

**Singularity:
The Death of Religion and the Resurrection of Faith
By the Rev. Kenneth W. Howard
M.Div., M.Ed.**

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Précis

The epic 2014 science fiction movie *Interstellar* tells the tale of a global civilization in decline, unaware that life on earth is dying, and a crew of astronaut-explorers who travel through a wormhole in search of a new home for humanity, acutely aware that the future of the entire human race rides with them on their journey.

In this paper, the author argues from worldwide demographic data that institutional Christianity is at a similar crossroads today. Comparing the skyrocketing fragmentation rate of denominations and worship centers (individual worship sites) to the steady but slower rise in the Christian population as a whole, he reveals a differential that is driving an equally drastic decline in the size of denominations and worship centers toward numbers not seen in centuries. He calls this phenomenon a **Religion Singularity**, arguing that the trend should not be considered speculation but established fact. He then turns to those questions subject to speculation: Will these trends continue indefinitely or taper off? What will be their impact on the Church? How can faith communities survive and thrive amid the change and uncertainty these trends will generate?

Biographical Statement

The Rev. Ken Howard is an author, speaker, pastor, and church futurist. He has led and/or consulted with church startups, restarts, and redevelopments; led workshops, retreats, and working conferences for lay and ordained church leadership; and presented at national church and non-church conferences. Early in 2014, he was invited to speak at the 2014 *Lean for Social Good Washington, DC Summit*, where his presentation “Stealing from Startups” – on applying lean and experimental principles in a faith community – won a conference award. Later that same year he was selected to present an *Ignite* talk at the 2014 *Lean Startup Conference* in San Francisco; and in 2015, he was invited back to lead an hour-long curated discussion. In 2016 he has been invited to present and discuss FaithX concepts at several conferences, including the Episcopal Church’s *Symposium on Faith-Based Incubators* in Denver, Religion in Society’s *Sixth International Conference on Religion and Spirituality in Society* in Washington, DC, and the International Network on Personal Meaning’s *Ninth Biennial International Meaning Conference* in Toronto. He is the author of two books – *Paradox: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them* and *Excommunicating the Faithful: Jewish Christianity in the Early Church* – and he is currently at work on his third book, *FaithX: Experimental Faith Communities for an Undiscovered Future*, forthcoming in mid-2016.

A Note About Open-Source Rapid Iteration Prototyping

In preparing this paper, the author utilized an approach called Open-Source Rapid Iteration Prototyping: inviting a broad spectrum of practitioners to review and comment on successive drafts of the paper on Academia.edu. This paper is version 10.

**Singularity:
The Death of Religion and the Resurrection of Faith,
Beginning with Christianity
By the Rev. Ken Howard**

Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future.¹

Niels Bohr

Danish physicist and quantum theorist, 1885-1962

The epic 2014 science fiction movie *Interstellar* tells the tale of a global civilization in decline, unaware that life on earth is dying. Meanwhile, a crew of astronaut-explorers travels through a wormhole (i.e., a black hole with a back door) in search of a new home for humanity, acutely aware that the future of the entire human race rides with them, making their every decision along the way immense significant.²

Organized religion is at a similar crossroads today. In the United States, poll after poll shows that trust in organized religion is rapidly declining.³ The numbers of those who are *Religiously Unaffiliated* – popularly known as the *Nones* – having been on the rise since the late 1950s, have become the largest and fastest-growing religious demographic.⁴ Meanwhile, the *Dones* – a subset of the *Nones* consisting of once-active churches members who have left their churches but not their faith – is rising nearly as nearly as fast as the *Nones*.⁵ Church attendance has been in decline for decades, now affecting even conservative denominations.⁶ The 2015 Pew Research poll shows that the percentage of people self-identifying as Christian has dropped for the first time since the founding of the country.⁷ In fact, according to polls conducted by the Barna Group in 2014 and 2015, secularism is on the rise in the U.S.⁸ and the percentage of Americans holding “post-Christian” beliefs (i.e., beliefs inconsistent with traditional Christian orthodoxy) has risen by seven percentage points in just two years, from

37% in 2013 to 44% in 2015.⁹ Meanwhile, non-church-going people are less likely to consider going to church than ever before. Clearly, church attendance is no longer a “mainstream activity.”¹⁰

