Mission to the Seekers: Evaluating Seeker Sensitive Churches Through Andrew Walls' Missionary Paradigm

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MISSION TO THE SEEKERS: EVALUATING SEEKER SENSITIVE CHURCHES THROUGH ANDREW WALLS’ MISSIONARY PARADIGM

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................iv

INTRODUCTION .........................................................................................................................1

1. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW .........................................................................................6

2. SEEKERS .................................................................................................................................31

3. SEEKER SENSITIVE CHURCHES ........................................................................................45

CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................................69

REFERENCES .............................................................................................................................73

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ........................................................................................................76
ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses seeker sensitive churches from the standpoint of Andrew Walls’ missionary paradigm. Seekers are described as a distinct population on the American religious landscape, characterized by the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Their ideological lineage is said to go back to the Transcendentalists. Seeker sensitive churches act as missionaries to seekers. These churches have conservative statements of faith. However, in translating their message to seeker culture, some of the aspects of those conservative beliefs become muted. Seekers come away with a strain of Christianity which is tailored to the three key characteristics of seeker religiosity. This new seeker Christianity makes the religion viable for a population who had moved away from the Christian faith. Other missionary encounters often have similar results, with Christianity adapting based on the culture into which it is introduced. These adaptations have led to Christianity’s continued success.
INTRODUCTION

Seekers and seeker sensitive churches are hot-button topics both inside and outside the academy today. The mere mention of Sheila Larson or Willow Creek Community Church is quick to evoke an array of opinions about these different modes of being religious. In this thesis I address many of those evaluations and show how scholars can more effectively view seeker sensitive churches through Andrew Walls’ missionary paradigm. When seen from this perspective, seekers become a distinct population on the American religious landscape, characterized by their concern with individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Seeker sensitive churches are the missionaries attempting to translate their conservative Protestant Christianity into terms with which seekers can connect. Through this interaction a new strain of Christianity emerges from seeker sensitive churches, shaped by the three core traits of seekers. This new seeker Christianity is not a negative development, however. It adds vitality to a religion that was losing ground among American seekers.

Chapter one looks back at the academic work that has been done regarding seekers and seeker sensitive churches. Certain trends become apparent in this scholarship. Seekers are often self-described as spiritual rather than religious, a description researchers then use in their work. Studies of seekers sometimes define their subjects on the criteria of being baby boomers, the cohort within which spirituality is depicted as blossoming and thriving. This spirituality is then devalued with charges of consumerism or undermining community. Seeker sensitive churches also garner negative assessments which center on commodifying or “watering down” religion. Many studies of seeker sensitive churches also limit their scope to a single institution, neglecting the larger trend happening across denominations throughout America.

The remainder of the thesis seeks to correct, supplement, and expand on this literature particularly through the use of Walls’ missionary paradigm. Clearly defining seeker spirituality, although in broad terms, shows that this is seeker religion and that while the linguistic dichotomy is moderately useful in understanding what seekers are saying about themselves, it is unnecessary and perhaps not useful in academic discussion. Seekers can be religious without belonging to a religious institution. In addition to overcoming this distinction, I move beyond the limit of baby boomers and suggest seekers are really defined by three primary traits: the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Today’s seekers are also
further defined by historical context, for example being embedded in the American marketplace, but the three core characteristics describe Transcendentalist seekers as well as they describe Sheila Larson. It is not surprising, then, that seeker sensitive church leaders, functioning as missionaries, would use seekers’ vernacular culture to appeal to the group. As these church leaders translated their message to appeal to seekers’ sense of personal relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness, however, their conservative message changed in ways they may not have anticipated. These changes have produced a new strain of seeker Christianity which has led to Christianity’s continued viability among American seekers.

The missionary paradigm I employ comes out of Andrew Walls’ *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*. Here he posits, “Christian history is the story of successive transformations of the Christian faith following its translation into a series of diverse cultural settings.”¹ These historically defining transformations occur through the interaction of missionaries with distinct cultures. Missionaries arrive with a particular form of Christianity which they expect to impart to the new culture they are attempting to reach. The missionary’s form of Christianity is resisted by the indigenous population, and the missionary must find some way to connect with their target in order to convey the Christian message. In order to impart this message, missionaries must find ways to translate Christianity into vernacular terms. This happens through literal lingual translation as well as through absorption of beliefs and practices of the indigenous population. The process of translation and absorption, however, yields a new form of Christianity, constructed through the interaction of missionaries and indigenous populations. These new strains of Christianity are often innovations which revitalize the entire religion. Although Walls is talking primarily with regard to African missions and their implications for the next chapter in Christian history, his ideas about missionaries and their interaction with other cultures can be applied to the relationship between seeker sensitive church leaders and seekers.

Chapter two takes up the category of seeker specifically and begins to address the historiographical issues identified in chapter one. In America, seekers became increasingly visible in the 1960s and 1970s as baby boomers began searching for spiritual alternatives. Due to the upsurge in seeker spirituality during this time period, studies on seekers often trace their lineage back to the Jesus People and focus on baby boomers as their primary group of study.

¹ Walls, 194
American seekers have a heritage much richer than what can be seen in the last fifty years, however. Leigh Schmidt, in his recent book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, calls to “shift the prevailing focus away from rambling boomers.” The American seeker family tree has roots at least as deep as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and their fellow Transcendentalists. Their views on the importance of the individual intellect in religious beliefs, the direct and immanent experience of the supernatural, and the toleration and value of other religious worldviews, would resonate down through the centuries.

Today’s seekers are embedded in a culture quite different from that of the Transcendentalists. American society has come to expect the mass customization of everything from automobiles to dishwasher detergent. Seekers are undeniably a part of this culture. Their quest for spiritual truth is often unbounded by tradition or official religious affiliation. They construct their worldview with elements from whatever belief systems they find to be true and useful to their personal situation. If a practice or belief strikes a seeker as being relevant to his or her personal life, he or she is likely to consider adopting that practice or belief into their worldview. This type of unbounded construction of an individual religiosity has garnered charges of being shallow, arbitrary, and destructive of community. Seekers, however, believe they are genuinely grappling with religious issues and attempting to compose a personal religiosity that fulfills their individual spiritual needs.

The three most central of these needs can be summarized in the categories of personal relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Seekers believe that they can construct a more relevant set of religious beliefs and practices by crossing traditional religious boundaries. They look for spiritual insights based on their own personal needs and are willing to accept these insights wherever they find them. This open-mindedness toward other religions comes across not only in their willingness to adopt principles from other religions but also in their tendency to respect others’ beliefs systems, regardless of what those beliefs entail. One common element of seeker religiosity is that the supernatural is perceived as being radically immanent, sometimes viewed as within the individual or as the individual. This immanence lends an experiential element to seeker religiosity, because seekers expect to have direct, almost intimate experience of the supernatural. These three traits define seekers as a group, setting them apart from other groups on the American religious landscape.

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2 Schmidt, 2
Chapter three evaluates how seeker sensitive church leaders take on the role of missionaries to this distinct seeker population. Although economic critiques are often applied to the adaptations occurring in seeker sensitive churches, the missionary paradigm allows us to see the influence of seeker culture on these churches. Seeker sensitive church leaders conceive of themselves as missionaries trying to reach a population whose language they need to learn. Through learning and then employing this seeker vernacular, the messages at these churches come to reflect seeker traits of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Seekers are entrenched in American culture, however, which includes the consumer marketplace. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life* says, “In today’s rapidly changing world, vision is also the ability to accurately assess current changes and take advantage of them. Vision is being alert to opportunities.”

As missionaries, seeker sensitive churches make use of cultural elements to better facilitate communication with seekers. This willingness to appropriate elements of the marketplace to convey their message does not necessarily mean that seeker sensitive church leaders are commodifying religion, it means they are trying to speak seekers’ language.

Speaking in terms of individual relevancy, immanence, and open-mindedness carries significant currency with seekers. Seeker sensitive churches go to great lengths to show their audience how their message is relevant to each individual’s life. Dramas, personal anecdotes, relationships in small groups, and even specially designing the building décor, all serve to make the seeker feel that the seeker sensitive church resonates with their life. An immanent deity also resonates with seekers. Messages in seeker sensitive services tend to focus on a close relationship with God, who becomes almost like a best friend. The more traditional conservative aspects of God as holy, judging, and powerful fade. This downplaying of judgment lends itself to the open-mindedness seekers value so highly. Some seeker sensitive churches have adopted practices originating outside conservative Christianity such as meditation or healing practices. More traditional conservative churches alienated seekers because they did not incorporate individual relevance, immanence or open-mindedness. It is important for seeker sensitive churches to distinguish themselves from these alienating churches. The letter Rick Warren wrote

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3 Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 28
in 1980 inviting the surrounding community to his new church began, “At last! A new church for those who’ve given up on traditional church services.”

At heart, though, seeker sensitive church leaders feel they are maintaining conservative Christian beliefs, as is evident in their statements of faith. From a missionary standpoint, however, some beliefs are difficult to translate in a way seekers can relate to readily. These more conservative principles are not incorporated into seeker services, they only begin to emerge in more committed levels of involvement. As a result, the Christianity that seekers come away with is a different strain than the religion that the missionary seeker sensitive church leaders had hoped to proffer. This new seeker Christianity need not be seen as another chapter in an American declension narrative. Throughout history, the interaction of Christian missionaries and new cultures has produced evolutions in Christianity which continue to make it viable as a belief system. Seeker Christianity has revitalized the religion for a group of Americans who had abandoned it as an option. This is not a story of decline; it is a story of renewal.

What you will find in the following pages then is a nuanced evaluation of both seekers and seeker sensitive churches brought to light through the use of Walls’ missionary paradigm. I have attempted to show that seekers are a distinct religious population characterized by the importance they place on individual relevance, immanence and open-mindedness, characteristics which extend back beyond the baby boomers to Transcendentalist thinkers. Conceiving of themselves as missionaries, seeker sensitive church leaders approach seekers as a population with a distinct religious vernacular centered on these three defining traits. The resulting encounter has produced a new strain of seeker Christianity in which the importance of the three core seeker characteristics come to the fore. Viewed through Walls’ missionary paradigm, seeker Christianity is one of many strains of Christianity to emerge from the interaction of missionaries and other cultures which has led to the continued viability of the religion.

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4 Quoted in Warren, 41
CHAPTER ONE
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

As early as 1841, and quite possibly earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt comfortable with the self-proclaimed term "seeker." Despite early traces of individual spirituality such as Emerson's, the seeker movement did not come under scholarly analysis until after the 1960s and 1970s made seekers much more visible on the American religious landscape. There were a few early exceptions to this, but it was really with Robert Bellah's 1985 *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* that a sustained academic conversation about seekers emerged. Bellah lamented the shift to individualistic religion, as have many of his successors who have taken up this topic. Interspersed in this seeker declension narrative are voices of other scholars who aim to treat the group without passing judgment on their religious validity. In both cases certain constructs, particularly age, emerge as significant factors in these discussions. Although baby boomers are an important group of seekers, they do not constitute the entire population. Nor does boomer culture extend back to seekers throughout American history.

To better understand seeker religiosity, it must be defined by traits which apply to all seekers. In the next chapter I propose the traits of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness as the defining characteristics of religious seekers. These qualities set seekers apart as a distinct religious population in America.

Many books addressing seeker sensitive churches also tell a declension narrative, except in this case, the lament is over new institutional expressions of religiosity, not individual expressions. In these expressions, churches often use business and marketing techniques to reach seekers, tailoring the church's message and appearance to draw them in. Authors have often characterized this as an abandonment of traditional religion and a watering down of the Christian gospel. Seeker sensitive church leaders protest these accusations, saying that while they do employ techniques borrowed from the business world, their true goal is missionary. According to these leaders, they do not view seekers as customers; they look at them as a population that needs the Christian gospel.

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5 Emerson, *Circles in Essays: First Series*. Says, "No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back."
Scholarly literature on seeker sensitive churches began to appear even later than academic studies of seekers and is not as developed as the latter. The first Protestant megachurches appeared in the 1950s and then took off with a significant growth spurt in the 1980s. Church growth literature emerged from these successful megachurches, and smaller congregations began incorporating similar techniques into their churches as well. This new orientation of churches to be cognizant of the “felt needs” of seekers has been addressed by a handful of scholars, but much work remains to be done. Those who do take up the topic of seeker sensitive churches often focus primarily on one or several megachurches. Seeker sensitive churches are not limited to megachurches, however. They are found across congregations of various sizes and denominations. It is important to consider the full variety of seeker sensitive churches for a richer picture of how they are attempting to reach seekers.

Definitions of seekers and seeker sensitive churches vary widely. A study headed by Brian Zinnbauer found significant differences in the ways various groups of people conceptualize the terms religiousness and spirituality. These disparities appear to be related to how individuals characterize their own religiosity or spirituality in relation to religious institutions. This results in scholars’ working out of different definitions when they are writing. Some consider seekers spiritual but not religious, others see that seekers may be spiritual and religious at the same time. Many see an extended trajectory of seekers reaching back to the Transcendentalists or even the Puritans, but others feel that seekerism only became fully developed with the baby boom generation. These conceptual disagreements complicate the discussion going on among researchers, but they also help to flesh out the picture we have of seekers and seeker sensitive churches. A clearer definition of seeker religiosity, not based on age cohort or self-definition as “spiritual,” will sharpen this picture and allow for connections to be made between seekers and the developments within the seeker sensitive church.

Seekers

Although in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James does not talk about a category of religious people called "seekers," he can be considered a pioneer in the field. James chose to limit his study to personal religion, attempting to exclude institutional religion entirely. In this context he defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may
consider the divine." For James, the most genuine religious sentiment was to be found in individuals outside a church or other institutional setting. The "root and centre" of personal religiosity was in "mystical states of consciousness," which brought the person into the immanent presence of the supernatural. Thus, while James' idea of religion may have encompassed more than a seeker style of religion, it certainly included seekers. Particularly resonant is the importance of individual experience and relevancy to both James' and seekers’ construction of religion. Through his use of "scientific" methods, James lent credence to the early academic discussion of seekers.

*The Varieties of Religious Experience* came under intense scrutiny shortly after its publication, however. Many of those undertaking studies of religious experience in the years following James' groundbreaking book felt that the individual in solitude who was having mystical experiences was not their desired subject. According to Ann Taves, "By adopting a stage theory of evolution, in which they identified automatisms with the mental instability of primitives, the younger generation of psychologists of religion beat a hasty retreat from the 'religious psychopath' who played such a prominent role in the *Varieties*." At the time, this retreat had more to do with differing opinions on the role of the subconscious in automatisms, but may have served to discredit the study of personal religion.

By 1962, Thomas Luckmann felt the need to make an argument for the existence of privatized forms of religiosity outside the church in his book, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. What had seemed obvious to James in 1902 needed to be recovered by Luckmann after the perceived pervasiveness of 1950s institutional religion. Luckmann feared that church and religion had become conflated in sociological research. He asserted that this equation was detrimental to these studies because, in reality, the church had become a marginal phenomenon through secularization in America. There were many questions raised, such as those relating to overarching belief systems and conceptions of ultimate concern. Ultimately Luckman concluded that many forms of religiosity occurred on a personal level outside institutions, thus rendering them invisible to researchers who persisted in equating religion with its expression in institutions. Today this difficulty in identifying and studying non-

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6 James, 31. Emphasis removed from original where the entire quote appears in italics.
7 James, 379
8 Taves, 307
institutional religion persists, but Luckmann’s point is crucial. Seeker religiosity is a valid form of religion, even if it is not affiliated with a church.

An article, “Invisible' Religions: Some Preliminary Evidence” by Richard Machalek and Michael Martin appeared in 1976, attempting to lend credence to Luckmann's claims of invisible religion. They too argued that within the sociological community, religion has been too narrowly defined as religion within the church and they expanded that definition to a broader conceptualization. Their research focused on what people voiced as their ultimate concerns and how people said they coped with those concerns. Although the sample was drawn from an extremely limited geographic area and the sample size itself was small, their findings are fascinating. They posited two main types of ultimate concern, transcendent (having to do with the supernatural, often associated with institutional religion) and immanent (not supernatural and usually unrelated to institutional religion). Less than 18% of their sample expressed transcendent ultimate concerns. Even more telling was that when asked how they dealt with these concerns only 32% of respondents said they used any sort of institutional coping mechanism such as attending church or praying. These figures led to the conclusion that, "[a] study of religion which would confine itself to analyses of the churches… could easily overlook an important range of phenomenon." According to the authors, this range of phenomena may be rooted in the invisible religions posited by Luckmann's earlier research. It is also worth noting that in this sample where two-thirds of respondents did not use religious coping mechanisms, the large majority of respondents possessed an immanent ultimate concern.

