:

All of you emphasized that your spirituality is significantly connected to nature. This includes both experiences of nature and a desire to reflect on the connections between spirituality and nature. Several of you expressed a sense of particular connection to this land at 1088 Bouldcrest Drive.

Feeling:

All of you emphasized spirituality in terms of feelings as opposed to intellectual knowledge. Feelings that you associate with spirituality include a sense of wonder or connection with nature, with other human persons, especially as they also seek to connect with nature, and for some of you, with something more that you generally avoid calling God. Some phrases that you used include “That’s it!” “something out there,” “meant to be,” “peace and wonderment,” and “being held.”

Slowing Down / Mindfulness: All of you emphasized the importance of slowing down in order to engage these feelings. Several of you emphasized an attentiveness or intentionality that you associate with spirituality. One of you described this as “digging in and opening” at the same time. Several of you identified Wild Church as an opportunity to slow down, see, and reflect in ways you otherwise wouldn’t, including to remind yourselves of the value of choices you have made.

Seeking without Needing to Know: Several of you indicated that you are seeking greater spirituality, but all of you expressed not having a need to know what that will look like as it unfolds. Several of you take comfort in feeling or experiencing a sense of connection without the need to categorize or understand it. At the same time, all of you are at least intrigued by the possibility of exploring your spirituality with other people, and see Wild Church as having potential for that. Some of you see your spirituality as primarily personal, but appreciate those attending Wild Church and would like to get to know them better while holding the possibility that this process might contribute to your own sense of spirituality. Others of you directly

associate connection with community with your sense of spirituality. Many of you would welcome learning from others who express a sense of spirituality.

Community: Caring community is important to all of you. All of you expressed in some way the desire for community as an act or commitment to hope in the midst of a world that is challenging. Some of you emphasized the ability to process and learn from others about spirituality and about how we are navigating this moment in time. Many of you value the ease with which children can participate in Wild Church, both in allowing you space to slow down and reflect differently, and for the joyful connection they experience with nature.

Religion: All of you have some background with Christianity. While you have different experiences with religion, you all identify religion as providing a structure that often feels antithetical to your experiences of spirituality, and intellectual more than fostering the feelings you associate with spirituality. Many of you identify community, and specifically community in which one can explore questions about spirituality, as a benefit of religion. Many of you identify Atlanta Mennonite Church and/or Wild Church at AMC as seeming more authentically open and concerned with the state of the world than other expressions of Christianity that you have experienced. Several of you used strong language for much of the Christian tradition with which you have been familiar, such as “repelled by” and “abhorrent.”

State of the World: This came up, largely unprompted, in each of my interviews with you. There is both concern for how much of Christianity seems to avoid facing, or exacerbates, suffering in the world. At the same time, there is a deep desire for communities that provide hope through mutual care, reflection, and connection with nature.

Here are brief summaries of how I understand each of you to understand your own spirituality. I have listed the date of our interview along with the pseudonym I have assigned to you to help you identify who you are. Please let me know if you would like to add to or correct what I emphasize here:

7-27, Lisa: Spirituality is “peace and wonderment,” a sense of appreciation and attentiveness, especially of nature, in moments that allow you to disconnect from the stresses of everyday life. This sense of appreciation sticks with you after these moments have passed.

8-11, Olivia: You semi-frequently experience a sense of “that thing” or that something is “meant to be” that are fleeting moments of connection, and that you would like to have more often. Community as an act of hope as well as a space to explore these moments is very important to you.

8-17, Emma: You are intentionally trying to be more present, “digging in and opening” at the same time. Connections with people who care for one another remind you of the goodness of life choices you have made. Nature and being outside promote this sense of presence.

8-19, Amelia: You believe that there is “something out there,” and are seeking to understand that more, but also do not need to know what it is. You welcome reflection from others’ experiences of this, and nuggets to think about from such reflections. You have had experiences of awe, especially in connection with nature, and are open to finding new ways to think about them.

8-25, Charlotte: “Being outside is my spirituality.” You value connection with nature and with communities of care. You intentionally seek to slow down in order to open yourself to a sense of connection or oneness with nature and one another, which also provides hope.

9-9, Ava: You feel an intimate connection with nature, and with this land at 1088 Bouldercrest in particular. Phenological rhythms are the structure for your spirituality. You feel held, and free to create a meaningful life within communities that care for each other, outside of the constraints of religion.

Thank you again for your help with this project, and I look forward to seeing you at the Nov. 16 Wild Church, if not before!

Best wishes,
James

Appendix F

Initial Summary for Focus Group Interviewees

Thank you all for allowing me to interview you. As I look forward to beginning to write my dissertation in the next couple of weeks, I would like to test what I have heard with you. Here are some common threads that I heard running through my interview with you. If you have further thoughts about any of these that you would like to share, please respond to this email with them. And while not all of what is below is attributed to all of you, if there are particular things to which you want to clearly say, “that’s not me,” please do that also.