Many have pondered the theological significance of these statistics and have speculated on their implications for the future of institutional Christianity. Some have been circumspect in their predictions. In 2010, I suggested that the very paradigm of religion as an “organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules” was rapidly fading as a unifying force within Christianity and that Christianity’s existence as an organized religion was “hanging by a thread.”¹¹ However, I declined to speculate with extensive specificity on the future of Christianity beyond suggesting that it would be significantly more lean, relational, and incarnational than it is now. Dwight Zscheile argued with similar guardedness that disruptive innovations were driving a deinstitutionalization of Christianity.¹²

Others have been more expansive in their predictions. Relying on an amalgam of statistics and interpersonal anecdotes to support her claims, Diana Butler Bass goes far beyond the available data arguing that the decline in Church trust and membership are bringing about the end of Christianity as a religion. With almost religious fervor, she makes the claim that even now we are caught in the throes of a great spiritual resurgence and are witnessing the dawning of a “New Age of the Spirit” or a “Fourth Great Awakening.” She defines this new awakening as a “Great Turning toward a global community based on shared human connection, dedicated to the care of our planet, committed to justice and devoted to releasing hundreds of millions from poverty, violence, and oppression.”¹³ In a similarly sweeping manner, but perhaps hewing a

little closer to the observable present, Phyllis Tickle has portrayed the current trends as a postmodern “Great Emergence.”¹⁴

These predictions and others like them are really theoretical hypotheses couched in theological terms. They are attempts to attribute theological meaning to the facts at hand in order to foresee where the Spirit of God is taking us and how we might best prepare for the journey. It is certainly clear that something very big is in the works. The question is, “What?” Yet as Mark Chaves points out, we do not need more theory to figure out where we are going. Rather, we need more fact.¹⁵ And it would be helpful if prognosticators were willing to put their theories in the form of testable hypotheses that the facts might confirm or deny.

Expansive predictions, like those made by Bass and Tickle are by nature difficult to test: not necessarily untrue but simply difficult to prove or disprove. Conversely, narrower hypotheses – that the institutional Church is dis-integrating¹⁶ or deinstitutionalizing¹⁷ – are easier to test. And I believe that facts needed to evaluate these hypotheses are available, for those willing to do the math.

For several decades, the *Bulletin of Missionary Research* has published an annual worldwide statistical analysis of the Christian Church, which tracks 73 discrete demographic measures related to world mission, with comparisons to other major world religions, over time.

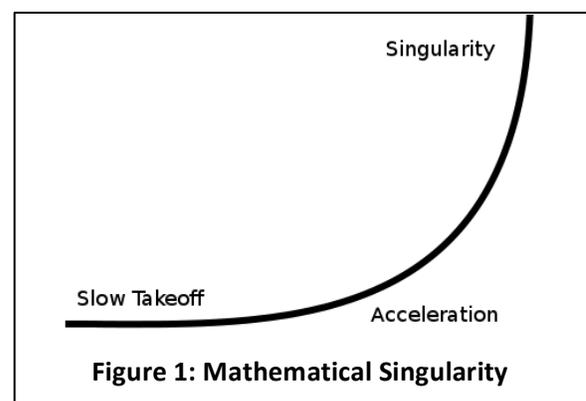
Comparing the trend lines for total worldwide number of denominations and worship centers (i.e., distinct physical sites designated for worship¹⁸) with the trend line for the total number of Christians worldwide, it quickly becomes clear that institutional Christianity is, in fact, in the process of dis-integration. Denominations and congregations are increasing in number – mostly by breaking apart – at a much faster rate than new believers are being birthed

by baptism to fill them. For reasons that will soon become clear, I call this phenomenon a **Religion Singularity**, and I believe the Church may have already passed the event horizon or point of no return.

I pair the terms “religion” and “singularity” intentionally: religion, in the sense of an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship the divine,¹⁹ and singularity, in the sense of the point in a mathematical equation at which the result becomes infinite (or the point in a black hole where mass becomes infinitely large and size becomes infinitely small).²⁰ In doing so, I am borrowing from seemingly distinct disciplines. I do this for the same reason as most transdisciplinary writers: to help those of us from a single discipline to see beyond the blinders that our paradigms oftentimes impose upon us. While there may not be a direct relationship between similar-appearing phenomena in entirely different fields, one phenomenon can still serve as an analogy through which to understand the other.²¹

What is a Singularity?

The term “singularity” is used in several fields of study: mathematics, astrophysics, and technology. In mathematics, it describes the point at which the result of an equation becomes infinite. In astrophysics, it describes the point at which the ratio of mass to size becomes infinite.