One formative critic of personal religion is sociologist Robert Bellah, et al., in Habits of the Heart (1985). Here Bellah is able to assume the existence of individualistic religion and attempts to illustrate that it leads to the breakdown of the family and, on a larger scale, the disconnection and breakdown of society. The particular case most often cited in Bellah's study is that of a young nurse, Sheila Larson, who told Bellah, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. ...It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of

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9 This may reflect an influence from Paul Tillich.
10 Sample consisted of 112 households in a particular neighborhood in Baton Rouge, LA.
11 Machalek and Martin, 318
each other."\textsuperscript{12} No subsequent study of seekers could resist citing Sheila and her Sheilaism. For Bellah, though, Sheila and her fellow seekers represented a loss of the socially connecting power of religion, to the detriment of relationships at all levels. Bellah was explicit in his lament, "How did we [in America] get from the point where Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century precursor of Sheila Larson's, could be run out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to a situation where Anne Hutchinson is close to the norm?"\textsuperscript{13} This fear of seeker religion being the culmination of the American declension narrative set the tone for future work on seekers.

\textit{Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America} by Phillip E. Hammond appeared in 1992, using a quantitative sociological study to discuss the increased privatization of religion in America. Hammond posited three disestablishments, or radical changes in religious authority, in American history. The first disestablishment came in the form of the First Amendment and the legal disestablishment of religion. The second disestablishment was the decrease of Protestant pervasiveness and authority in American culture brought about by the influx of non-Protestant religions. Then, beginning in the 1960s, the religious climate became intensely personal and shifted to being outside of institutions altogether. This was the third disestablishment. Hammond used information from a telephone survey conducted in four states to draw conclusions about the relationship between religion and personal autonomy during the third disestablishment. One such conclusion, in support of Bellah's findings, was that as personal autonomy increased, communal involvement decreased. He was assuming a normative, traditional religiosity prior to 1960, however, and thus skewed some of his results. Although characterizations of early twentieth century religion often reflected this romantic traditional ideal, there were in fact strong but less visible undercurrents of seeker tendencies throughout this and earlier periods, going back to at least the Transcendentalists. Without taking this into account, Hammond finds a much more drastic shift than may have actually been the case.

Another sociological entry in 1992 was an article by Bruce A. Greer and Wade Clark Roof entitled, "Desperately Seeking Sheila: Locating Religious Privatism in American Society." Here the authors are interested in ways to conceptualize Sheilaism in a quantitative study. They make their own attempt at doing this by using the 1988 General Social Survey, which included a battery of questions about religious involvement and importance. They found that "Sheila-like

\textsuperscript{12} Bellah, 221
\textsuperscript{13} Bellah, 221
faith is undergirded neither by participation in organized religion nor by traditional practices of prayer, saying grace at meals, or Bible reading. Whatever Sheilasm is as a religious expression, it appears to be negatively related to the indicators usually used in survey research. "14 Difficulty in detecting seekers with traditional religious measures not only resonates with Luckman’s idea of invisible religion, it also indicates seekers have a distinct religiosity characterized in terms not associated with traditional criteria. Despite this limitation, however, the authors were able to conclude that males were more privatized than females, Caucasians more than African Americans, and baby boomers more than other generations. They also discovered a relationship between increased education and higher privatization, as well as higher occupational status and higher privatization. There were also differences among members of different religions and across various regions of the country. In their brief study, Greer and Roof painted an early picture of privatized religion and raised several critical questions concerning the conceptualization of religious privatism which future researchers would have to address.

In A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation (1993), Wade Clark Roof acknowledged being inspired by Bellah's work, but was working on a somewhat different project, perhaps expanding out of the 1992 article findings. Roof was focused primarily on the religious trends and shifts within the baby boom generation, which he saw as key in the development of seeker spirituality. Seeker spirituality amongst boomers, according to Roof, was rooted in a certain market mentality. As boomers moved into the 1990s, their spiritual perspectives were beginning to evince a maturity undetected by Bellah. Roof explains, "The diversity of spirituality reflects, of course, a consumer culture, but also a rich and empowering melding of traditions and existential concerns."15 This more mature spirituality did not necessarily lead to lessened social cohesion, in fact it might reinvigorate traditional congregations.

Roof recognized that this cohort of seekers had an impact on America's religious landscape. Churches adapted to the American culture and to the boomer generation influencing them. This was perhaps even more the case as many boomers began having families and returning to church where they infused their brand of spirituality into the religious institution. He noted that not just Christianity but almost all major American religions have seen some sort of

14 Greer and Roof, 350
15 Roof, A Generation of Seekers, 244
change from the effects of the boomers. This infusion of seeker spirituality into the seeker sensitive church is described in chapter three of this thesis. Since Roof’s main concern was with the boomers themselves, however, he was not able to explore the larger story of the seekers which appears to be far from over even today. Seekers are found among all age groups and are thus influenced not by one age cohort, but by many. Roof presented a detailed picture of only one generation. Defining his subjects by age rather than key aspects of their religious orientation limits the generalizability of his findings to all seekers.

By 1997, psychologist Brian J. Zinnbauer, et al., felt the need to clarify terms. In his article, *Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy*, he attempted to clarify how the terms "religiousness" and "spirituality" were being conceptualized in different social groups. He also measured how people identified themselves in relation to those categories and correlated those reports with other measures. Overall, people were more likely to identify with the term spirituality than religiousness, although 74% said they were both spiritual and religious and only 19% self-identified as spiritual but not religious. Zinnbauer found the terms to hold significantly different meanings, however: "both definitions share some features in common, but they diverge in the focus of religiousness definitions on organizational or institutional beliefs on practices, and the focus of spirituality definitions on the personal qualities of connection or relationship with a Higher Power."¹⁶ Spirituality, then, was related to an immanent conception of the supernatural. Definitions varied significantly by group, so what one group considered spirituality would not be the same for other groups. The occasional conflation of the terms spiritual and religious, and the tendency of different groups to conceptualize the terms differently, caused Zinnbauer to call for more complex measures of religion and spirituality that help tease out the respondent's understanding of each term. I would propose measures of the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness.

Beyond the complexity of terminology, Zinnbauer was able to correlate several variables and draw valuable conclusions. There were positive correlations between self-evaluated spirituality and the "level of education and income, frequency of prayer, experience of being hurt by clergy, New Age beliefs and practices, group experiences related to spiritual growth, and

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¹⁶ Zinnbauer, 557
Similarly, the group designating themselves as spiritual and not religious were more likely than the spiritual and religious group to rate higher on group experiences related to spiritual growth, New Age beliefs and practices, mystical experiences, and independence from others. Measures of independence and interdependence indicated that religiousness was related to interdependence and therefore to communal ties, whereas spirituality was correlated with independence. This particular finding would support Bellah and Hammond suggesting that as religion becomes more associated with the personal or spiritual and less associated with the institutional or religious it loses its power to build strong social ties. It would have been useful if Zinnbauer had distinguished between independence and the importance of individual relevance. Seekers desire a religious system which is relevant to their personal situation, this does not preclude having strong social relationships. The most salient point of this study was, however, the way in which it nuanced the definitions of spirituality and religiousness.

These linguistic nuances did not factor into Richard Cimino and Don Lattin’s book, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millenium* (1998). Here the trope of consumer culture evidenced in *A Generation of Seekers* came across with increased emphasis. The authors attempted to not pass judgment on this market based religiosity. They were interested in sketching the landscape of religion in America and making predictions on the directions in which it would continue. Two such predictions were, "consumerism will shape all religious practice – from conservative evangelical worship to the wildest New Age workshop" and "personal spiritual experience will replace religious doctrine as the driving force in tomorrow's free market of belief." A capitalist, market mentality of supply and demand drove this analysis. Underlying this market oriented religiosity was a relatively stable set of American (Christian) religious beliefs. Cimino and Lattin countered the secularization thesis, saying that some of the latest research shows Americans were actually more religious than in previous years, even if their faith was a "mix-and-match" or "pick and choose" approach to spirituality. The institutions most likely to prosper in this religious climate were those suited to meet the demands of the consumer, such as megachurches, which will be discussed under the heading seeker sensitive churches in chapter three. These churches claim that they are not following the whims of the market, rather

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17 Zinnbauer, 557. The author does not clearly define his measures for New Age beliefs and practices. He did create a separate scale to measure those beliefs and practices, which included “such things as reincarnation and psychic phenomena.”

18 Cimino and Lattin, *Shopping for Faith*, ix
they use elements of the seeker culture to help seekers connect with the churches’ message. Such a translation using elements of a distinct culture often happens when Christian missionaries try to relate their message. Cimino and Lattin did not see this missionary element, focusing solely on economic analysis and speculation.

Robert Wuthnow also engaged in a portrait of the seeker movement in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (1998). Wuthnow marked 1950 as a time of a crucial shift within the movement. He distinguished between a spirituality of "dwelling" and one of "seeking." The spirituality of dwelling was the more traditional religiosity where the sacred was located within the churches, and was characteristic of American spirituality prior to the 1950s. According to Wuthnow, as people lost faith in this spirituality of dwelling they shifted to a spirituality of seeking where the sacred was found in glimpses in various places. This division was similar to James' conception of primary religious experiences in individuals and second-hand religiosity in institutions, without passing judgment in the manner practiced by James. Both conceptions of seeker religiosity involve the immanence of the supernatural. Wuthnow did note that even church members may be involved in a seeker type of spirituality, but he does not explore any implications of this point of convergence.

The Puritans, in Wuthnow's estimation, were important as contributors to the spirituality of dwelling, thus linking them with institutions and not with seekers. According to Wuthnow, "The Puritan legacy was an especially strong source of connections between spirituality and sacred space." This connection was not crucial for Wuthnow's larger project, however, which was to talk about spirituality in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1999, Wade Clark Roof made another foray into the seeker discussion with his book, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Here Roof revisited many of the baby boomer subjects he interviewed in *A Generation of Seekers* and used this data, combined with other recent studies, to draw conclusions about continuity and change in seeker spirituality over time. Roof continued to draw a distinction between religion as something found in institutions and external to individuals, and spirituality which is experiential and personal. Five different types of communities were identified by how they define their religious and spiritual identities. Born-Again Christians and Mainstream Believers, both considered themselves spiritual and religious. Dogmatists, such as Fundamentalists, were religious but not

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19 Wuthnow, 22
spiritual, whereas Metaphysical believers and Spiritual Seekers were spiritual but not religious. Finally, Secularists were neither spiritual nor religious. Boomers participated in a quest culture where they were open to exploring what they believed in, as well as the grounds of belief. This quest culture had produced a marketplace of religious ideas, according to Roof, both within institutions, such as the seeker sensitive church, and outside of them. Roof believed that while the seeker movement may be destructive of institutional religion in America, it was revitalizing spirituality. In addition to this revitalization, I suggest that the interaction between the seeker movement and seeker sensitive churches has produced a variety of Christianity which is now viable among seekers.

Returning to Bellah, Robert Putnam worried about the overall decrease in affiliation with religious institutions in his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam's primary concern was that institutional religion encouraged social cohesion. He cited statistics allying institutional membership with increased social relationships, higher civic involvement, and increased philanthropic and volunteer activity. As religion became increasingly privatized or abandoned, this social participation also decreased, so his argument was similar to Bellah's concern with social deterioration. Unlike Bellah, however, Putnam added, "It is not my argument here that privatized religion is morally wrong or theologically frivolous, or that inherited religious traditions are inherently superior."\(^{20}\) In avoiding judgments about the religious value of spirituality outside the church, Putnam offered a more focused critique on the subject of social capital than Bellah was able to with his broader distaste. Both authors, however, neglect the open-mindedness of seekers and the type of social interaction which grows out of that wider tolerance and acceptance.

Putnam also emphasized the importance of generational dispensations of religiosity. His argument here was primarily that children overall tended to be less institutionally religious than their parents' or grandparents' cohort. This made the baby boomers less likely than their parents to join a church, and generation x less likely than the boomers. Putnam did add complexity to this generational decline by talking about differences in mainline membership versus evangelical membership.\(^{21}\) Evangelicals had been able to grow or maintain their numbers, but they were more likely to be socially engaged only within the church community. Mainline churches on the

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\(^{20}\) Putnam, 74

\(^{21}\) Putnam is using evangelical as interchangeable with fundamentalist.
other hand had declining membership rosters but were more likely to participate in social outreach and betterment programs which were not affiliated with the church itself.

George Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones published *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century* in 2000. They found themselves somewhat outside the discussion, however, with their frequent appeals to religion and requests that the reader pray. Their primary goal was to offer some ideas on where American spirituality may be headed in the future. In their estimation, "[t]he erosion of religion's moorings in recent decades seems to have done little to dampen spirituality. In some ways it may have intensified it."\(^{22}\) This was in line with other assessments of increasing spirituality. For Gallup and Jones, a resurgence of spirituality which could be harnessed by religious movements and institutions was a positive trend, spirituality outside those bounds, however, could be shallow and overly concerned with the individual. Although the authors do not mention seeker sensitive churches, it would be interesting to know if they believed seeker sensitive churches to be too focused on the individual or if they saw these churches as appropriately harnessing seeker spirituality. Seen from a missionary perspective, these churches have revitalized Christianity for a group who had come to see the gospel as irrelevant to their personal religiosity. Unfortunately the authors do not comment on how the seeker sensitive church fits their model of the way churches can utilize spirituality. Gallup and Jones’ book was also complicated by surveys with leading questions, which likely led to skewed results.

In *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth Century Awakening* (2001), Amanda Porterfield talked about a phenomenon in American religion much larger than the seekers alone, yet intimately tied to them. Porterfield posited that Protestantism's focus on the importance of the individual ultimately led to the decline in authority traditionally held by Protestant institutions. Even as these institutions declined, however, remnants of Protestant ideas and attitudes diffused into American culture and even into other religions. The combination of the loss of Protestant authority, but the continuing dominance of Protestant thought structures led to the construction of a post-Protestant religious world. While seekers in

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\(^{22}\) Gallup, Jr., 25. In a quote I can't resist reproducing they expand on this point saying, "One of the authors once asked Martin Marty, professor of modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, if he felt the modern soul [spiritual] fascination was authentic. 'The hunger is always authentic,' he answered. 'It's just that you can feed it with Twinkies or with broccoli'" (29).
general may fit into this post-Protestant worldview, seeker sensitive churches see themselves as remaining doctrinally conservative Protestant.

The lineage Porterfield ascribed to seeker spirituality goes directly back to the New England Puritans. She said, "It is the Puritans who introduced belief in the primacy of conscience and subjective experience into American religious life." While Puritans themselves were not seekers, they carried the seed of the importance of individual discernment and of personal transformation. This seed came to especially poignant fruition in Anne Hutchinson but would not be fully cultivated until taken up by later thinkers. These Puritan ideas, although not others, were adopted by New England Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Transcendentalism not only emphasized the importance of individual conscience, but came to see God as a stream of consciousness. The personal morality systems which emerged from the Transcendentalist perception of spirituality were precursors to the type of personally relevant religion expressed by Sheila Larson in Robert Bellah's study. For Porterfield then the trajectory of seeker religion began with the New England Puritans and was not so much a loss of traditional religious ideals, as it was the transformation of them.

The same year Porterfield's book was released (2001), Robert Fuller published Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America, a study much more narrowly focused on the lives and beliefs of seekers. Fuller alerted the reader to a section of the American population that was profoundly spiritual, even though they were not affiliated with a religious institution. Fuller was convinced that "the fact that many Baby Boomers are following paths similar to Sheila's should be taken as a sign of maturity and authenticity, even if it does result in fewer traditional believers." He claimed that for many seekers traditional religiosity was no longer an option and that for this group of people the choice was really about whether to abandon religion altogether or opt for some alternative spirituality that was relevant to their life. These spiritual alternatives were far ranging and far reaching. Not only was Fuller concerned with mapping spirituality outside institutions, he also wanted to show that, "unchurched spirituality is gradually reshaping the personal faith of many who belong to mainstream religious organizations." In this project then, Fuller hoped to describe non-institutional spirituality not as the downfall of

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23 Porterfield, 15
24 These other ideas (not adopted by the Transcendentalists) probably account for Robert Wuthnow's linkage of Puritans and institutional religion, see page 14.
25 Fuller, Spiritual but not Religious, 162
26 Fuller, Spiritual but not Religious, 9
American religion, but as a vital force reshaping the religious landscape of the entire nation. I suggest that seekers’ spirituality also shaped the religious institutions with which they came into contact.

Fuller suggested a Puritan legacy quite different from that proposed by Porterfield. The more influential Puritan bequest, as both Fuller and Wuthnow saw it, was the alienating effect of the transcendence and remoteness of God in Puritan theology. This was a God largely inaccessible and irrelevant to their lives in New England. In this situation the colonists turned to alternative spiritualities to supplement, not replace, their Christian faith. Interest in religious practices unassociated with the church rose up in response to early American Christian theology, according to Fuller. This paved the way for Americans' openness to spiritual movements outside the church as both supplements and alternatives to traditional religion. The narrative then moved from this opening up against rigid Puritan theology to the emergence of rational religion with the Enlightenment and then the blossoming of metaphysical spirituality in the Swedenborgians and Transcendentalists. The many movements emerging from these varieties of religiosity led to seekers having a plethora of spiritual options, even histories, to choose from, but all related to an individually relevant, mystical/immanent, open-minded spirituality.