Inclusiveness of Wild Church:

All of you appreciate the inclusiveness and openness of Wild Church. This is felt especially with regard to the inclusion of children. For some of you, less overtly religious/Christian language is also welcome. There is general gratitude for new people engaging in Wild Church. Wild Church feels like a place that people can just be, without expectations. On the other hand, Wild Church is not everyone’s preference, and can be hard for people with mobility issues.

Pause and Open:

There is appreciation for Wild Church as an opportunity and reminder to pause, slow down, and be open to engaging nature and the divine differently. We are more attentive to our senses and we notice more during Wild Church. Some of us shared that we are intentionally taking more moments to pause and notice in the rest of our lives, and attributed this to our experience of Wild Church.

Shared Experience:

We appreciate the opportunity to share the experience of Wild Church together. One person talked about a sense of shared feelings, even if we have different reasons or understandings of those feelings. Several spoke of the delight of sharing a discovery or noticing with others. One said that you can tell that we’ve all “kind of had a little meditative practice” as we return from wandering.

Life of AMC:

Several of us expressed appreciation for the diversity of our worship experiences, and excitement to experience their variety. Several of us expressed an increased sense of connection with the land at 1088 Bouldercrest as a result of Wild Church. We all hope that Wild Church is sustainable, and that we can continue to experiment with how we do Wild Church. One of us in particular wonders if Wild Church can become an opportunity to reclaim the Christian tradition’s engagement with spirituality in nature and share that with people who have not experienced that. There is some interest among us in building community and connection with those who attend Wild Church.

Shared Leadership, Authenticity, Vulnerability, Connection:

These four values were identified as characteristic of Wild Church by Wanda Stahl. We all affirmed these as values that AMC holds, and that we hope to express in Wild Church. Several of us commented on vulnerability being expressed differently in Wild Church as we know people less well and so may be hesitant to share as vulnerably, but also as we explore nature in ways that may feel vulnerable. We also reflected on the ways that practices of shared leadership undergird the other values of authenticity, vulnerability, and connection by ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.

Here are brief summaries of how I understand each of you to understand your own spirituality. If you don't recall your pseudonym, feel free to ask! Please let me know if you would like to add to or correct what I emphasize here:

Sophia: Spirituality is a sense of connection, especially in nature. "God is everything." Stillness, in which you simply are present, is an important practice.

Noel: Your spirituality is biblically oriented, contemplative, perhaps even mystical, emphasizing our kinship with creation.

Isabella: Spirituality is about being rather than doing, supported by spiritual practices and communities, esp. through a community of believers, but also yoga and nature. You seek and experience connection with the divine in nature that is accompanied by a sense of wonder and awe.

Evelyn: Your spirituality has developed in natural settings such as church camps and festivals. Music is an emotional well-source of connection with the divine for you.

Mia: You experience spirituality through physical experiences of your body through yoga and exercise, meditation, and nature. You seek opportunities to get off your phone and out of your head.

Thank you again for participating in this project. I look forward to continuing this Wild Church experiment with you!

Best wishes,
James

Appendix G

Frequency of Codes Leading to Individual Interview Themes

To provide a sense of the relative frequency of the codes that led to the six themes that emerged from coding the individual interviews, I include here the number of times I assigned each code.

- Nature
 - Land, Nature, and Place: 66
- Feelings Versus Intellectual Reflection
 - Connection: 91
 - Wonder: 66
 - Peace: 42
- Slowing Down and Being Attentive
 - Slow Down, Breathe: 30
 - Mindfulness: 61
- Seeking Without Needing to Know
 - Seeking: 59
 - Don't Know or Need to Know: 29
- Community
 - Community: 55
 - Reflect Together: 30
 - State of the World: 29
- Being Spiritual but not Religious
 - Religion: 73
 - AMC is Different from Other Churches: 20

Appendix H

Frequency of Codes Leading to Focus Group Themes

To provide a sense of the relative frequency of the codes that led to the five themes that emerged from coding the focus group interview, I include here the number of times I assigned each code.

- Inclusioness of Wild Church
 - Inclusive: 28
 - Community: 32
- Pause and Open
 - Slow Down, Breathe: 12
 - Mindfulness: 32
- Shared Experience
 - Connection: 36
 - Reflect Together: 16
 - Peace: 16
 - Wonder: 18
- Life of AMC
 - Religion: 27
 - Appreciate Religious Tradition: 8
 - Land, Nature, Place: 31
 - New Paradigm: 21
 - Curiosity: 17
- Shared Leadership, Authenticity, Vulnerability, Connection
 - Connection: 36

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