In technology, it describes the point at which machine intelligence outstrips unaugmented human intelligence.²² But in all of these fields, it describes the last stage of phenomena that, when described graphically, share three specific stages:

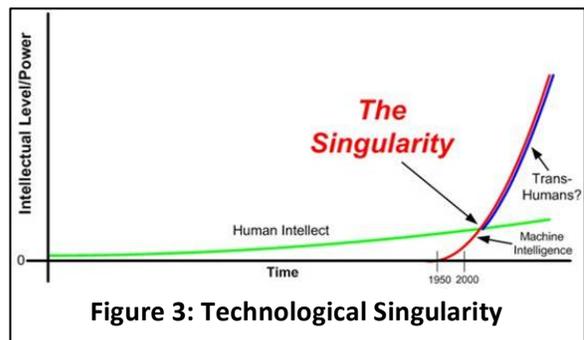
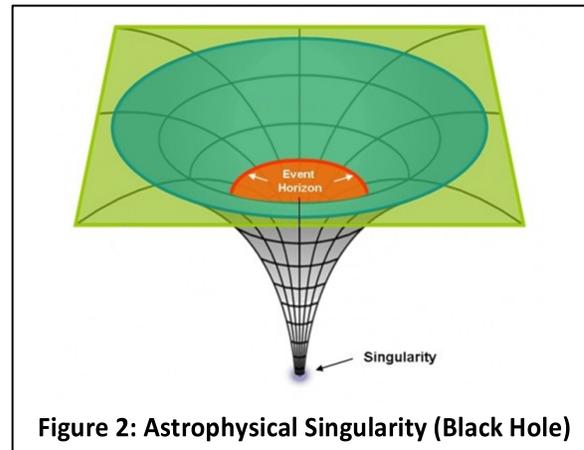
- **Slow Take-Off.** Change is slow and relatively linear.
- **Acceleration.** Change picks up speed so fast that it turns sharply upwards.
- **Singularity.** Change passes a point of no return and becomes nearly infinite.

Each one of these characteristics – Slow Takeoff,

Acceleration, and Singularity – is demonstrably present in the phenomenon currently affecting institutional Christianity: the phenomenon I have called the **Religion Singularity**.

Examining the Data Behind the Religion Singularity

Figures 4 through 9 represent actual demographic trends in institutional Christianity up to 2014 and projections of those trends from 2015 to 2100. In other words, the projected trend lines are anchored in solid actual trends composed of actual historical data: shifts in growth rates that began in the late 19th century and became firmly established long before the end of the 20th. All the elements of a singularity-like trend – Slow takeoff, Acceleration, and Singularity

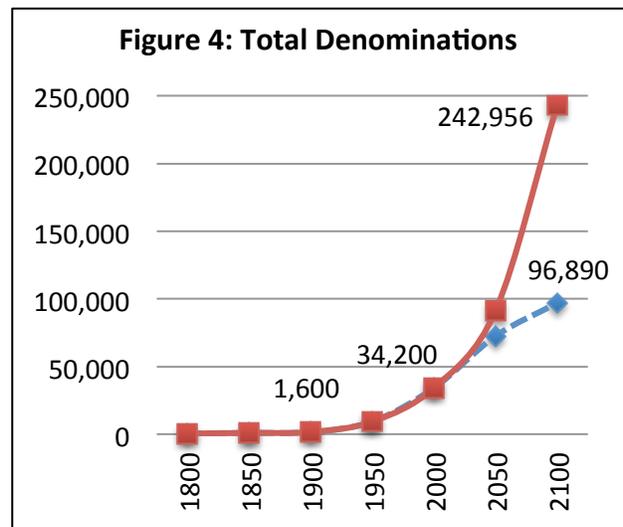


– lie within the historic segments of the trend lines, which establishes as fact, not speculation, the assertion that Christianity has entered a period of singularity-level fragmentation. Clearly, the dis-integration of institutional Christianity has already begun and its continuation is a near certainty. The real question is not *whether* the deinstitutionalization of Christianity will take place but *how*?

Growth in Total Denominations Worldwide

Figure 4 – Total Denominations²³ tracks the total number of denominations through 2014, then projects two possible trend lines into the future. Denominations, in this context, are

defined as discretely named organizational associations of churches. The term refers equally to those who commonly call themselves denominations (e.g., Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist), those who refer to themselves as traditions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox), and those who call themselves non-denominational but



nonetheless are ecclesiastical entities that differentiate themselves based on beliefs, practices, and polity. The term includes both denominations that split off from others (the vast majority) and those that originated without a predecessor. The three typical plot segments of a singularity are clearly evident.