In 2004 Fuller once again published a volume dealing with spirituality in America, this time entitled Religious Revolutionaries: The Rebels Who Reshaped American Religion. In a sense this later book carried on the majority of themes from his earlier work, Spiritual but not Religious, but worked through creative, iconoclastic Americans who redefined the spirituality of their period. The ten figures Fuller chose; Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Phineas Quimby, Andrew Jackson Davis, William James, Paul Tillich, Mary Daly, and James Cone, all worked against the traditional religiosity prevalent in their day and opened up new paths for spirituality. This ultimately led to modern seekers being able to "freely choose within a wide open spiritual marketplace."27 In continuing to hold to American religion as market driven, Fuller joined his argument with many of the claims of religious secularization, despite his explicit attempt to characterize seekers as having a mature spirituality.

Leigh Schmidt's Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah (2005) attempted to avoid critical judgments in assessing the spirituality movement he described. Catherine Albanese even said the book, "rescues the Sheilas of the American world

27 Fuller, Religious Revolutionaries, 194
and points unmistakably to their seriousness as religious seekers. Whereas Wuthnow focused his historical narrative on the development of the seeker movement in the period after 1950, Schmidt was interested in the timeframe prior to the mid twentieth century. Schmidt wanted to establish a historical base for the movement reaching back to groups such as the Transcendentalists, Reform Jews and forward-thinking Quakers among others. He disagreed with Porterfield's assessment that the Puritans were the root of this movement and her conclusion that many Transcendentalist ideas grew out of Puritan individualism. He did, however, agree with many of her points about the Transcendentalists. Schmidt's lineage was meant to illustrate how the rise of the seeker mentality had paralleled, and was an artifact of, the rise of religious liberalism. In fact, the author was primarily talking about liberal seekers, not the entire body of people who may be attracted to this type of spirituality. Schmidt did not find it necessary to discuss the seeker sensitive church and its relationship with seekers, perhaps because these churches often had rather conservative values couched under their polished exterior.

Not only did Schmidt provide a different trajectory for the history of seekers, in doing so he broke out of standard conceptions of age constraints. Seekers, as we have seen, were often talked about as solidly within the cohort of baby boomers. Some studies explicitly focused solely on the baby boomer generation as their sample and described seeker spirituality as it occurred for this group of people. By extending the liberal spiritual lineage back to the Transcendentalists and others, Schmidt provided a forward moving narrative that could encompass the boomers but also discuss their predecessors and successors. This inclusiveness provided a fuller, more complex picture than available with just the boomers. It also unintentionally provided insight into characteristics found in previous studies which might in fact be more associated with the age cohort than the phenomenon of seeker religion.

Catherine Albanese also wants to trace a historical lineage for an American religious group, but her focus is on metaphysical religion rather than religious liberalism. Her 2006 book, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, is working within a broader context and longer history than Schmidt’s “Spiritual Left” encompasses. Albanese suggests three types of religiosity in the United States: evangelical,
liturgical, and metaphysical. This latter form has been neglected in scholarly studies due in part to the difficulties in studying it. However, it is at least as important as the other two in the author’s estimation. Metaphysical religion is characterized by an emphasis on the experience of mind over heart and by a believed “correspondence, resemblance, and connection” with a spiritual world.30 Transcendentalists certainly fit into this model and seekers align better here than as evangelical or liturgical. The history of metaphysical religion goes far deeper than these expressions, having roots in Hermetic literature. Interestingly, she suggests that metaphysical groups share a religious language, or vernacular, and her history is the account of groups who speak that language. In my estimation, seekers fall under the umbrella of metaphysical religion and speak its language, but are even further specialized as a distinct group with this broad category.

In order to continue to clarify the nature of seekers, I propose we move beyond age constructs and socio-economic factors. While these indicators may tell us what type of person is most likely to be drawn to seeker spirituality, they do not tell us much about seeker spirituality itself. This is a difficult task due to the immense variety among seekers, but underlying traits can be identified. The three most prominent characteristics uniting seekers across social class and time are the importance they place on individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. These qualities are alluded to in many of the studies mentioned above, but have often remained opaque or secondary in the final analysis. Focusing on these key qualities helps to illustrate why seekers pursue the types of religiosity they adopt. It also provides insight into what is happening within churches that are trying to reach seekers.

Seeker Sensitive Churches

Long before anyone was using the term seeker sensitive churches, there was anxiety about this new way of “doing church.” Robert Schuller, the self-proclaimed founder of the church growth movement, not only founded a successful church based on addressing the unchurched, he also started teaching others how to do the same thing. Although his church was founded in 1955 and his book, Your Church Has Real Possibilities, was written in 1974; scholarly literature about megachurches, seeker sensitive churches, or the church growth movement did not appear until much later. Once this literature did appear it often centered on ideas of the commercialization and commodification of the church. Rather than seeing these

30 Albanese, 6
church leaders as missionaries attempting to reach a population who had become alienated from Christianity, many evaluations picture them solely as business men offering a diluted message. Most authors do not account for the fact that these churches often have quite conservative statements of faith which they hope to eventually convey to seekers.

One early title expressed an almost apocalyptic tone of concern with the culturally sensitive style of institutional religion in America. *The Consumer Church: Can Evangelicals Win the World Without Losing Their Souls?* by Bruce and Marshall Shelley appeared in 1992 to both assess the movement and correct it. According to the Shelleys, religion was both traditional and pervasive until the 1960s. In the sixties a new ethic of self-fulfillment arose and the more committed a group of people became to this ethic, the less likely they were to attend church. Evangelicals, for the most part, did not get caught up in this and continued to follow an ethic of self-denial which set them against this other, more liberal culture. Three centers of culture were labeled; the cultural left (associated with the ethic of self-fulfillment), the cultural middle (associated with "yuppies"), and the cultural right (associated with the ethic of self-denial and evangelicals). For the cultural left, and less so for the cultural middle, a secularization had occurred in which people had not become less religious but had come to see religion as a strictly privatized matter.

These concerns were particularly centered around the baby boomers and occasionally the baby busters, who together made up the majority of the cultural left and also one-third of the US population. They were the group who had most whole-heartedly imbibed, and invented in a sense, the ethic of self-fulfillment. Rather than feeling compelled to join a church they had become consumers who believed it was their right to choose how and where they would be religious. It was because of this new mentality, according to the Shelleys, that the "Christian message and lifestyle, which in an earlier day could be more directly imposed must now be 'marketed.' It must be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy.' …Most churches and parachurch agencies are dominated by the logic of marketing agencies."\(^{31}\) The church, and in many cases its message, had become a commodity.

The church, in the Shelley's estimation, could err in two ways in regard to this commodification. It could close itself off to modern culture and cling to traditions, making it irrelevant. At the other end of the spectrum the church conformed to the culture, abandoning its

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\(^{31}\) Shelley, 20
message of true Christianity. The Shelleys advocated an approach up the middle ground, adopting useful aspects of culture that people can identify with but still retaining the traditional message. In this they hoped to offer a corrective between the two errors of closed off fundamentalism and commodified liberal churches. In fact, this approach of using seeker culture as a way to facilitate a traditional message is precisely what most seeker sensitive church leaders hope to accomplish. Those churches are often classified under the Shelleys category of the cultural left because their culture appropriating techniques are noted and their conservative beliefs ignored. Despite the fact that the authors often used grossly oversimplified categories and did not account for stirrings of religious privatism prior to World War II, they offered a critique of the assimilation of the church to American culture which was echoed in many subsequent works.

R. Laurence Moore was also concerned with a commodified religious world in *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (1994). Like the Shelleys, Moore said the secularization many saw occurring in America was not the disappearance of religion, instead Moore said it was the commodification of religion. This process had led to conditions where "survey after survey suggests that they [average religious Americans] are stupefying dumb about what they are supposed to believe. When religion began to sell itself in earnest, it contributed to a process of democratization that did not yield impressive enlightenment."\(^{32}\) Moore illustrated how religious leaders became involved in the marketplace in an attempt to curb consumerism but soon got caught up in the market themselves. Through theatrical religious performance, the use of business strategies such as advertising, and print culture, among other things, religion exposed itself to an economic model of supply and demand. As culture changed and new lifestyles emerged, religion was expected to follow in kind, and in many cases was happy to do so because it meant larger market share and, perhaps, making more money. This story of initial resistance giving way to full-fledged acculturation was a type of declension narrative for Moore. He believed that this culture friendly religion had become secularized beyond hope.

It is important to note that, for Moore, the story of commodification began in the early nineteenth century with the emergence of a significant print culture. Whereas the Shelleys saw religion remaining quite traditional until the baby boomers started coming of age in the 1960s, Moore detected a much longer history of religion manifesting itself in a business-like framework.

\(^{32}\) Moore, 10
Influences on religion were not only business and marketing, but also aspects of American culture such as the theatricality of religion and its interaction with politics. *Selling God* was also a story about religion attempting to, and being at least moderately successful at, shaping American culture. Much like secular marketing and media reflected culture at the same time they were shaping it, religious leaders did have some of the impact they desired. Ultimately, however, Moore said that religion became intimately tied to the market; as culture changed, the church could choose to conform to demand or be seen as irrelevant. Alternatively, I suggest that seekers, perhaps, were not as concerned with the extent to which churches conformed to culture, as Moore posits, although using cultural tools has been successful in seeker sensitive churches. If the church had become irrelevant for seekers it was because it did not adequately address individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. The interaction between seekers and seeker sensitive churches has focused more on negotiating these key factors than it has on adopting a business mentality.

A case study of a church that embraced a business model for structuring themselves appeared in 1996 when G.A. Pritchard published *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*. By this point Willow Creek had already reached celebrity status as a church and Pritchard even talked about four "waves" of influence Willow Creek had on other American churches. This book began using terms like seeker-targeted, seeker friendly, and seeker sensitive rather than exclusively market terms like commodified or supply and demand. These new terms also opened up the study of seeker sensitive churches beyond the realm of megachurches. Pritchard devoted about two-thirds of the book to giving a thick description of what went on at Willow Creek and why the leaders chose those strategies. His information came from a period spent as an observer but also interviews with attendees, members, and church staff. It was apparent that Willow Creek employed a business model for how they ran their church. They employed MBAs from top universities, conducted market research surveys, and shaped their message to reflect the concerns, or felt-needs, of their audience. The picture he drew was rich in detail and gave the reader deep insight into exactly how the church operated and what motives drove them. One such motive was the missionary motivation to reach out to a population who did not readily adopt Christianity.

In the remaining third of the book, Pritchard evaluated his various findings and offered what he hoped was fair criticism to the Willow Creek approach. One strategy the church
employed was to have different services for different levels of believers. The weekend seeker sensitive services were light on theology and tended to avoid appeals for donations. These were designed to attract "unchurched Harry and Mary," the personified typical seeker. Weekday services offered a heartier serving of religious doctrine, and were directed at members who were expected to tithe. Pritchard saw a problem with this tiered structure which he called "churched Larry." Churched Larry represented one of thousands of people who attended the weekend services but never moved into deeper levels of commitment. These attendees only heard the culturally sensitive, theologically-lite messages that garnered criticism from observers such as the Shelleys. Prichard finds this problematic because Willow Creek's model for bringing people into the church assumes attendees will move into the deeper levels of involvement. Churched Larrys remain outside the church’s model and frustrate the church’s goals. Beyond just frustrating the church’s objectives, I suggest that Churched Larrys, along with more committed seeker sensitive church members, have shaped a distinct seeker Christianity within and through these churches.

Another consumer driven critique came from Cimino and Lattin whose book, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millenium*, was discussed above in the seeker section. They did not limit their predictions to the future of individualized religion, they extended forecasts to the churches as well. They believed that the consumerism and eclecticism that characterized the megachurch today, would be the way churches continued to prosper in the future. One prediction they made, that "churches that demand the most from their members will be the ones most likely to grow," seemed out of line with other assessments of the seeker church movement. They believed that the tiered involvement structure of the seeker sensitive church, such as that described by Pritchard at Willow Creek, was successful because it ultimately required members to be very active in the ministry. This did not prevent them from maintaining the consumerism trope though. They speculated, with minimal and sometimes unrelated evidence, "even traditional institutions like Roman Catholic convents will bend to the dictates of consumerism and the plethora of spiritualities in the wider culture. At the same time, the most esoteric of spiritualities will find institutional expression." Throughout this examination

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33 Cimino and Lattin, 65
34 Cimino and Lattin 72. This prediction seems to not take into account the modernizing many convents underwent in the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council.
Cimino and Lattin remained neutral towards the consumerism in the seeker sensitive churches and saw it continuing into the future as a logical extension of contemporary trends.

Kimon Howland Sargeant took on a study similar to Pritchard's in his book, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (2000). Here Sargeant conducted a study of churches that were members of the Willow Creek Association (WCA), an organization for churches who want to receive information from Willow Creek about their program.\(^{35}\) These were often churches that were much smaller than Willow Creek, but that wanted to learn more about the success that WCA had experienced. Through surveys and interviews with WCA member church pastors, Sargeant attempted to illustrate what characterized seeker sensitive churches. This was problematic because membership in the WCA did not necessarily correlate with a church orienting itself as seeker sensitive. Even Sargeant's findings reflected this conceptual problem. Some WCA churches were very traditional and their leaders explicitly said they did not consider themselves seeker sensitive. Although these responses could have been eliminated from the sample, Sargeant did not see them as problematic and included them in all subsequent data analysis.

Sargeant directly addressed the dynamic between seeker sensitive churches and their audience. He was able to offer prolific examples as well as useful analysis of what was happening within the seeker church movement as he had defined it. His underlying premise, however, was that although the presentation at these churches had drastically changed to reflect American consumer culture, the message they proffered was still the same message offered at traditional conservative Protestant churches. This would be in line with the vision the Shelleys had for the direction churches should take towards interacting with American culture. As we have seen, others believed that seekers had not only shaped the façade of seeker sensitive churches, but also some key points of the message. Some of Sargeant’s findings betray him on this point. For example, he finds that “seeker churches have developed culturally innovative strategies for attracting baby boomers while preserving evangelical distinctiveness regarding the authority of Scripture, the need for salvation, and the existence of an afterlife.”\(^{36}\) Several pages later however, Sargeant reports that, “many seeker church pastors minimize God’s agency in

\(^{35}\) The WCA costs about $250 a year to join. In return churches receive a newsletter, get invited to conferences, have discounted access to Willow Creek materials sold online such as sermons, and get listed as a WCA member church. People who are looking for a church in their area like Willow Creek are encouraged to browse the WCA member listings.

\(^{36}\) Sargeant, 164
determining an individual’s eternal destiny. Instead of stressing God’s judgement, seeker church pastors focus on each individual’s personal decision for or against God.”

Despite evidence of a shift in the evangelical theology being offered at these churches, Sargeant maintains that these churches remain completely traditional in their message.

Conrad Ostwalt entered the discussion on seeker churches with the aim of redefining secularization. In *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (2003), the author claimed that the current secularization theory, which said as society modernizes it becomes more secular, was not applicable to the religious situation in this country. Americans were still largely religious, even if they were not as closely tied to institutions. In Ostwalt's conceptualization secularization had occurred, but it was not a decrease in religiosity, rather it was "a shift in the locus of authority to express religious ideals." One way to see this shift was as a decrease in the authority of institutions and an increase in the authority of individuals. As individuals gained power in the expression of religion, the church with its decreased power was obligated to follow the new ideals set by the practitioners in order to stay relevant.

Megachurches, Ostwalt notes, were leading the way in discovering methods for acknowledging and appeasing the religious ideals of individuals who identified as seekers. This made these churches truly secularized because they were molding themselves to the population they wished to reach, placing power and authority with that audience. Ostwalt adopted the consumerism model, which had appeared in multiple other analyses, saying, "The church in America competes in the marketplace for loyalty and attention and, as a result, has had to market its product in order to compete." Even their secularization could be categorized in six business oriented terms: packaging, organization, programming, ideology, function, and space. Ostwalt’s evaluation of changes within each of these categories could be nuanced by considering the churches through Wall’s missionary paradigm.

Ostwalt was discussing megachurches in terms that are better encompassed under the heading of seeker sensitive churches. Megachurches are typically defined as having a weekly attendance of over two thousand people. There are many traditional Protestant churches, as well as Catholic churches, that could be described as megachurches according to size. The arguments Ostwalt advances would be better make using the term seeker sensitive church rather than

37 Sargeant, 98
38 Ostwalt, 5
39 Ostwalt, 58
megachurch. The trends Ostwalt focused on were similar to those Sergeant tried to demonstrate in his study of seeker sensitive churches. Ostwalt presented a framework of power in addition to that of economics though and added nuance to the discussion.

In *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*, James Twitchell offered yet another economic based analysis, assessing the marketing techniques used by churches. He primarily addressed seeker sensitive megachurches and analyzed the ways they were attracting their target audience. These churches arose due to "a strange confluence of marketing, population shift, consumer demand, consumption communities, the entertainment economy, and the good old-fashioned yearning for the feeling of epiphany and the bandwagon effects that generate it."\(^{40}\) Twitchell recognized that these churches had undergone drastic changes as a result of their interaction with seekers (mainly as a result of their attempts to draw in new members), while seekers drew on the benefits the churches were offering them. The author did not delve much deeper than an economic analysis of the relationship between seekers and seeker sensitive churches.

Part of this market based analysis led Twitchell to offer both caution and promise to the churches to which it applied. Part of the danger of using business models was that "[o]nce doing church becomes like doing shopping or doing lunch (or even doing drugs), the inevitable contradiction appears. The consumer is allowed to become passive while the retailer is active, and the hard-sell, the guilt-and-shame sell, becomes the soft-sell, the feel good sell. Brands and brand stories replace content-based material."\(^{41}\) This echoed back to warnings such as Moore and the Shelley's that once the church became commodified it was then harnessed to the demands of its audience. Twitchell, however, extended a note of sympathy to these churches. Churches that wanted to continue to have people in the pews needed to find ways to attract today's more particular and hard to please religious shopper. After all, said the author, there have always been merchants in the temple. Whereas Twitchell sees megachurch leaders as business retailers, it is also helpful to conceive of these leaders as missionaries interacting with a population to whom they hope to minister.

*The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies*

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\(^{40}\) Twitchell, 80

\(^{41}\) Twitchell, 72
(2005) could be considered a reiteration of, and response to, the issues raised by many of the authors thus far. The author, David E. Fitch, believed that "evangelical churches have forfeited the practices that constitute being the church either (a) by portioning them off to various concerns exterior to the church or (b) by compromising them so badly that they are no longer recognizable as being functions of the church." Although he did not explicitly accuse seekers as being the group to which these concessions were made, it was apparent through the other literature reviewed here that they were considered part of this negative, secularizing influence. Fitch saw the evangelical churches as thoroughly commodified through the demands of privatized religion, among many other things. In his opinion, for the church to survive this contemporary malaise it must become smaller, not larger. Fitch suggested religion downsize and focus on close human relationships among practitioners and a return to a God held to be mysterious and transcendent. This is problematic because he seems to conflate the shift from transcendence to immanence with commodification. He also ignores the fact that a mysterious, transcendent God would seem alien to seekers.

The study of seeker sensitive churches started out with an assumption of a trend in churches adapting themselves to modern American culture. Researchers perceptively noted how liberal, Protestant megachurches exemplified many of the traits they saw in "commodified" churches. Only recently has the category of seeker sensitive churches begun to be used to not only talk about this large sub-category of megachurches, but also to encompass the smaller congregations who are emulating models of seeker sensitivity. Using this term eliminates those megachurches which have different agendas and techniques than the seeker sensitive megachurches. It also complicates the picture of seeker sensitive churches. For example, Willow Creek has different services geared at seekers and members, which raises the issue of "churched Larry's." Smaller congregations tend not to have separate services because their size would not support them. For these congregations the content of the message becomes more intriguing. "Seeker sensitive" is therefore a useful term for delineating and encompassing this type of church and should be used in future studies.

**Insights**

In addition to adopting the term "seeker sensitive" there is much for future researchers to consider before undertaking their projects. One dilemma is the urge to condemn or lament the

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42 Fitch, 13
directions seekers and seeker sensitive churches are taking. The role of the researcher and historian should be one of observation and evaluation, not judgment. This can prove difficult when the scholar undertaking the study has an investment in the material. By recommending strategies for churches to correct their "problem," authors are joining in the story and altering the directions it will take. Although evaluations are not always going to be positive, it is overstepping academic bounds to try to modify the phenomenon we are studying. If a group or institution defines itself as religious it is up to the scholar to assess how that religiosity has developed, how it functions, or how it is most clearly defined. It is neither productive nor professional to say the group or institution is a poor representation of religion or is not religious at all.

Another such issue is the trope of commodification or the business/market model for the church. It is important to remember that there is more occurring in this setting than merely commercial gains and losses. For an accurate analysis of seekers or seeker sensitive churches one needs to consider more than just their “corporate” motivations. These organizations and those they are trying to reach are concerned with religious beliefs, a "product" much more personally significant than those offered by corporations. Unlike Robert Orsi, I am not interested in "the realness of the sacred presence in the imaginations and experiences of religious practitioners and its fate in the modern world." Boiling religious experience down to a market driven model does, however, obfuscate the relationship of its leaders and practitioners. This interaction is better imagined using the missionary paradigm in addition to economic analysis.

Although the seeker movement itself has generated a plethora of literature, there have been relatively few books looking at the interaction of the seeker movement and seeker sensitive churches. Many scholarly evaluations of both phenomena are negative, viewing the seekers as religiously inauthentic and the seeker churches as having put culture before religion. I am unaware of any research which applies Walls’ missionary paradigm to the seeker sensitive church movement. Seen as missionaries and not corporations, seeker sensitive church leaders are attempting to translate their conservative Protestant message into a form with which seekers can connect. This new vantage point would permit an evaluation of the changes happening in and through the seeker churches without a built in condemnation. By conceptualizing seekers as a distinct population and seeker sensitive churches as missionaries one can see their interactions

43 Orsi, 10
and adaptations in a new light. While American culture is embedded in capitalist ideals and seekers are embedded in that culture, the business model is only one, perhaps minor, element of the encounter.
CHAPTER 2
SEEKERS

In *Habits of the Heart* (1986) Robert Bellah introduces his readers to Sheila Larson and her personal religion of "Sheilaism." Her beliefs include belief in God and caring about herself and others. She does not attend church and says her religion is based on her own "little voice." Bellah sees this individualized spirituality as an example of a much larger trend in American society to develop one's own religious ideology. This trend has been called personalism, individualism or individualistic religion, and spirituality. Many, including Bellah, lament this emphasis on the individual as a loss of American religiosity and see it as a threat to established denominations. Despite these concerns, personalism continues to grow and seekers are now one of the most sought-after groups for evangelistic efforts.

Surveys tell us over ninety percent of Americans believe in a higher power such as God. This belief, however, does not correlate with the rate of attendance at religious services. It appears that while many people have religious beliefs, not as many exercise these beliefs in a traditional religious setting. In *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Wade Clark Roof presents findings of a study conducted in 1988-1989 which show that up to 54 percent of respondents believe "that churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion." Perhaps even more telling are the 33 percent of his sample who agree with the statement that "people have God within them, so churches aren't really necessary."

Seekers do not have their own denomination. They do not have a governing body issuing statements on doctrine or theology. There is no universal weekly gathering and no single symbol with which they all identify. Many people who could be considered seekers might not even be familiar with the term. How then, are we to define and study a group that seems to defy adhering to clear boundaries?

Despite the variety among seekers, it is possible to identify certain characteristics and themes they often share amongst themselves. This chapter posits three overarching categories which define seekers as a distinct religious group: individual relevance, immanence, and open-

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44 One example is the 1996 Gallup Poll
45 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 85
mindedness. Perhaps the primary characteristic of a seeker is their emphasis on finding or constructing a religious worldview that is relevant to their own personal lives. This importance of individual relevance can lead to an interest in the pragmatic effects of a given religious belief or practice and the importance of personal experience. If seekers have a conception of a higher power then it is an experiential sense of immanence directly in relation to the individual. Because of this individualism, seekers not only show a high degree of respect and open-mindedness toward others' beliefs, but often expect others not to share their own beliefs. Pragmatic concerns also mean seekers do not feel confined to any one established religious belief system and often show a low degree of loyalty to any religious organization they may join. It is important to remember that any group whose most definitive characteristic is an appreciation of the individual, will be extremely diverse. However, these overarching characteristics of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness allow us to define seekers as a group distinct from more traditionally religious groups.

Other attributes often identified with contemporary seekers may result more from their historical context than their identification as seekers. For example, it is often said that seekers mistrust authority figures in general and extend this to figures of religious authority, such as pastors, and also the religious institution itself. This uneasiness with authority figures is said to have grown out of disillusioning experiences of the Vietnam War and is therefore particularly salient to baby boomers. Seekers, however, can be found on the American religious landscape long before the Mai Lai massacre was uncovered. Transcendentalists in the nineteenth century may have seen the self as the ultimate authority, but did not necessarily mistrust all authority figures. Other characteristics such as an increased likelihood of having parents who did not attend church frequently, being college educated, white-collar, and politically liberal, as well as having weaker social relationships may describe seekers today in a way that may or may not be applicable to those of yesteryear. These traits may extend beyond the boundaries of the seeker group as well. For example, the majority of baby boomers might mistrust authority figures. Despite this overlap these attributes, when paired with the less contextual characteristics of seekers, are useful in describing contemporary seekers. Together these themes and characteristics

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46 As expressed in continued participation or in strict adherence to belief systems
47 Wade Clark Roof is one scholar who suggests this interpretation
48 Whitman, for example, held Abraham Lincoln in the highest esteem.
49 These characteristics are itemized in Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious* (7) but can be found in many other descriptions of seekers.
allow us to talk about seekers as a distinct religious group. While seekers believe their religiosity is unique to their individual personalities, it also shares many traits with the spirituality of other seekers.

Certain Protestant churches, often called seeker sensitive churches, have leaders who recognize the spiritual searching going on amongst seekers and try to devise ways to attract members of the group. These churches appeal to a distinct seeker religiosity, embodied in the categories of relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness, as well as contextual traits. The relationship between seeker sensitive churches and seekers is similar to that of a distinct population, with their own unique cultural and religious style, being approached by a missionary hoping to bring those peoples to Christian beliefs. This unique seeker culture is fashioned by the three defining traits mentioned above and by historical factors. These come together to give seekers their own religious worldview as well as a type of vernacular language, which seeker churches are attempting to understand and use to communicate. This chapter will demonstrate how seekers are a distinct population on the religious landscape of the United States. I will do this by discussing in detail the three primary traits that separate seeker culture and by establishing an ideological lineage for the seekers going back well before Woodstock.

**Transcendental Heritage**

The emphasis on an individual experience of religion is not a recent development, regardless of what some commentators would lead you to believe. Although the counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's made people like Sheila Larson more visible on the American religious landscape, their predecessors stretch back to New England Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, perhaps even further. The style of religiosity espoused by these nineteenth century thinkers reflects not only the importance of individual relevance and experience, but also exhibits a radically immanent conception of the sacred and open-mindedness toward other religious ideas. This section will demonstrate a distinct lineage for today's seekers, who are modern representations of a religious worldview which can be seen in the writings of the Transcendentalists.

Robert Fuller notes, "The Transcendentalists were ahead of their time in placing the individual, rather than institutional religion, at the center of their spiritual vision." Prior to this period religion stressed that man was inferior to God and was stained by the taint of sinfulness. Emerson (and others), however, reversed this formulation by saying, "the only sin is
According to the Transcendentalists, the Puritan mentality into which men of their day were typically born, stifled authentic religious experience because it improperly oriented men to the universe. A proper orientation for the Transcendentalists would have located the individual as the central locus of religious experience.

Many present day seekers would recognize themselves and their journey in the pages of the Transcendentalists. Fuller notes that part of this recognition is due to the "vocabulary of spiritual self understanding" the Transcendentalists developed based on three guidelines: "(1) the immanence of God; (2) the fundamental correspondence between the various levels of the universe; and (3) the possibility of 'influx' from higher to lower metaphysical levels." This "vocabulary" can still be understood by seekers today. In this ideology, the sacred flowed into people, or perhaps was located inside them to begin. This reflects both the importance of the individual as well as the immanence of the sacred. Emerson actually called himself a seeker in one of his publications and wrote extensively on the importance of individual, direct religiosity.

With the individual as the final religious authority, Transcendentalists each sought to construct a personally relevant, well-reasoned belief system. Since most Transcendentalists could also be classified as intellectuals, they wanted to apply a certain rationalism to the construction of their individual religiosity. They were some of the first Americans to look to texts from Eastern religions for insight and incorporate concepts from those texts into their own religious worldview. This open-mindedness toward non-Christian religions and toward intellectual rationalism led them to form individual spiritualities quite distinct from the mainstream religious systems of their day. The same non-judgmental attitude also allowed them to see continuity and appreciate disparity among their individual beliefs.

Although the Transcendentalists did subscribe to a radically individualistic religious worldview, they did not see themselves as unconnected. Despite the differences in their personal religious worldviews, they felt a shared sense of spirituality. According to Amanda Porterfield in her book *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth Century Awakening*, "In the Transcendentalist schema, genuine self-reliance was not narcissistic or antisocial. Rather, attunement to oneself and confidence in the authority of one's feelings and intuitions ushered one into a deep kinship with others by virtue of the underlying spiritual

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50 Atkinson, 255
51 Fuller, *Religious Revolutionaries*, 95
intelligence coursing through one and all.” Transcendentalist religiosity not only involves a focus on the authority of the individual, but is accompanied by a sense of compassion or connectedness to others through a shared spiritual potential. Even Sheila Larson said part of Sheilaism was to take care of others based on her perception of what God would desire for everyone.

Seekers, then, are not new to the American religious landscape. Not all seekers are familiar with the Transcendentalists but they share a common type of religiosity, giving a rich heritage to seeker spirituality. Eighteenth century Transcendentalists exhibit the same traits of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness which characterize seekers today. The persistence of these traits illustrates the distinctiveness of modern seekers. They are unwilling to be amalgamated and unlikely to disappear. A closer look at these three traits and how they mark today’s seekers as a distinct population will help us better understand why some churches feel the need to address seekers separately and in a distinctive manner.

**A Religious Population Unto Themselves**

In a sense it seems ironic that seekers, who incorporate beliefs and practices from various religions into their own spiritual blend, would be able to be defined as a distinct religious population. The underlying beliefs which join the group together allow us to talk about more than just each individual's idiosyncratic compilation of beliefs and practices. The three primary shared characteristics of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness not only provide common ground amongst seekers but also give evangelists a way to appeal to this diverse group. By looking at each of these traits more closely we will be able to see how each characteristic sets seekers off from the other regions of the American religious landscape.

One way in which seekers describe themselves grows out of a linguistic dichotomy between the terms "spiritual" and "religious." "Religious" is now associated with formal worship services, practices and doctrines. The term is linked to membership in a public religious organization. "Spiritual," on the other hand, relates to the private, interior experience of religious sentiments. This separation is the topic of Robert Fuller's book, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. He finds that people who see themselves as spiritual, as opposed to religious,

feel a tension between their personal spirituality and membership in a conventional religious organization. Most of them value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experiential approach to religion. They often find established
religious institutions stifling. Many go so far as to view organized religion as the major enemy of authentic spirituality. Genuine spirituality, they believe, has to do with personal efforts to achieve greater harmony with the sacred. For them spirituality has to do with private reflection and private experience—not public ritual.

These individuals are part of the seeker category, although not all seekers are quite so critical of organized religion. Some seekers identify as spiritual and religious and may belong to a religious institution but augment that religion's belief system with additional outside beliefs and practices. This use of the dichotomy of the terms spiritual and religious can be problematic since different people define the terms differently and identify with them in various ways. A clearer way to designate seekers is by assessing their views on the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness.

Relevance

Regardless of whether seekers join a religious institution, it can be almost guaranteed that they subscribe to religious beliefs which have relevance to their own personal lives. Seekers do not typically hold a belief based on faith alone, because it has been believed for generations, or because it is doctrinally tied to another belief they may hold. In a study conducted by Wade Clark Roof, he discovered,

Self-declared spiritual seekers were the most inclined [baby boomers] to evaluate their personal growth or inner development in terms of how well they were able to achieve the desired benefits; phrases like 'it helps you,' 'you discover things about yourself you never knew,' and 'it works' were not uncommon.52

This pragmatic orientation to religion leads to individuals like Sheila feeling they have constructed a belief system unique only to them and useful to them in ways it may or may not be to others. According to Robert Fuller, "spiritual seekers are concerned with the individual's right, even duty, to establish his or her own criteria for belief."53 Institutional religion on the other hand has a constructed set of beliefs and practices which members are expected to accept, regardless of their personal situatedness. This unifies these groups in a way seekers cannot unite in, but seekers appreciate and respect the religious worldviews of other seekers, even where others differ from their own.