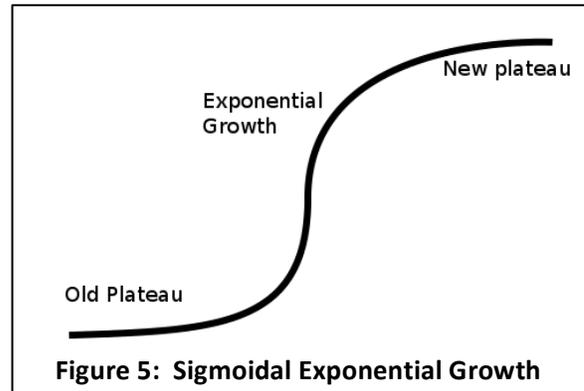
50-1900 – Slow Takeoff. Despite numerous spikes of rapid growth along the way, when viewed as a whole, the increase in the total number of Christian denominations over the first 19 centuries of the Church's existence was remarkable for its continuously strong, steady, and linear growth. Between 50 and 1900 the number of denominations worldwide grew from one denomination (the undivided Church) to about 1,600 denominations: little less than one new denomination per year.

1900-1950 – Acceleration. At the dawn of the 20th century, driven by an increased rate of denominational fragmentation – and ironically coinciding with the birth of the modern Ecumenical Movement – the growth of denominations turned sharply upward. The 50 years between 1900 and 1950 saw the number of Christian denominations worldwide expand from 1,600 to 9,300: a nearly six-fold increase. In other words, nearly six times the number of denominations were created in the first half of the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. This is the “knee” in the typical singularity plot: the point at which the result accelerates toward infinity.

1950-2014 – Approaching Singularity. In the second half of the 20th century, the rate of increase in the number of denominations continued its acceleration. From 1950 to 2000, the number of Christian denominations grew from 9,300 to 34,200: twenty times the number of denominations existing at the beginning of the century. In 2014, the number of denominations stood at roughly 45,000. Clearly, what we see in this trend has all the characteristics of a singularity. Two questions remain: Have we already passed the event horizon (the point of no return)? And are we looking at a black hole or a wormhole (will this trend continue indefinitely or taper off)?

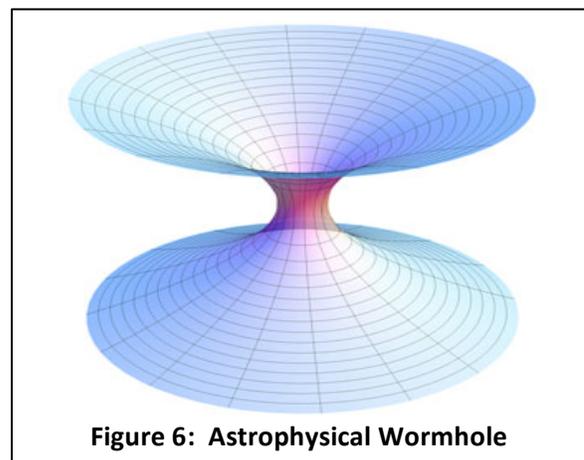
Projecting Future Growth in the Number of Denominations

The rate of fragmentation is, in itself, astounding. But what happens when we project forward? It depends on the assumptions we make. There are two possibilities. If the growth/fragmentation rate is subject to a **Resource Effect** – that is, dependent on finite



resources – then the growth curve will slow and plateau as finite resources are consumed, and the growth curve will become S-shaped, like the sigmoidal growth curve illustrated in Figure 5. However, if the growth being measured is resource independent, the rate of growth will continue to accelerate indefinitely into a singularity

One can think of the resource-dependent sigmoidal (s-shaped) path much like the astrophysical wormhole in Figure 6. Earlier, I called referred to a wormhole as a black hole with a back door. Clearly, they are astrophysical cousins that share some characteristics. But the two phenomena are also different in a few



important ways. While black holes are now generally viewed as naturally occurring phenomena in the physical universe, while wormholes still remain an unobserved theoretical construct, consistent with principles of relativity and quantum physics, and dependent on exotic matter and other esoteric requirements. Another crucial difference is that the “funnel” of a black hole

collapses into a gravitational singularity, a point through which nothing can pass and from which nothing can return, while the funnel of a wormhole narrows but never collapses and opens out into another part of the universe. So theoretically, in Figure 6 one could imagine an object entering along the gravity-warped line of space-time at the bottom left, following a sigmoidal (s-shaped) path through the wormhole, and exiting on the upper right in an entirely different region of space (and perhaps time).