52 Roof, Spiritual Marketplace, 83
53 Fuller, Spiritual but Not Religious, 75
The death of a close friend or family member is a situation which often leaves individuals feeling like they need a religious explanation or belief to navigate through their grief. For individuals who are members of an institutional religion, their official doctrines offer a specific view of death, usually in a way meant to help the survivor cope with their loss. Seekers, conversely, will reach out to those beliefs that make the most sense out of their particular situation and provide them with the most peace. For example, a traditional Christian may believe their loved one died and went to heaven because God ordained it. This is the worldview they have been immersed in and have accepted. Seekers, who have more fluidity in their beliefs, may navigate the situation as they experience it at the time. This is due to the fact that seekers, "rarely expect to find absolute truths, but instead seek provisional truths." If a seeker believes they continue to feel the presence of their loved one, they may decide that there is a spiritual world around us. They may determine the two worlds can interact through a séance, an Ouija board, or by some other means. However, if the seeker experiences a sense of the absence of the loved one's presence they may reach a plethora of other interpretations and beliefs. This genuine grappling and seeking for religious explanations from a variety of sources, including one's own experiences, marks seeker worldviews as distinct from institutional systems which do not change to be relevant to each individual.

The modern seeker who incorporates Christian concepts into his or her personal religiosity is likely to be interested in God and redemption, but less keen on concepts such as judgment and Hell. This is a manifestation of the desire for religious beliefs to be individually relevant. God and redemption offer the seeker help and hope in their daily lives. Judgment and Hell, however, do not necessarily serve a useful purpose to the individual and are thus omitted to a higher degree. Christianity does not abandon these concepts, of course, but seekers appropriate them in ways they find the most functional. Even the concepts which are adopted, such as a belief in God, can be radically reconceived.

Immanence

A second category which helps define seekers as a distinct group on the American religious landscape is immanence. Seekers view the sacred as very close to and involved in their lives. This immanent conception of the sacred leads them to believe that the sacred is involved in even the most quotidian of their activities. For some seekers the sacred is radically immanent and

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54 Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 154
is conceptualized as being inside the individual. Ralph Waldo Emerson believed in a sacred energy flowing into the individual from a higher, spiritual plane. One survey found that sixty percent of seekers agree with the statement "People have God within them, so churches aren’t really necessary." Other seekers perceive immanence of the sacred as a close friendship, relationship, or a pervasive sense of being surrounded by the sacred. In all these cases the sacred is seen as being intimately involved in the seeker's life. This immanent conception of the sacred allows seekers to view their higher power as fulfilling their need for individual relevance.

An example of this immanent sense of the supernatural can be found in Elizabeth Lesser’s *The New American Spirituality: A Seeker’s Guide*. Here Lesser has a section entitled, "Who is God?" which begins with sixteen quotes from sources as varied as the Upanishads, Albert Einstein, the Koran, Meister Eckhart, and the Bible. Shifting to her own words, Lesser relates that the common thread through these quoted pearls of wisdom is that, “God is the creative energy flowing between all states of consciousness. …God is not one thing or another; rather God flows between and through all things.” She finds comfort in the uniformity she finds on this metaphysical point between so many religious thinkers. God can be experienced through the individual’s consciousness and is also surrounding the seeker. Again the theme of personal relevance is crucial. Lesser advises seekers, “Let what resonates with your own experience spur you on to discovering the vast and unified and fundamental consciousness called God.”

The closeness of the sacred, along with the need for individual relevancy, leads seekers to value personal, direct religious experience. They may be directly connected to the sacred and therefore have experiences of their own religious power, such as mind-cure healings, or they may stand outside the sacred but be very closely connected to it, such as having visions from a higher power or a mystical experience. In both cases there is a metaphysical influx of the sacred to the individual. Experience is crucial in Lesser’s conception of how the supernatural functions and how individuals can apprehend the supernatural. The experiential element is important because it validates the individual seeker's religious belief system.

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55 Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 84. This is compared to only twenty-seven percent of non-seekers who agreed with the statement. Overall, one third of respondents agreed.
56 Lesser, 328
57 Lesser, 330
Healing is one direct religious experience which can actually initiate someone into a seeker oriented mentality. When a traditionally religious person is pursuing a healing experience, whether for themselves or a loved one, they may experiment with beliefs outside their traditional worldview. If a healing experience is believed to have occurred through an alternative spiritual system, say with the use of an amulet, the person involved may begin to exhibit a seeker religiosity. A healing experience is both individually relevant and immanent in its experiential quality. If the person believes the alternative belief system to have brought about the healing, they are likely to become more open-minded as a result. In this sense healing experiences lend themselves to seeker spirituality.

**Open-Mindedness**

While many religious groups struggle to find common ground for ecumenical discussions or pluralistic endeavors, seekers embrace pluralism and its accompanying religious diversity. Although not willing to have any religious view imposed on them, they are tolerant of others' religiosity. Seekers recognize that America is growing increasingly diverse and that this diversity is not only of nationalities, but also of religions. They understand the desire for religious tolerance because they do not fit neatly into the Protestant, Catholic, Jew conception of the United States. Beyond extending respect to new manifestations of religion though, seekers often attempt to appropriate various elements of these religions which they find supportive of their own beliefs. The willingness to assume elements from other traditions is often heavily criticized and charges of a shallow, buffet-style religion abound.

A seeker's choice to tolerate, investigate and perhaps even adopt beliefs and practices from a variety of religious sources, does not necessarily indicate a shallow religiosity, however. Seekers are struggling to create a worldview that makes the most sense in terms of their needs and experiences. Beliefs and practices which are genuine elements of a seeker's religiosity are incorporated because they help that individual in some profound way. Individuals who wear an amulet because it is trendy have not incorporated the item as a part of their spiritual outlook, but the seeker who believes the pendant to have healing powers has imbued it with much more than a shallow religious meaning. Many seekers are willing to give different beliefs and practices a trial run and then abandon them if they cease to hold religious significance for the person. This does not mean that at the time the individual held those beliefs they were anything less than genuine in their commitment to them.
This genuine seeker spirituality has manifested itself in the American setting since at least the time of the Transcendentalists. Its unique blend of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness creates a religious presence on the American landscape distinct from other more traditional belief systems. Each of these characteristics could be said to apply to other religious groups in America. For example, Unitarian Universalists are open-minded about other faiths, and followers of Father Divine believed him to be God and thus present and immanent. This overlap is not problematic, however, because seekers exhibit all three traits which come together in such a way that they distinguish seekers from other groups who may possess one or more seeker characteristics.

**Contextual Factors**

In addition to the three enduring characteristics of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness, today's seekers share traits related to their historical location. These contextual characteristics help to describe today's seeker population, but may not be applicable to former seekers such as the Transcendentalists. For example, today seekers are immersed in a consumer culture to an extent that former generations of Americans were not. It is important to note that current day seekers hold certain notions about products and services because this shapes the way seekers construct their religious belief system and how they assess the options available to them. This participation in consumer culture is also crucial because it shapes how seeker sensitive churches attempt to attract seekers. Thus, although contextually based seeker traits may not be unchanging characteristics of seekers in general, they are useful in this analysis of the interaction between contemporary seekers and seeker sensitive churches.

Leigh Schmidt employs the category of religious liberalism in his recent book, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*. Here, religious liberals are defined by six characteristics. There is a desire for an individual religious experience or personal mysticism. This experience is to be fostered by withdrawal from social situations, meditation, and time spent alone reflecting. The person's higher power or idea of the transcendent is actually seen as very immanent, often situated in the person themselves or in nature. Religious plurality as well as a type of religious syncretism is important to these religious liberals. There are often social implications to their beliefs in that they encourage developments that foster justice in society. Finally, religious liberals stress their creative powers and the sense of an exciting journey. Thus, religious liberals as defined by Schmidt are almost necessarily seekers. Because
the groups share such common characteristics, religious liberals possessing all three traits of seekers, it would be easy to conflate the two groups. Not all seekers can be classified as liberal, however, although the majority probably do subscribe to liberal beliefs due to their open-minded stance toward other worldviews.

Another term used in many books today as a near synonym for seeker is "unchurched," defined as not only "people who have never been inside a church… [but also] those who have a church background but no personal relationship to Christ, and those who haven’t been to church for some time, usually years." Religious leaders realize many seekers have withdrawn from the churches because they feel stifled by the ecclesial environment. In response to this move away from the church, some congregations have attempted to be more seeker friendly as a way to draw this group back into active membership. Seekers can also be churched, however. Wade Clark Roof points out that as seekers age and have familial commitments, they may return to church for practical purposes. Other seekers may have been in an institutional setting continuously, but hold outside beliefs as well. Seeker sensitive churches assume they are appealing to the unchurched. In reality they may be appealing to the churched as well, who feel they fit in better at a seeker sensitive church than their former congregation.

Statistically speaking, the majority of seekers are also college educated and employed in white collar jobs. Multiple studies show that participants who identify with seeker characteristics also tend to have reached higher levels of education and be involved in higher class employment such as business enterprises. A byproduct of these attributes is that seekers tend to be middle to upper middle class persons with a higher income than some. Again, it is important to remember that seekers can be found within all walks of life and employed in a vast variety of industries. The majority, however, find themselves in a middle class bracket. It is difficult to determine if a seeker mentality leads people to explore further education or if exposure to higher education and additional worldviews fosters the development of a seeker mentality. Regardless of causation, these characteristics prove easy targets for seeker sensitive churches to appeal to.

If a business mentality makes an easy target of appeal, a consumer mentality is even simpler. Of course, being immersed in a consumeristic culture is characteristic of Americans in general, not just seekers. However, seekers who have more disposable income than others can

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58 Warren, The Purpose Driven Church, 167
59 For example see Fuller, Spiritual but Not Religious or Wade Clark Roof's studies A Generation of Seekers or Spiritual Marketplace.
more readily participate in this consumer culture. Many are employed in businesses which rely on the consumer model for their success. Seekers are deeply involved in this world of buying and selling, picking and choosing. It is no wonder then, that critics of seeker religiosity would see parallels between an open-minded, syncretistic model of spirituality and the mass customization in the marketplace which allows consumers to choose a product tailored to them. Such a strictly economic analysis denies the complexity of seeker culture which is not limited to the marketplace, although it is embedded in it. Seekers also bring with them a heightened sense of personal spirituality and a willingness to travel not only into and out of religions, but also across them.

When the three overarching traits of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness combine with these additional contextual characteristics, a distinct religious population emerges. This unique population has developed its own sort of vernacular language and culture, which has left traditional religious institutions unable to reach seekers. In talking about metaphysical religion, a category encompassing seekers, Catherine Albanese says it is like a "vernacular religion [which] is most properly understood as the appropriated beliefs – and lifeways – of a group of people who 'speak' the same religious language."\(^{60}\) It is this language that seeker sensitive churches are attempting to learn to speak, and as in any cultural encounter, the definitions are changed in the interaction.

**Implications**

Despite the fact that seekers are difficult to describe in the specific details of their faith, three characteristics define them as a distinct religious group in America. Seekers desire a religious worldview which is relevant to their individual lives, they view the sacred as immanent, and they are open-minded about other belief systems and what they include in their own belief system. Historical factors enrich our picture of seekers today. All these influences converge to describe a religious group with a unique mix of culture, beliefs and values. This diversity, along with other factors such as the importance of individual relevance and a resistance to authority, makes seekers a difficult group to study. Since they often resist institutions and standard doctrines, seekers are often misunderstood or overlooked.

Seeker sensitive churches realized that seekers were not only misunderstood and overlooked in scholarly circles, they were also being neglected spiritually by Protestant churches.

\(^{60}\) Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 9
Not all church leaders understood that seekers were a unique population with distinctive traits to which churches could appeal. These leaders hoped to attract all potential converts, including seekers, with their traditional service style and message. The God they talked about was holy, majestic, and transcendent, the ultimate judge of humanity. These non-seeker sensitive churches offered a prescribed set of beliefs, desiring uniformity within the congregation and conversion of all outsiders. In their view, a certain style of Christianity was the only true religion and they were closed off to outside beliefs. Religious truth was to be found in the Bible and had nothing to do with relevance to individual lives. Individuals were to be “born again,” redefining themselves in relation to Christian religious beliefs rather than defining religion in terms of individual relevancy. This strategy was not effective for reaching seekers because traditional styles and services were not in line with the three distinguishing traits of seekers.

This transition to address seeker spirituality would prove to require more than just superficial adjustments because, as Robert Fuller notes, "[n]ot only are [seeker's] religious 'answers' tantamount to heresy, even their questions run counter to Western religious orthodoxy."\(^{61}\) Traditional Protestant churches found themselves facing a religious population so distinct from themselves they would have to reach out and adapt, much as missionaries do when facing other cultures. By conceptualizing the seeker sensitive church in a missionary stance toward seekers we can more fully understand the interaction and adaptation which has occurred. These churches, as missionaries to the seekers, perceive themselves proffering a traditional message in an innovative package. As seen in other settings, the missionized population (in this case the seekers) alters the version of Christianity offered to them by the missionaries. Seeker sensitive churches were not aware that in appealing to personal relevance, immanance and open-mindedness, they were opening their belief system up to these very same traits. Andrew Walls, when writing about the Christian missionary situation in Africa, says,

…the Christian encounter with new cultural situations and the unprecedented questions that that encounter raised, had a profound effect on missionaries. If they were to do what they had come to do – to talk about Christ – they had to engage at a more fundamental level… with the traditions and the cumulative effects of the languages, histories, and literatures, written and oral… The fact that so many people within these cultures showed no inclination to respond to the gospel forced open new areas of Christian thinking. Perhaps even more drastic revisions of

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\(^{61}\) Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 158
Christian thought arose in those situations where people did respond to the Christian proclamation.\textsuperscript{62}

In the next chapter I will use the missionary paradigm expressed by Walls to explain the relationship between the seeker sensitive church movement and the seekers themselves. I will apply Walls’ analysis of other cultures to the seeker sensitive churches in America today to show that the intimate interaction between seekers and seeker sensitive churches has forged a new strain of Christianity. This new formation is not solely based on consumerism and secularism however; it is an alteration of the traditional message these churches sought to proffer, altered to be more viable within the large seeker population in the country today.

\textsuperscript{62} Walls, \textit{The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History}, 238
In Robert Bellah’s mind, Sheila Larson exemplified something sinister about the seeker phenomenon. She did not go to church. She did not participate in a group that shared beliefs, aided each other in times of need, and fostered community. For Bellah, it was this undermining of community that posed a threat to a strong culture. Sociologists were not the only ones to notice that Sheila and her friends were not at church, however. Church leaders became aware of a growing body of individuals who had a strong sense of spirituality but who resisted church membership or even attendance. Awareness of people like Sheila on the American religious landscape did not mean that leaders knew an effective way to reach this diverse group. Take, for example, the case of Chuck Smith, the founder and pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. He says,

Actually, at the time of the hippie movement, these long-haired, bearded, dirty kids going around the streets repulsed me. They stood for everything I stood against. We were miles apart in our thinking, philosophies, everything. As their numbers began to grow, God began to lay a burden upon my wife's heart to reach these kids for Jesus. My wife and I used to go over to Huntington Beach and park downtown to watch the kids and pray for them. We wanted somehow to reach them, but we didn't know how. We would drive down to Laguna Beach, watch the kids going up and down the streets, and pray for them. Again, wanting to reach them but didn't know how.  

Smith goes on to describe these hippies in terms that indicate they were often seeking some spiritual truth, in Christianity or elsewhere. As a leader with more traditional conceptions of how Christian outreach should be conducted, Smith was uncertain how to reach this population. Over time though, Smith and other Christian leaders discovered how to reach seekers by appealing to seekers’ core values such as the importance of individual relevancy.

This appeal to the seeker values of individual relevancy, immanence, and open-mindedness can best be conceived as a missionary outreach tool. This chapter will show how conservative Protestant church leaders acted as missionaries to seekers, hoping to imitate and appropriate seeker culture in order to more effectively communicate their Christian message. I will demonstrate how aspects of seeker sensitive churches are designed to resonate with the three

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63 Smith, *History of Calvary Chapel (Extended)*, http://www.calvarychapel.com/?show=Resources.ExtendedHistory
overarching characteristics of seekers. In this interaction, however, these seeker sensitive church leaders unknowingly fostered the adaptation of the religion they sought to proffer. The resulting strain of seeker Christianity reflects both the conservative heritage of being an institutional religion and also the key aspects of a seeker mentality.

This analysis differs sharply from the consumerist declension narratives which are often told about seeker sensitive churches. According to one author, we have reached an irreversible point in the commodification of religion and "are left with nothing new under an unforgiving sun whose burning rays carry cancer and God knows what else through an ozone-depleted atmosphere." When seen from the perspective of Walls’ paradigm, however, the story is one of renewal rather than demise. Seeker culture certainly participates in and shapes the marketplace but seekers are not buying and selling their faith, they are struggling to construct the most meaningful belief system available to them. Seekers also bring with them a heightened sense of personal spirituality and open-mindedness about religions which allows them to traverse religious boundaries. New or rediscovered practices are becoming a part of seeker sensitive churches such as interest in ideas adapted from other faith systems, participation in small groups, or the focus on "felt-needs." The churches who are reaching out to these seekers are not "selling God down the river," they are making Christianity pertinent to this group by pressing the more immanent characteristics of God in a way that resonates with seekers. In doing so they have both altered, and perhaps saved, Christianity for a population that was beginning to find the religion irrelevant. Historically these types of changes often occur when Christianity encounters a new population. The adaptations the religion has undergone through the interaction of its missionaries and indigenous populations have often led to its continued success.

**Defining a Seeker Sensitive Church**

As more and more people began to look beyond the faith of their parents and explore the type of inner religiosity encouraged by Transcendentalism and New Age movements, American churches found themselves with increasingly unloyal, shrinking congregations. Seeker services have proven to be one of the most successful responses for the church to missionize to those drawn into the seeker mentality. Surprisingly most of these seeker sensitive churches espouse conservative statements of faith and many leaders believe they are solidly within the realm of traditional belief, just put in a non-traditional package. While churches attempt to draw seekers

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into a conservative belief system, seekers are causing the churches to change in ways leaders may not even realize.

Before assessing these alterations, it is important to understand how to define a seeker sensitive church. Leaders at these churches have recognized that many seekers are not involved in any type of institutional religion, and if they are, it is probably not conservative evangelical Protestantism. The goal of the seeker sensitive church is to find a way to appeal to this distinct religious population and attract them to the church. Not surprisingly, seeker sensitive church leaders often use techniques that appeal to aspects of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Some churches opt to have weekend services for seekers, in which the service can be completely tailored to reach seekers, as well as a separate service during the week for committed believers, where the church can more explicitly address its conservative beliefs. Not all churches have the desire or the attendance to create separate services, and in these settings it is necessary to design a service that will appeal to both audiences. What is unusual is the fact that behind these innovative techniques for reaching seekers, there is often a conservative statement of faith.

In contrast to the discussion of “watered-down” gospel and compromised religion, seeker sensitive churches’ statements of faith are often strikingly conservative. In Sargeant’s 1995 survey of churches that were members of the Willow Creek Association, eighty-nine percent of pastors responding indicated that the term “liberal” described their theological and doctrinal preferences “not well at all.” Expanding on this finding, Sargeant says, “On other key issues of evangelical theology, such as the divinity of Christ and the nature of the afterlife, the responses of seeker church pastors were in general theologically Orthodox.” Tenets of faith at seeker sensitive churches include such traditional messages as the infallibility of scripture, the idea of original sin, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Saddleback Valley Community Church lists a heading called “About Eternity” which states:

Man was created to exist forever. He will either exist eternally separated from God by sin, or in union with God through forgiveness and salvation. To be eternally separated from God is Hell. To be eternally in union with him is eternal life. Heaven and Hell are places of eternal existence.  

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65 Sargeant, 20-21
66 “What We Believe,” Saddleback Valley Community Church
While this is a traditional conservative Protestant doctrine which the church clearly states they believe, it is subject matter not likely to come up in a weekend seeker service. God is depicted in a conservative, traditional fashion in the statements of faith at most of these churches. Words like creator and ruler are used to describe God. He exists as the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and offers grace and salvation through Jesus. To disobey God is to sin, to sin is to be separated from God and to be separated from God is to be delivered to Hell. There will be an end time judgment over which God will preside, and those who are not saved will go to Hell. Salvation comes through God’s grace and not through works. There is also mention of man being created in God’s image. In addition, leaders of seeker sensitive churches tend to believe the bible is the ultimate authority.

While the published beliefs of many seeker sensitive churches tend to follow a typical conservative system of belief, the messages do not reflect this orientation. Seeker sensitive church leaders are attempting to function as missionaries of this conservative belief system. In order to be successful, they must adapt traditionally conservative Christianity to resonate with seeker concerns. The extent to which this interaction alters the core beliefs they are attempting to convey may be opaque to church leaders. These pastors believe there will be a judgment presided over by God in a similar way as McDonald’s believes their food is fattening. It may be a part of what they believe, but you won’t see it in their next commercial. Services geared specifically at seekers present less harsh formulations of belief, if any doctrine or theology is espoused at all. Some larger seeker sensitive churches have separate services for believers which are typically held on weeknights. Many of these churches, regardless of size, also have small group programs where a limited number of members get together for religious education or discussion. These inner levels are where the theology and doctrine becomes increasingly conservative, although with stress still on God in a close relationship to the believer. Many participants, however, never make it to these deeper levels of commitment and teaching.

A seeker sensitive church mentality is often conflated with megachurches. While not all megachurches are seeker sensitive, many highly visible ones are, such as Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. These megachurches allow us to see how seeker sensitive techniques function on a large scale, but many smaller churches are also using these same techniques. The Willow Creek Association, for example, is a network of more than 11,000 churches worldwide, representing over 90 denominations, which each contribute around
$250 a year for free or discounted materials from Willow Creek to assist in ministry techniques or to use in their own churches. Although much of the church growth literature has been written by someone associated with a megachurch, its readership is primarily within churches that seek to increase the size of their congregation but not to megachurch proportions. Pastors at smaller scale churches realize their congregations have many of the same complaints the megachurches are effectively addressing. Books such as Robert Schuller’s *Your Church has Real Possibilities* or Rick Warren’s more recent *The Purpose Driven Church*, counsel other church leaders on how to make their churches seeker friendly.

Partly due to consistencies in some of this prescriptive literature, seeker sensitive churches can be identified from a number of other characteristics. Many of these churches begin their seeker ministry by taking what is essentially a market survey of the people they hope to attract. Questions get at why seekers are uninterested in attending church. With the results in, seeker sensitive church leaders attempt to design a style of worship which offers a solution to the concerns expressed in the surveys. No longer are services boring or condemnatory, rather the entertainment quality borders on professional and God is presented as a friend much more than a judge. In some cases the atmosphere is adjusted to reflect a more contemporary, less traditionally religious setting. Religious symbols such as pews, organs, hymn books and crosses might be replaced with comfortable theatre style seats, a band, a projection screen for praise and worship songs, and a blank wall or contemporary art. Different churches adopt these techniques to various degrees, but all successful seeker sensitive churches will reflect adaptations to attract seekers.

**How they are missionaries**

According to Andrew Walls, “It is the basic missionary experience to live on terms set by someone else.” In the case of the seeker sensitive church, leaders became aware of the necessity of approaching seekers on their own terms. A distinct seeker population called for distinct strategies to appeal to that unique situation. Some church leaders explicitly recognized the need to be missionaries. For example, Robert Schuller, the founder of Garden Grove Community Church and self-proclaimed founder of the church growth movement, says,

Those ‘churches’ that are willing to become ‘missions’ will succeed. Churches that are incapable of understanding what it means to become a mission, or are

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68 Walls, 96-97
unwilling to pay the high price of dying as a church and being born again as a mission, will disappear entirely or will perpetuate themselves as fringe elements that are largely ignored.\textsuperscript{69}

Seeker sensitive church leaders wanted to find a way to convey their conservative beliefs to seekers who tend to be very liberal. In order to communicate this message, leaders had to find a way to speak seekers’ language. Robert Fuller has noted, “many mainstream denominations consciously adopt some of the vocabulary of unchurched spiritualities as a way of making their message seem more relevant to contemporary audiences.”\textsuperscript{70} Similar to other missionaries, however, the message is often altered in the translation.

One popular method that seeker sensitive church leaders employ and recommend is doing marketing research in the community. Robert Schuller conducted a research survey prior to opening his church in the 1950’s. By finding out what his audience wanted, he achieved a 1971 church membership of 6,000 and increased that to 8,000 by 1981. In the 1970’s he started the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Church Leadership in order to show others how to achieve the same type of success he had reached. One attendee was Bill Hybels, the future founder of Willow Creek Community Church. Hybels also used the market research strategy prior to opening Willow Creek.

Market research done by these churches tends to focus on why non-churchgoers avoid the church. The information gathered is then used to tailor various aspects of the church to appeal to the group they wish to attract, seekers. This affects various levels of interaction between the churches and seekers. A shift in terminology occurred in which pastors began giving “messages” rather than “sermons” because the negative connotation of “getting preached at” associated with the latter. Other changes were much deeper, cutting into the way the church presented itself, including the content of the “messages.” In \textit{The Purpose Driven Church}, Warren states, “Once you know your target, it will determine many of the components of your seeker service: music, message topics, testimonies, creative arts, and much more.”\textsuperscript{71} Seeker sensitive church leaders perceive these changes as creative presentation techniques, through which they continue to communicate a traditionally conservative message. However, the message which is actually

\textsuperscript{69} Quoted in Pritchard, \textit{Willow Creek Seeker Services}, 55
\textsuperscript{70} Fuller, \textit{Spiritual but Not Religious}, 171
\textsuperscript{71} Warren, \textit{The Purpose Driven Church}, 1995, 253-254
delivered at seeker sensitive services neglects many of the elements of that conservative belief system.

A conservative statement of beliefs is not what is appealing to most seekers. Those seekers willing to venture into seeker sensitive churches are looking for a belief system relevant to their individual lives. As with other religious doctrines, seekers are willing to accept the part of the message which is spiritually useful to them. Seeker sensitive church leaders continue to try to pull seekers into deeper levels of commitment in the church where they are presented with increasingly conservative beliefs. This push and pull is a result of the outreach project being undertaken. Walls says,

The missionary movement arose from the need to live on someone else’s terms, to make Christian affirmations within the constraints of someone else’s language. The missionary movement is the learning experience of Western Christianity. But it is far more, since, in the process of introducing Christian affirmations in other languages, it set them free to move within new systems of thought and discourse.72

Seeker sensitive church leaders feel the need to open their church’s message up to the spiritual vernacular of seekers, which is based in the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. When they open their churches in this way, however, seekers are free to join the discourse forming doctrine and beliefs. Seeker culture brings “new areas of human experience, new accumulations of knowledge, relationship, and activity” which leads to the expansion of the original theology brought by the missionary seeker sensitive churches.73 The church leaders themselves appear to continue to subscribe to those original conservative beliefs because those beliefs remain in the statements of faith of their churches. Messages at seeker sensitive services appear to convey this expanded seeker theology which has emerged through the interaction of seekers with seeker sensitive churches.

Implications of Walls’ Missionary Paradigm

By using Walls’ paradigm we can see how the changes brought about in seeker sensitive churches revitalized religion. According to Walls, “Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into the vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades.”74 For many seekers, conservative Christianity had already withered as an alternative. In order to

72 Walls, 42
73 Walls, 46
74 Walls, 29
address this lack of interest “[s]eeker church leaders design new contemporary forms of worship to mirror the musical and cultural preferences of contemporary society. As a result, seeker services are nontraditional and nonliturgical in almost every way.”

Seeker sensitive churches, in order to make a Christian institution a viable option for seekers, had to speak their language and minister to their way of life.

Seekers already had a concept of the supernatural, an idea in which it was radically immanent. When seeker sensitive missionary church leaders were attempting to find ways to relate to seekers they realized the shared currency of talking about the supernatural or God. Using a shared term with contested definitions produced a shift in the theology presented in the seeker sensitive churches, however. Conservative leaders continue to believe in a God who is not only loving but also holy, awe inspiring, numinous, judge, and king. Seekers, on the other hand, imagine God to be like their best friend, involved in the quotidian, forgiving, loving and immanent. What has happened in seeker sensitive churches is that the God presented at seeker services tends to resemble the deity imagined by the seekers, in which many traditional characteristics of God fade away. Rick Warren advises,

*Select your scripture readings with the unchurched in mind.* While all Scripture is equally inspired by God, it is not all equally applicable to unbelievers. Some passages are clearly more appropriate for seeker services than others. For instance, you probably won’t read David’s prayer in Psalm 58: ‘Break the teeth in their mouths, O God… Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun… The righteous will be glad… when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.’ Save this passage for your own personal quiet time or the local pastors’ breakfast!

Certain depictions of God and heaven are acceptable to church leaders, but unacceptable to seekers. In such a situation, Walls says, “The theological agenda is culturally induced; and the cross-cultural diffusion of Christian faith invariably makes creative theological activity a necessity.” Leaders continue to believe that as seekers move into deeper commitments within the church they will also move into an acceptance of the more conservative statements of faith made by the church. Believers’ services, small group studies, and other events like prayer breakfasts are the venues where theology comes across as increasingly conservative. Seekers,

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75 Sargeant, 55. The use of the term “worship” here may be incorrect. Many pastors are quick to recognize that their seeker services are not worship services because their audience is presumably not in a close relationship with God yet.


77 Walls, 79
however, find the God offered in the seeker sensitive services more immanent and personally relevant, and so form their beliefs around this theology rather than the conservative statements of the church.

The way in which God is experienced also reflects seekers’ emphasis on the immanence of the supernatural, and the importance of personal experience. The self, rather than being a stumbling block to finding God, becomes the primary vehicle for experiencing the divine. According to Kimon Howland Sargeant, who conducted a study of Willow Creek and members of the Willow Creek Association, “[m]any Willow Creek messages indicate that each person, through his or her own psychological makeup, has a window into God’s character. In other words, the human psyche provides a pathway to understanding God.” This perception of how God is experienced by the individual grows out of the influence of the seeker idea of the supernatural being within or in close proximity to oneself. As missionaries, seeker sensitive church leaders used this idea of immanence to facilitate seeker understandings of God.

Not only did seekers bring a new, radically immanent conception of the supernatural to conservative Protestant Christianity, they also brought a set of practices reflective of their need for personally relevant experience. Seekers are open-minded about other faith systems and have often found certain extra-Christian practices useful in facilitating personal interaction with the immanent supernatural. Ideas about healing and meditation are particularly prevalent. Seeker sensitive churches tapped into this reservoir of ideas and practices in ways that “Christianized” healing and meditation. Incorporating these elements, however, reflects an increasing openness to the usefulness of extra-Christian ideas and practices in a Christian setting. Catherine Albanese, in her study of American metaphysical religion, notes, “[m]editation became a property that even mainstream churches promoted.” Some churches offer scriptural passages for daily mediation and some have retreats to facilitate a meditative atmosphere. Additionally, the success of healing ministries reflects seeker interest in the healing potential of religion. Saddleback Church offers thirteen “relational support groups” and eighteen “medical support groups.” The range of people addressed in church counseling groups also reflects the open-mindedness seekers require of seeker sensitive churches. Saddleback has a group for “families with incarcerated loved ones,”

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78 Sargeant, 86
79 Albanese, 513
“living with HIV/AIDS”, and a “post-abortion support group.” There are also eighteen “open share groups” including “chemically addicted,” “sexual addiction,” and “same sex attraction.” Seeker sensitive churches have to be open to all seekers, regardless of their lifestyle, and provide something for them. These support groups are one way seekers sensitive churches implement their much larger strategy of meeting “felt-needs.”

Walls recognizes that traditional “[m]issionaries often had to acknowledge that they were welcomed or tolerated for reasons other than the one that brought them, that of preaching and the gospel.” Seeker sensitive churches are also aware that they can appeal to seekers more effectively by addressing their “felt-needs” than by just delivering Christian messages. Many of these churches include amenities such as sports and fitness facilities, entertainment events such as movie showings, and sometimes coffee or book shops. Some larger churches are billed as seven-day-a-week churches because there is always something going on. These extra-religious purposes of the church appeal to today’s seekers who are embedded in a consumer culture and appreciate the added value these amenities give the church. In order to keep seekers coming back, seeker sensitive church leaders want to make seekers perceive the church as valuable in their lives and as inviting. A strategy frequently used to make seekers comfortable is to reduce or eliminate the religious imagery within the church. Seeker sensitive churches tend to be modeled on institutions seekers themselves are deeply involved in such as a business office, a theatre, a shopping mall or another secular setting. None of these functional changes are opposed to conservative statements of faith. However, seeker sensitive churches function with a focus on seekers whereas more traditional conservative churches would likely identify themselves as functioning with a focus on God. This is not to say that seeker sensitive churches perceive themselves as not also serving God; seeker sensitive church leaders would certainly claim that is their purpose. This is fulfilled more through reaching seekers, however, and less through a focus on worship.