Assuming a Near-Term Resource Effect. The projection contained in *Status of Global Mission 2014* (SGM) appears to anticipate a resource effect starting that year, with denominational growth/fragmentation tapering off through at least 2025 (their furthest prediction).²⁴ If we continue to project forward along SGM's predicted resource effect trend line, we discover that the growth/fragmentation rate of denominations would not fully plateau until the middle of the 22nd century. Even if these more conservative predictions hold, by the end of this century, the total number of denominations worldwide will have reached almost 97,000: *more than 6,000% growth in just 200 years.*

If we extend the *SGM 2014* projections, even allowing for their presumed resource effect (which would not fully plateau until the middle of the 22nd century), by the end of the 21st century the total number of denominations worldwide will have reached almost 97,000: *more than 6,000% growth in just 200 years.*

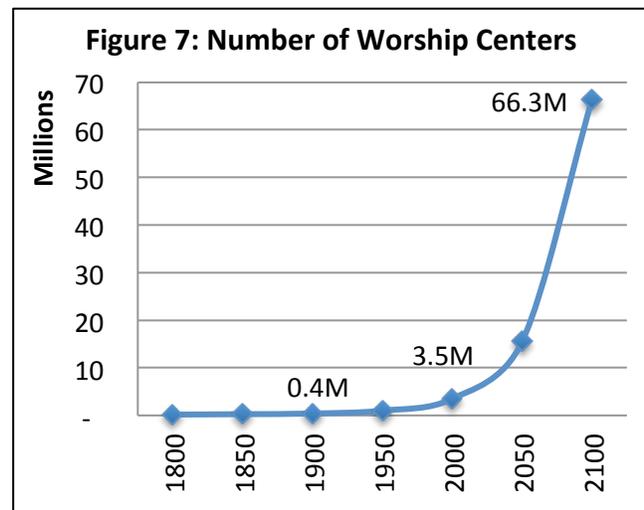
Assuming a Far-Term Resource Effect. As astonishing as this number may seem, there is little reason to believe that the resource effect assumed by *SGM 2014* is actually taking place now or will take place in the immediate future. While *SGM* has been predicting the imminent onset of such an effect for at least a decade, the current growth rate has remained largely

unchanged for almost 50 years. Moreover, *SGM* offers no rationale for assuming a near-term onset of a resource effect.

If we eliminate the assumption of a near-term resource effect and project forward the current rate of growth in the number of denominations, the results are even more remarkable. By 2100, we will see more than 240,000 denominations. This would be a 15,000% increase over the number of denominations that existed in the year 1900, in less than 1/10th of the time it took the first 1,600 denominations to arise.

Growth in Total Worship Centers Worldwide

Meanwhile, as shown in Figure 7²⁵, the growth in the total number of worship centers worldwide, also driven in large part by fragmentation, is following a trend almost identical to that for the total number of denominations: Slow Takeoff, followed by Acceleration, followed by Singularity.



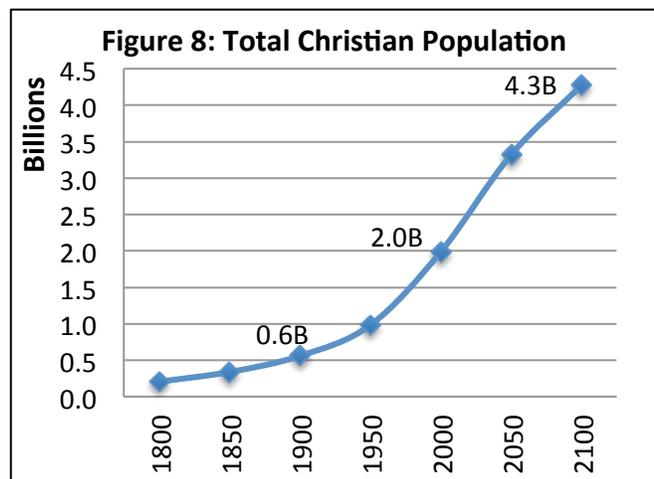
Through 1900 – Slow Takeoff. Like the graph for denominations in figure 4, the graph for number of worship centers is also part of a larger historical dataset reaching back to the first century. And if we could see that portion we would notice the same features: lots of growth spikes across the centuries but a remarkably strong, steady, and linear pattern overall, equating to approximately 216 new worship centers per year on average. Over the first 18 centuries of its existence the number of worship centers worldwide grew to about 400,000.