Pastors of seeker sensitive churches are often quick to acknowledge that their seeker services are not worship services at all. Hybels, for instance, notes that worship services are “designed all the way through for someone who has a long back ground in church involvement,

80 Data from “Support Groups.” http://www.saddlebackfamily.com/home/careprayerhelp/support_groups/
who understands the lingo, who has all the prerequisite knowledge.\textsuperscript{82} Worship is not the language of seekers in this assessment. In order to find a way to effectively communicate with seekers, messages are designed to address felt needs in a similar way as building facilities meet felt needs. Mark Mittelberg, an evangelicalism director at Willow Creek, says, “we have to learn to be relevant and give messages that are applicable to the people that we’re reaching. In other words, they have to relate to their daily life, their relationships, their families, their workplace.”\textsuperscript{83} It is the missionary’s responsibility to find a way to reach his or her audience and for seekers that way is through making Christianity relevant to their personal lives in both quotidian and sweeping ways. Messages in seeker sensitive churches are often based on material drawn from member emails, daily life, or popular culture. They include minimal scriptural references and offer a simple, immanent theology. While leaders at these churches intend to draw seekers into deeper levels of commitment, at which point worship services would be possible, they have really just redefined worship for many seekers. For these seekers, worship happens through having a close personal relationship with God and perhaps through singing the simple praise and worship songs popular at seeker sensitive churches. This new conception of worship comes out of the interaction between seekers and seeker sensitive services which are based on felt needs.

Many of these developments towards a new strain of seeker Christianity have been criticized by conservative Protestants who are not seeker sensitive. They believe that a radically immanent, loving deity, without the additional hallmarks of holiness, numinousness, and power, is a misrepresentation of Christian beliefs. The new style of worship is called “watered-down” or commodified. These harsh assessments can be countered, however, when we remember that these churches are approaching seekers as missionaries. Walls says,

\begin{quote}
If the acts of cultural translation by which the Christians of any community make their faith substantial within that community cease – if (if one may use such language) the Word ceases to be made flesh within that community – the Christian group within that community is likely to lose not just its effectiveness, but its powers of resistance. Most cultures are in frequent change or encounter with others, so the process of translation is endless.\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}

Seeker sensitive church leaders recognized that they needed to take their conservative Protestantism and translate it in a way that seekers could understand. This involved presenting it

\textsuperscript{82} Quoted in Pritchard, 27
\textsuperscript{83} Quoted in Pritchard, 138
\textsuperscript{84} Walls, 13
as personally relevant, immanent, and open-minded. The transformations which have occurred are not a lessening of Christianity but rather a new translation of Christianity which makes it viable once again among seekers. Walls suggests that this represents “the expansion of the Christian faith by its interaction with different cultures and even languages, so that by cross-cultural diffusion it becomes a progressively richer entity.”

Seeker Christianity is not only useful to seekers, it may contain elements that offer a corrective or addition to other Christian belief systems.

**The Missionaries Themselves**

Seeker sensitive church leaders did not set out to produce a new strain of Christianity and most do not believe that they have done such a thing. Most leaders subscribe to conservative beliefs which are espoused in their churches’ statements of faith. These leaders recognize that they are appropriating elements of seeker culture and translating their Christian message into terms that have resonance among seekers. The message, despite undergoing this translation process, is believed to be the same conservative message offered in the statements of faith. Bill Hybels lines his church up with other, non-seeker sensitive Evangelical churches saying, “We are like many other churches when it comes to our purpose. Almost every Bible-believing, Christ-honoring church believes in a biblical purpose… a church that is exalting, edifying, evangelistic, and [involved in] social action.” It is the seeker sensitive presentation strategy which distinguishes them from other conservative churches. Hybels continues, “We are very different when it comes to the strategy of how we achieve those purposes. That is where Willow Creek is unique.” Leaders then are likely to believe that they are promoting a traditional message in a seeker friendly package.

The personal beliefs of these missionary leaders are more difficult to assess. Leaders maintain that their churches continue to hold to conservative belief systems, perhaps partially as a defense to accusations of selling out. The beliefs of individual leaders likely line up with their church’s statement of faith, but without interviews, diaries, or auto-biographical accounts there is little evidence to make claims concerning these leaders’ beliefs. Even if such sources were available, it is unlikely that seeker sensitive church leaders would perceive a significant change in their belief system as a result of their interaction with seekers.

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85 Walls, 9-10
86 Quoted in Pritchard, 23
As the original conservative missionaries continue their work in seeker sensitive churches, new churches will grow out of these congregations. It is possible that as indigenous seekers who spiritually matured in seeker sensitive churches strike out to lead churches of their own, these new churches may reflect less of the conservative belief system of the original missionaries. Someone like Bill Hybels, who was raised in a Calvinistic church that stressed transcendence, obedience, and future judgment, is trying to bridge the cultural divide between himself and seekers. He has to find a way to translate his conservative faith into a message seekers can understand. Seeker sensitive messages, in this translation effort, do not reflect all the points of the leaders’ conservative faith. The seekers who become involved are spiritually “raised” in church services that emphasize individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness, and downplay some of the more conservative beliefs originally held by the leaders. When these seekers set out as missionaries to their own population they are taking a message that reflects the ways in which the original missionaries interacted with and utilized themes of seeker culture in their own message.

**Missionary Targets**

At the most basic level seeker sensitive church leaders want to reach the unchurched. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church says, unchurched “doesn’t refer to only people who have never been inside a church. It also includes those who have a church background but no personal relationship to Christ, and those who haven’t been to church for some time, usually years.”

More specifically these church leaders are trying to reach seekers who are uninterested in or disillusioned with traditional church services. The information found through taking surveys of local community members who say they do not attend church provides a picture of the typical unchurched seeker to whom the church leaders are trying to appeal. For churches without the resources or desire to undertake such a study, numerous church growth publications offer insight concerning who seekers are and how to engage them. This picture of “unchurched Harry and Mary” helps seeker sensitive church leaders envision the population they are trying to reach.

The survey undertaken in 1975 to help shape Willow Creek Community Church uncovered several complaints seekers continue to lodge against traditional conservative

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88 Generic names are sometimes given to the prototypical unchurched seeker. “Unchurched Harry and Mary” are the names used at Willow Creek Community Church.
Protestant churches. The most prevalent complaint was that traditional churches asked for money too often. Other issues had to do with being unable to relate to either the music or messages, feeling that one’s needs went unfulfilled, or sensing the service was predictable, boring, or guilt-inducing. In other words, seekers felt traditional Protestant churches did not fulfill their personal need for relevancy or direct, immanent experience. These responses led church leaders to identify a cultural divide between themselves and seekers. Mittelberg notes,

Our message here, or a big part of it, is that we as a church need to close that cultural chasm ourselves so that we can move over to them culturally and bring them the message of the gospel. . . .[Missionaries] need to study the language of the people they’re going to, and they need to study the culture of the people they’re trying to reach. And yet, we often, naively, assume that we don’t have to do the same thing.

This divide has been bridged by seeker sensitive church leaders through a plethora of strategies. In order to address the complaints of seekers, church leaders found ways to make their church’s appearance and their message resonate with the seeker traits of personal relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness.

**The Appeal to Individual Relevance**

As seeker sensitive church surveys have made clear, churches must be personally relevant to seekers if church leaders want to be effective missionaries. Nancy Beach, the executive vice-president of programming and production for the Willow Creek Association, warns, “you have to get his [a seeker’s] attention in the first few minutes or you’ve lost him. Because his life is on such a pace and he is so absorbed with other things, unless we are relevant …we are going to lose him.” The need for individual relevance runs much deeper than the fast pace of life or interest in things other than church, though. Not only do seeker sensitive churches have to catch a seeker’s attention, seekers have to become convinced that the religion offered there is pertinent to their individual lives. This call to be relevant is answered in the seeker sensitive church in a number of ways. From non-theological dramas to personally driven messages, these church leaders are attempting to identify with seekers and show how the churches offer strategies to seekers for their individual situations.

89 These survey results are presented in Pritchard, Willow Creek Seeker Services, 55.
90 Quoted in Pritchard, 122-123
91 Quoted in Pritchard, 101
One very clear way seeker sensitive services can demonstrate their pertinence to seekers is by including a dramatic element such as a brief skit to help open up the meaning of the message in an entertaining way. The topics addressed in these dramas tend to center around an every-day event or problem such as relationships with relatives or co-workers. These are events in which almost any seeker could see themselves engaged. For example, “War and Peace,” a drama written and distributed by Willow Creek, deals with how frustrating it can be to approach a friend about their disruptive children.\(^92\) These pieces tend to be free of any theology and serve to help the religious seeker identify with the message about to be presented in the service. The seeker identifies with the characters in the drama. When the message reveals an insight concerning the dilemma in the drama, seekers more readily see how the church’s message serves a utilitarian purpose in their life, making it relevant to them. The productions are also professional and often humorous, adding to their entertainment value which keeps the audience engaged in the service.

Even the messages in seeker sensitive services tend to focus more on practical, everyday concerns than on traditional religious teachings. The use of personal anecdotes is extensive. One study conducted in 1989-1990 found the weekend messages at Willow Creek included the word “I” over 6000 times to create intimacy, but scriptural passages were used a mere 169 times.\(^93\) It is estimated that 75% of megachurch sermons recall a firsthand experience of the pastor.\(^94\) This is a move to create relevancy for the attendees and minimize the weight which bible passages would give to the service. The goal is to help people see how God interacts with them in their everyday lives and illustrate the type of practical assistance he can offer. It is not only important that the attendees relate to the message, though; it also needs to hold their attention. Part of the effectiveness of the pastor sharing personal stories is that they are often humorous or evoke a strong emotional response.

The material used in a message often comes directly from the stuff of everyday life. Gary Pritchard, who conducted an intensive study on Willow Creek’s seeker services, observed, Willow Creek’s staff makes sermonizing decisions on the seeming whims of the marketplace. In doing so, doctrine is not handed down from Above, either from

\(^{92}\) Sherbondy, “War and Peace,” Willow Creek Community Church, 1995

\(^{93}\) Study by Gregory Pritchard, cited in Twitchell, *Branded Nation*, 2004, 95

\(^{94}\) Study by Scott Thumma, “Megachurch Today: Summary of Data from Faith Communities Today Project.” No such estimate is available for seeker sensitive services but since many seeker services are based on advice taken from megachurches it is possible that the percentage is comparable.
heaven or from any bishop. Religious programmers simply analyze what the consumer needs and likes. For instance, Hybels asks his staff to copy the styles of secular entertainment, and at the beginning of the week they check the incoming e-mail and often spin a service around the concerns expressed in it.\textsuperscript{95}

This tactic of deriving a message from e-mails is regularly and explicitly used in the devotional material as well. These secular-style messages are relevant because they draw from the situations of real, everyday life. They rarely include any threatening or intimidating language. It is also rare to find complex doctrine.\textsuperscript{96} Fear or a sense of disconnectedness with the message would undermine these churches’ attempts to establish their relevancy to seekers and defeat their missionary aims.

Seeker sensitive churches also try to demonstrate their relevance to seekers by connecting seekers with similar interests or in similar situations with one another. Small groups become crucial for the church to maintain its relevant relationship with seekers. The individual needs to feel important in a way a large congregation has trouble providing. Even in smaller congregations, small groups are important for a sense of intimacy and trust. In these groups, seekers form strong and intimate friendships which are connected to the church through the small group. The close relationship among members reflects the close relationship seekers feel with the supernatural. This means that the God portrayed at seeker sensitive churches needs to be caring, loving and forgiving, a God who will assist them in their everyday trials such as family relationships, financial difficulties, and routine activities like working and driving. This is not a far away, transcendent deity; he is as close and involved as a best friend or spouse.

\textbf{The Appeal to Immanence}

The closeness of the God presented in seeker services appeals to seekers’ sense of the immanence of the supernatural. Pritchard observes that at seeker sensitive services the “explanation of God’s nature emphasizes God’s love and desire to be involved in people’s lives. They argue that human fulfillment comes only as individuals respond to and build a relationship with God.”\textsuperscript{97} This is an experience that attendees can identify with as paralleling to their own human relationships, so this tactic serves to make God real. One observer notes that during a

\textsuperscript{95} Twitchell, \textit{Branded Nation}, 2004, 95
\textsuperscript{96} Twitchell, \textit{Branded Nation}, 2004, 94
\textsuperscript{97} Pritchard, \textit{Willow Creek Seeker Services}, 1996, 23
church’s service “many individuals said they felt ‘the presence of God,’ meaning that they encountered a deity who was approachable, familiar, and palpable.”

The modern seeker is interested in God and redemption, but less keen on concepts such as judgment and Hell. Seeker sensitive church pastors have responded. One of the least preached on topics is end times and judgment. The God they talk about is an immanent, not transcendent, God with whom the believer can have an intimate, direct relationship. This is a distinct shift from the sovereign, far-off, awe inspiring God of more traditional churches and of many seeker sensitive churches’ statements of faith. Hybels says, “Willow Creek is about God. We really believe in him. Not as a remote deity who is unconcerned, but a God who is alive, powerful, and concerned and eager to intervene in lives like our lives. Willow Creek is about God.” Thus seeker sensitive services bring God into the world in a very active and concerned way and into an intimate relationship with the believer.

Seeker sensitive churches turn to contemporary Christian music and praise and worship songs to fill the musical slots in their program. Warren advises that “unbelievers usually prefer celebrative music over contemplative music because they don’t yet have a relationship with Christ.” According to Loveland and Wheeler, in *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, “The songs emphasized ‘the emotion and experience of spirituality’ rather than theological doctrine. Rather than being written about God, they were addressed to him, using second-person instead of third-person pronouns.” The lyrics often attempt to persuade people to engage in a close, individual relationship with God. These typically simple songs appeal to seekers because they paint a picture of a deity who is open to personal needs and desires rather than depicting a harsh, judgmental or transcendent God. The songs used in services portray a loving, immanent God who desires a personal relationship with each member of the congregation. By setting these songs to catchy tunes and making the words repetitive and easy to remember, an attendee will feel more comfortable singing these songs at a subsequent service or even humming them at the grocery store.

Rick Warren began Saddleback in his California home in 1980. Today he preaches to approximately 22,000 people every weekend. He is perhaps even more widely known for his

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98 Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 2003, 240 and 257
99 Quoted in Pritchard, 22
100 Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 1995, 287 and 289
recent book *The Purpose Driven Life* which has become the fastest selling non-fiction book ever, selling over 23 million copies.\(^{102}\) On the website designed for that book and the others which followed it, free daily devotionals are available and archived.\(^{103}\) The following discussion stems primarily from a review of the devotions posted on that site for August and September 2005. Subsequent devotions distributed from their website via email have been reviewed but not submitted to a content analysis.

By evaluating references to God in the devotionals several attributes appear to be prevalent.\(^{104}\) The aspect of God stressed most frequently is his relationship with people and his involvement in their lives. Also central is God as purpose giver, as father, as savior, calling people to service, and assisting evangelical efforts. Several devotionals are absent of any reference to God, focusing instead on personal issues relevant to reader’s lives. There is mention of God as judge, as mysterious/unknowable and as sovereign, but these aspects appear significantly less than the softer, more interactive elements. Some devotionals talk about God being in Heaven, but more often he is located on earth or in human hearts as a force on Earth. Overall these daily devotionals seem to emphasize God’s close interaction with people and the assistance he offers them. John Fischer, the senior writer for “Purpose Driven Life Daily Devotionals,” explains the strategy of relevance leading to a sense of immanence saying,

> It is with serious intent that I intrude upon our devotional moments in these missives with things such as coffee, the Da Vinci Code, jogging, iPods, Bonnie Raitt, and Dodger dogs. There is a method to this madness – to splash a little profane around the sacred so that the opposite might happen when we leave this devotional reflection to the end that the sacred might invade our profane existence and open our eyes to God in the world.

By relating God to the everyday activities of seekers, the author draws on seeker’s need to experience the closeness of the supernatural.

The dominant stance of seeker sensitive church messages is that God is immanent and active. While the published beliefs of the church may include more transcendent, powerful aspects of God’s nature, the God seekers come to know at these churches is more like a close friend. He is depicted as being present throughout the daily activities of people and he is not only

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\(^{102}\) Selling God A Lucrative Business, CBS News, June, 28, 2005

\(^{103}\) The website can be found at www.purposedrivenlife.com

\(^{104}\) I chose to exclude references to “Christ” or “Jesus” and only treat references to “God” or “Lord”
present but also working to improve those people’s lives. One reporter summed up a Willow Creek message saying,

The distant God isn’t all that far away. He’s not the presiding official in a court of law tallying wrongdoings and weighing them against the works of wonder. He’s waiting for you in the stands of the soccer field, between the racks of clothes at Field Days, or in the boardroom. He wants to be your friend, and if you let him, it will change your life.  

This impression tells us that attendees of such services are offered a relationship with a God who is concerned with the most mundane details of their life. Deemphasizing God’s role as divine judge and placing him in the role of transforming friend also serves to make seeker sensitive churches more open-minded about the people and practices they accept into their worldview.