1900-1950 – Acceleration. Soon after the start of the 20th century, the growth in the number of worship centers accelerated. By 1950, the total number of worship centers worldwide had grown to almost one million: a roughly 250% increase in just 50 years. In other words, in just five decades, 2½ times more worship centers came into existence than in the previous 19 centuries.

1950-2014 – Approaching Singularity. By the year 2000, the total number of worship centers worldwide had grown to 3.5 million. In 2014, the number exceeded 4.7 million, and appears to be on its way to 7.5 million by 2025. In fact, the annual rate of growth/fragmentation in the number of worship centers is even more pronounced than the rate “achieved” by denominations. One might ask whether growth in the number of worship centers is not good a thing? In fact, the implications of this acceleration are more troubling than one might realize.

The Impact of the Religion Singularity

The numerical growth of denominations and worship centers is astonishing in itself. Yet its full significance only becomes clear when compared to the growth of the total Christian population worldwide.

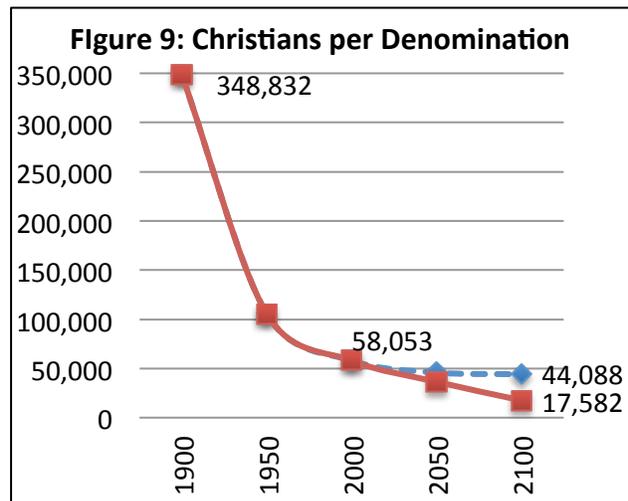


By itself the graph of the annual rate of increase in the total Christian population worldwide looks impressive,²⁶ yet it is roughly half the growth/splintering rates of

denominations and less than half of the rate for worship centers. This can't help but have a serious impact on the sizes of denominations and worship centers over time.

Impact on Denomination Size. Indeed, when we subtract the growth rate per year of the worldwide Christian population from that of the total number of denominations, we discover that the size of denominations has dropped substantially over the last century, and a trend that will likely continue for decades.

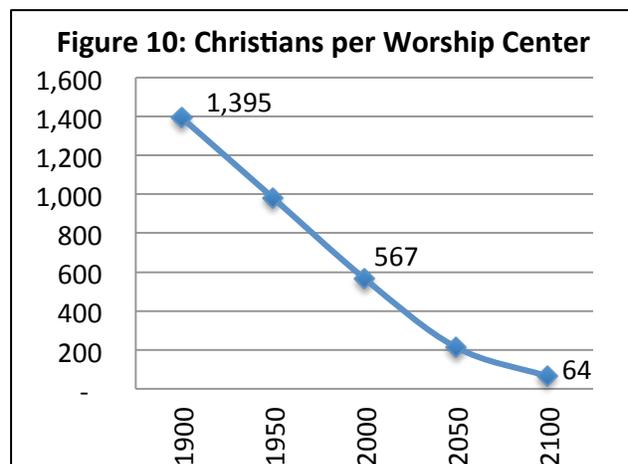
As Figure 9 illustrates, average denomination size dropped from about 349,000 to about 58,000 between 1900 and 2000.²⁷ How much will it continue to drop in the current century? It depends on whether we assume that a near-term Resource Effect will cause a slowdown in the rate of



growth/fragmentation. Even if it does, average denomination sizes drop to about 44,000 by the end of the century: an 87% decline in just 200 years. But if it does not, and the rate continues unchanged into singularity territory, average denomination size will drop to 17,500 by 2100: a 95% decline over the same period.