The Appeal to Open-Mindedness

Seeker sensitive church leaders expect their audience to be skeptical of religious doctrine, particularly any aspects that are disorienting, difficult, or distant. God’s role as transcendent judge is one of these aspects and is therefore downplayed. Other conservative doctrines also fit under this heading and do not appear frequently in messages or devotional material offered through these churches. As some of these doctrines fade, seeker sensitive churches increasingly appear open-minded about views taken from the secular world or other religious systems. As discussed above, these churches have incorporated and “Christianized” practices such as meditation and healing. They have also adopted business models for running their churches and find useful insights in marketing techniques. This open-mindedness appeals to seekers who tend to perceive conservative Christian churches as close-minded.

One technique used to make seeker sensitive churches appear open-minded to seekers is foregoing a denominational affiliation or only loosely affiliating with a denomination. According to Sargeant, “[w]hen all seeker churches (denominational and nondenominational) are taken together, more than half (57 percent) appear to be nondenominational to visitors.” Some pastors believe adding a denominational marker to their name will scare potential visitors away. Congregations can be made up of people from a wide variety of religious backgrounds who all appreciate the new approach to church. This lends an air of open-mindedness to the church. Remaining non-denominational also has the added benefit of freeing the church from doctrinal

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105 Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 2003, 257
106 Sargeant, 28
and financial ties. This allows the church to budget their money how they see fit and gives the pastor freedom in his theology and teaching. This freedom is important because each church community is located in a different cultural landscape and in order to be most effective must have to ability to adjust within its environment. Not all churches have abandoned denominational affiliation, however, and seeker sensitive churches seem to be present in a plethora of Protestant denominations.

Seeker sensitive church leaders also try to make seekers feel more comfortable by designing their church environment to mimic secular places with which seekers are familiar. In light of survey responses at Bill Hybel’s Willow Creek Community Church, for example, all religious symbols were omitted from the churches décor, there is no alter call at the weekend seeker services, and visitors are allowed to remain anonymous and are asked not to participate in the collection. As a rule, seeker service messages are brief, friendly and theologically light. Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church, says, “I’m not there to teach them doctrine necessarily, but to let them know that God is a good God, and has a plan for their lives.” This message of God’s immanence and goodness does seem to transcend denominational boundaries, which appeals to the open-mindedness seekers value so highly.

The Economic Critique

Since seekers are embedded in the American marketplace and seeker sensitive church leaders are attempting to be missionaries to seekers, it is only logical that these churches would reflect aspects of the marketplace. Running day to day operations on a business model appears more efficient than other forms of church administration. Gearing series around popular movies, websites or products attracts seekers to services. Using personal illustrations helps them connect to the message pastors are giving. At first glance then, seeker sensitive churches appear to be molded primarily by the marketplace. If seekers want to hear about MySpace, then that is what seeker sensitive churches will talk about. Critics are quick to accuse these churches of being inauthentic, “watered down,” or pale versions of true Christianity.

Willow Creek employs a Stanford MBA to manage the day-to-day affairs of the church and a Harvard MBA runs the Willow Creek Association. Their full staff includes 260 full time

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107 Joel Osteen in “Meet the Prosperity Preacher” BusinessWeek Online, May 23, 2005
According to James B. Twitchell in *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*,

> If religion were a company, it would be number five on the Fortune 500, its fifty billion dollars of revenues putting it behind IBM and just ahead of GE. Church land and buildings are worth uncounted billions. And the figures don’t include volunteer work, worth an impressive seventy-five billion dollars a year.  

Evangelicals today face countless issues that affect the size of their membership and thus their continued viability. Continual population shifts, political issues and the decreased loyalty of current and potential members force churches to strategize or risk closure. Twitchell notes, “although the market for religion hasn’t shrunk, market share is changing all the time. Both growing and declining churches face unprecedented market challenges. Hence, words familiar from boardrooms – market research, customer satisfaction, takeaway value, positioning, asset management, brand equity – resound in pastoral and diocesan offices.” This type of critique acknowledges that seeker sensitive churches have adopted business techniques for running the church and for attracting seekers. Unfortunately it places the church’s sole motive in staying open, not in remaining relevant to its audience.

Warren replies to charges such as these saying that “beginning a message with people’s felt needs is more than a marketing tool! It is based on the theological fact that God chooses to reveal himself to man according to our needs!” Seekers were growing further and further from institutional Christianity. Seeker sensitive church leaders discovered that in order to reach this group they needed to find a way to speak in terms seekers could understand. The most effective way for doing this was found both in adopting techniques pioneered in the business world and by then using those techniques to minister to the seeker concerns of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness.

**Benefits of Using Walls’ Missionary Paradigm**

When viewed outside Walls’ paradigm, seeker sensitive churches seem to have fallen prey to the concern that,

> Once doing church becomes like doing shopping or doing lunch (or even doing drugs), the inevitable contradiction appears. The consumer is allowed to become passive while the retailer is active, and the hard sell, the guilt-and-shame sell,

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108 Twitchell, Branded Nation, 98
109 Twitchell, 56
110 Twitchell, Branded Nation, 2004, 59
111 Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 295
becomes the soft-sell, the feel-good sell. Brands and brand stories replace content based material.”

The charge is that wherever the market goes, seeker sensitive churches will follow, no matter how secular. In reality, these church leaders are consciously utilizing the various aspects of seeker culture, such as consumer trends and the importance of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness, to convey the Christian message to this group.


Since the time of Toqueville, observers have noted that Americans espouse a this-worldly, secular-style religiosity adaptable to the practicalities of everyday life. …Popular Evangelical styles continue to be driven by pressures of accommodation, and especially so within the Boomer culture. Despite resistance to the erosion of an older religious world, the drift over time, and still today, is in the direction of enhanced choices for individuals and toward a deeply personal, subjective understanding of faith and well-being.

The missionary paradigm drive is not toward accommodation, however, it is towards remaining relevant to seeker culture by speaking on their terms. Seeker sensitive church leaders continue to express their conservative beliefs in their churches’ statements of faith. They have not accommodated these beliefs to meld with the demands of the market. However, the messages offered at seeker sensitive services typically exclude elements of conservative belief with which seekers cannot easily connect. As with any missionary enterprise, when Christianity enters into the vernacular culture it must be understood in terms already familiar to that culture. Seeker sensitive churches are not swaying with the demands of the market, they are acknowledging which aspects of the market appeal to seekers and then “Christianizing” those very same aspects in order to make their religious message salient to seekers.

It is also important to remember that, as missionaries, seeker sensitive churches have more than just economic motivations for entering into seeker culture. Traditional secular businesses take market research surveys in order to know what customers want so they can sell more products. These businesses follow fads and trends for solely economic reasons. Seeker sensitive churches, on the other hand, use similar techniques to discover what appeals to seekers so the churches can effectively transmit what they believe is the redeeming gospel of Protestant

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112 Twitchell, *Branded Nation*, 2004, 72
113 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 127
Christianity. As missionaries they are using aspects of the vernacular culture in order to communicate Christianity in a way seekers can relate to and understand. While it is impossible to measure true motivations or to say to what extent missionary or economic motives shape these churches, it is possible to examine what church leaders claim to be doing. Warren explains, “While it is fine for a business to be market driven (give the customer whatever he wants), a church has a higher calling. The church should be seeker sensitive but it should not be seeker driven.” Their stated religious motives imply that they do not want to exploit seekers and seeker culture for their own profit or success, rather they believe they are saving seekers souls. This desire to rescue lost seekers does mean moving into seeker culture and living on seeker terms, but not “selling out.”

Mark Noll, a professor at Wheaton College, says, “There’s always a danger when Christian gospel is shaped to appeal to the dominate forms in a culture….So I do see the potential for real problems in the watering-down of the gospel, and I also see a real possibility in the creative adaptation of a historic method to contemporary circumstances.” It would be possible for a seeker sensitive church to lose their message in the seeker culture, but that is not what appears to be happening in most seeker sensitive churches. The conservative beliefs held by many seeker sensitive church leaders seem to fade in seeker sensitive services, but the message presented does fit within Protestant Christianity. Translating Christianity into the language of the target population has allowed seeker sensitive churches to make inroads where other churches were unsuccessful. The resulting interaction between the seeker sensitive churches and seekers has resulted in a new strain of Christianity, reflective of seeker concerns. This process of adaptation and evolution has gone on throughout Christian missionary history and often leads to the continued success of the religion.

Implications

Although many critics claim seeker sensitive churches have sold out to seeker culture, Walls’ missionary paradigm allows a new perspective on this interaction. Walls says, “[t]he original missionary aim was never abandoned; but in the process of fulfilling that aim new dimensions of the task were recognized, dimensions not visible at the beginning.”

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114 Warren, 80, emphasis in original
116 Walls, 242
many of these churches make the decision to shift their focus to being seeker sensitive they are unaware of the implications of opening up their message to seekers. Church leaders turn to surveys or church growth literature to learn what it is that seekers want in a church. In attempting to provide that most effectively, these seeker sensitive churches adopt useful aspects of seeker culture to aid in the transmission of their message. By adopting attributes of seeker culture the churches have produced a reformed type of Christianity which appeals to the seeker values of individual relevance, immanence and open-mindedness. It is not necessary to bill this shift in negative terms, however. Seeker sensitive churches have revitalized Christianity as a religious option for many Americans.

As these seeker sensitive church leaders continue their missionary outreach it is likely that indigenous-led offspring churches will appear. According to Sargeant’s study, newer seeker churches are more likely to be non-denominational, to offer separate seeker and member services, and to opt to downplay religious imagery in their buildings. These trends reflect the strong seeker preferences toward stressing individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. As seekers are taking ownership of this new strain of seeker Christianity it will likely reflect even stronger influences from seeker culture. It will be interesting to see if in the future these indigenous, seeker-led congregations abandon the conservative statements of belief of their parent missionary seeker sensitive churches. One example of this may be the Emergent Church which has no central authoritative body and resists putting forward universal statements of belief. Walls uses the phrase “Postmissionary Christianity” to discuss the phenomenon of indigenous populations taking leadership of the church planted by missionaries.\(^{117}\) If seeker sensitive churches have succeeded as missionaries, then postmissionary seeker Christianity may flourish and provide innovations which allow Christianity to thrive in America in places where conservative Protestantism would have failed. This is not the success conservative leaders may have initially imagined since postmissionary Christianity will most likely continue to neglect the conservative beliefs which did not come across strongly in seeker sensitive church services. As with many missionary enterprises, the success of the seeker sensitive church lies in the new strain of seeker Christianity emerging from them, which may revitalize the religion in America.

\(^{117}\) Walls, 132
CONCLUSION

There is no sequel available to Sheila Larson’s story. Robert Bellah reports one intriguing interview and the young nurse slips back into the seeker culture from which she came. Her comments give us insight into that seeker culture though. Sheila reports that she cannot recall the last time she attended church. It seems to have become irrelevant to the personal religiosity she has constructed. She does believe in God, though: specifically a God who she feels very in touch with and who encourages people to care of one another. While it would be interesting to know if seeker sensitive churches ever appealed to her, it is more important to know that they reach out to hundreds of thousands of seekers just like her.

Seekers are not an easy group to draw generalizations about, however. As a population who values the individual and sees religion as a combinative venture, seekers defy easy definitions. Despite this diversity, several overarching key traits do characterize seeker spirituality. Due to the importance seekers place on the individual and individual consciousness, a core element of their religiosity is that it is personally relevant to their individual situation. One way of feeling this personal relevancy is through an encounter with the supernatural which is radically immanent. The contents of a seeker’s belief system are drawn from whatever traditions they find the most relevant and the most conducive of the immanent supernatural. This willingness to adopt elements from various sources reflects the open-mindedness seekers feel toward other religious traditions. Not only do they tolerate other belief systems, seekers believe they may have something to learn from those systems. These characteristics of the importance of individual relevancy, immanence, and open-mindedness, define seekers as a distinct group on America’s religious landscape.

There are, of course, contextual factors which help to describe a religious group at any particular historical moment. Today seekers are found across socio-economic and political groups. However, the majority tend to be white, college-educated, middle class and liberal. They are also deeply embedded in the larger American culture which includes the marketplace. All these factors influence seeker religiosity, but conform to the core factors of individual relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness.

The roots of this group lie far deeper than the seekers who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1841, Transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “No facts are to me
sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no past at my back.” He and his fellow Transcendentalists exemplified the three traits which characterize seekers. This historical lineage demonstrates the persistence of seekers as a religious group. Prior scholarly assessments of seekers that focus primarily or solely on baby boomers could expand and correct their conclusions by taking the longer history of seeker religiosity into account.

Seeker sensitive church leaders recognized this “unchurched” population and the difficulties traditional conservative Protestant leaders were having making inroads with seekers. These seeker sensitive leaders believe that they are adhering to the same belief system as more traditionally conservative congregations. They see their missionary project as one of repackaging a traditional conservative belief system in such a way that seekers can connect with it. By taking surveys of seekers asking what kept them away from church, seeker sensitive church leaders were able to find ways to tap into seeker culture and address their “felt needs.” This process of learning the vernacular culture of the population and then translating the Christian message into terms that population could understand is precisely what missionaries have been doing for centuries.

One language which resonates with seekers draws on their historical contextual situatedness. Seekers are immersed in a market culture and are familiar with the secular institutions where they work and shop. They are also interested in current cultural phenomena such as popular websites, podcasts, current events, and other such popular culture entries. Seeker sensitive church leaders, as missionaries, try to find ways to use this seeker culture to package their message. They offer products which promote their message such as books, devotionals, and audio products. Their churches are often designed with an eye to locations where seekers feel comfortable, perhaps a corporate office or a shopping mall. Even the messages given at seeker sensitive churches connect with seeker culture in some way. The messages are then offered as podcasts. These techniques are used by seeker sensitive church leaders in order to translate their beliefs into something with which seekers can connect.

More importantly, seeker sensitive church leaders try to find ways to appeal to the three primary characteristics of seekers. Seeker sensitive services include dramas, personal illustrations and song lyrics which help seekers draw connections between the leader’s message

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and their own lives. Small groups also foster this sense of personal relevancy. The presentation of God at these services and in these song lyrics resonates with seekers because the radically immanent terms used to describe God. Here God is described as being in a relationship with the seeker, caring for even the most quotidian details of the seeker’s life, and as being apprehendable through the human psyche. Other techniques for experiencing God in the seeker sensitive church have been adopted from extra-Christian sources, practices like meditation and healing. This open-mindedness is reflected in the types of individuals welcomed into the church as well. Seeker sensitive church leaders used the importance of individual experience, immanence, and open-mindedness to translate their beliefs into a message seekers could understand and find relevant.

More conservative beliefs of seeker sensitive church leaders, which appear in their churches statements of faith, were not as easy to translate into seeker friendly terms. The missionary leaders have not abandoned these beliefs, but deemphasize them in seeker sensitive services. They hope that seekers will move into more committed levels within the church where the more conservative beliefs play a larger role, although still in the context of personal relevance, immanence, and open-mindedness. Many seekers do not move into those deeper commitments and those who do have already imbibed the theology presented at the seeker sensitive services. The Christianity these seekers come away with is a new strain of the religion which is characterized by the three primary traits of seekers. This is a typical experience of missionaries. Translations produce new forms of Christianity, forms unintended by the missionaries.

The new seeker Christianity, which is emerging from the interaction of seekers and seeker sensitive churches, is often lamented by commentators. Seeker sensitive church leaders did not intend this effect and may not recognize that this new strain of Christianity is coming out of their translation of conservative Christianity to seeker culture. Much like other missionary encounters, however, this seeker Christianity makes the religion viable for a population who had moved away from it. In addition to seekers, more mainline churches may find their message revitalized by appropriating elements of seeker Christianity.

As seekers who made up the indigenous population of the first generation of seeker sensitive churches begin to take on leadership positions in those or other churches, the conservative beliefs which appear in statements of faith may begin to disappear. Missionary
seeker sensitive church leaders often continued to present conservative beliefs in their churches’ statements of faith, but did not present them strongly in seeker sensitive services because those beliefs did not have currency with the seekers they hoped to reach. Seekers who came to spiritual maturity in those services have combined the church’s message with their own beliefs to produce a new strain of seeker Christianity. As some of these seekers become church leaders, they take this seeker Christianity with them and are not committed to conservative beliefs in the way the original missionaries had been. Postmissionary seeker Christianity, then, no longer needs to translate its message to seekers; they are already speaking the same language.

Seeker sensitive churches are still a relatively new phenomena in American Christianity. The interaction between traditional, conservative Protestants who struck out as missionaries to seekers and the seeker culture they had to negotiate, is on-going even today. Post-missionary seeker church leaders are just beginning to emerge and take on roles in the new seeker Christianity. It is premature to speculate about the effect seeker Christianity will have on the larger parent body of conservative Protestant Christianity. However, if we can generalize from Walls’ account of missionary encounters, seeker Christianity may be the next chapter in American Christianity.
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