Impact on Worship Center Size.

Given what we already know about the noticeably higher growth/fragmentation rate of worship centers it should come as no



surprise that when we “do the math” the resulting rate of decline in the number of Christians per worship center is also markedly higher.

As shown in Figure 10, in 1900, the number of Christians per worship center worldwide was nearly 1,400.²⁸ By 2000, number of Christians per worship center had dropped beneath 600. Extrapolating forward, by 2050 Christians per worship center worldwide will have dropped to just above 200 and by 2100, if the trend does not change, the number will be well below 100.²⁹ This means that Christians will become more and more isolated from each other in their weekly worship services and less likely to make a real-world difference as a united front.

Black Hole or Wormhole? (Beyond the Event Horizon)

The trends we have examined have been strong and consistent for decades. There is no reason to expect that they will plateau in the immediate future, and resource effect or not, there is little we can do to change their course. Figuratively speaking, it is clear that we have passed the event horizon.

So what lies ahead of the Church: a Black Hole or a Wormhole? Will we follow the path of the unrestrained singularity into oblivion? Or are we committed to an unstoppable journey down an unstable path into an undiscovered future in uncharted space? Will the Church continue indefinitely down the path of fragmentation, splintering into new denominations and worship centers at an ever-increasing rate until both are so small as to be virtually non-existent? Or will the Church, at some point in the future, encounter a resource effect (i.e., an insufficient number of new Christians) that causes it to plateau, but results in denominations

and congregations that are drastically smaller – and thus dramatically different – than they are now? And this brings us to the question of sustainability.

Denominational Sustainability

I find it difficult to make a case for the sustainability of denominations. Even the most rudimentary requirement for sustainability, their mere survival as institutions, is hard to imagine. Their capacity for financial self-reliance is already severely strained and will continue to diminish as they proliferate in number and decline in membership.

But institutional preservation alone is not true sustainability, especially in the case of faith-based organizations. As denominations become increasingly consumed with merely *maintaining* their existence, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to focus on their *mission* and to live according to their *vision and values*. Even when they attempt to re-imagine themselves to meet the challenges of change and uncertainty, they find their survival instincts, along with their desire to protect their influence and power, undermining their creative efforts and producing disappointing results.³⁰

Precisely how this denominational dis-integration will play out is anybody's guess. Past being prologue, my guess is that the fragmentation and decline of denominations will continue and that maintenance will continue to trump mission: that they will react to their rapid unraveling by attempting to maintain or regain the power and influence they are losing. We are already seeing denominations reacting to this trend by negotiating mergers or formal associations. Yet ironically, given the compromises necessary to form such groupings, the more denominations merge or associate, the less homogenous – and the more diverse – they

unavoidably will become, with fewer doctrines and practices held in common by all the members of each new denominational grouping. Ultimately, those that take this path will become more like networks and less like denominations. We might even call “the networks formerly known as denominations.” But whether they take this approach or simply fragment into smaller and smaller pieces, one thing seems clear: at some point in the not too distant future, denominations as we have come to know them either will become distinctions without differences, or become so unsustainable that they collapse altogether.

Worship Center Sustainability

Worship centers face the same off-the-charts singularity of change as denominations. Their ever-increasing number continues to drive a concurrent and continuous decrease in average size. The stand-alone, building-centered, membership-focused, pledge-supported worship center “business model” that we have come to know and love over the centuries is will be impossible to sustain when the *average* number of Christians per worship center drops considerably below 100.

Given the trend above, one might ask whether megachurches might provide a sustainable alternative, but the data suggests otherwise. While the number of megachurches has increased over the last several decades, their membership appears to be plateauing, which may be an advance indicator that even megachurches may soon join the downward trend.³¹

We find ourselves hanging on for dear life to a framework that, at some level, we already know is cracked and crumbling. We try to tweak our way out of trouble by deferring maintenance, drawing down endowments. We seek reprieve in mega-churches, multi-site

churches, language or ethnicity-based churches, immigrant churches, whatever seems to be bucking the overall downward trend in any particular generation. But this only demonstrates that we are in deep, blinding ourselves to the truth that would set us free.

To survive and thrive in increasingly turbulent times we will have get outside box that is – both literally and figuratively – our building. We will have to develop entirely new forms for being and doing Church at the local level that are much less building-centric, member-centric, perhaps even religion-centric, than the form we have come to know and love. And while we cannot know exactly what the emerging form will be, we can imagine...

Imagine a future in which a worship center that partners with a developer, an architectural firm, a construction company, a bank, several for-profit companies and non-profit service organizations to design, fund, build, and occupy a mixed use campus, and of which a worship center is only in which the worship center was neither the major occupier or owner, but rather the catalyst and initial investor in the development of community via community development. Designed around a spectrum of critical unmet needs of the community, the worship center might partner with a school, a coffee shop, a theater, a recreational complex, affordable housing, or a supported living facility.

Imagine a future in which groups from multiple faith traditions come together to develop a multi-faith worship campus: Christians, Jews, and Muslims, for example, building and operating out separate worship centers on the site while sharing the cost of land, utilities, and maintenance. Or imagine them designing and operating out of a single, shared, multi-faith center, worshipping in the same space on their traditional worship days.

These are but two possibilities. They may or may not come to pass. Indeed, there may well emerge paradigms of doing and being Church that no one has yet considered.

While worship centers face the same onslaught of change and uncertainty as denominations, I believe they are much more likely to succeed in finding new and more sustainable ways of being and doing Church. Precisely because their starting point is significantly smaller and more organic, they may find it easier to redevelop the capacities of leadership, adaptability, and program capacity that are essential to organizational sustainability.³²

Compared to denominations, worship centers, by their nature, may be more flexible confronting the changes and challenges they both face. Because the majority of their ministries and programs are carried out by unpaid volunteers within a flatter organizational structure, churches/worship centers are by nature much less dependent on a large base of supporting members than are denominational structures, which tend to be more hierarchical with a much greater percentage of paid staff. Consequently, it will likely be easier for individual worship centers – even as they grow smaller – to become more flexible, adaptive, and creative in the face of these changes (though it is by no means certain how many of them will).

Individual worship centers may also find it easier to welcome diversity of opinion over doctrine and practice than denominations, which were created, in large part, to preserve and defend particular theological and ecclesiological points of view. Because of their higher level of adaptability, worship centers may be more successful than denominations in surviving and thriving in the midst of a general population increasingly distrustful of institutional religion and skeptical of enforced uniformity of doctrine and practice. While large numbers of people may

be giving up on things religious, many still have deep spiritual yearnings for faith, hope, love, meaning, beauty, and truth in the context of a community that points to a relationship with something much larger than itself...God.

Yet even though worship centers may have a greater capacity for adaptation than denominations, even for them this transition will be a wild wormhole ride, with all its twists, turns, and uncertainties. Nevertheless, those faith-based communities and organizations that develop sufficient vision, creativity, and experimental culture to survive the ride through the wormhole will be well prepared to thrive in whatever conditions they find at the end of the ride.

But What About the Structures that Lie Between Denominations and Worship Centers?

Most denominations have a variety of layers of hierarchical strata interposed between denominational headquarters and local worship centers: multi-national, multi-state, multi-county, multi-city, all the way down to local assemblages of individual worship centers. Every denomination has its own names for these various adjudicatory strata, but we need not concern ourselves with the names of most, since as top-level denominational structures collapse so, I believe they will take down with them all but the most local collectives. Depending on the particular faith traditions these may be called dioceses, districts, and other names, the important thing being that they are the lowest level collectives of faith communities. The local leader of these collectives may be bishops, superintendents, or something else, the important thing is that each of them locally personifies the unity of the local collectives they lead or coordinate. I believe that it is possible that these local collective

structures may well survive the downfall of denominations if they can demonstrate the capacity to promote unity between and collaboration among local worship centers, and if they can become much flatter, much more lean, and a lot more creative and experimental, not unlike the local worship center. Bishops, superintendents, and other in similar positions will need to be lead their local collective with a lot less power and control and a lot more love and relationship.

The “Gravitational” Effects of the Religion Singularity – Informed Speculation

Much as an astronomical singularity creates a tidal effect that begins to distort the fabric of space-time around them and begins to draw all surrounding matter toward its event horizon, the Religion Singularity also will exert a gravitational pull far beyond the unsustainability of denominations and individual worship centers. While the deinstitutionalization of Christianity likely will begin with the collapse of denominations and the re-formation of local worship centers, it is highly unlikely to end there. Rather, it will exert a tidal effect that will in turn collapse many of the religious structures and processes we have come to associate with them, making room for more sustainable and adaptive structures and processes to arise from the dust of their passing.

Imagine, if you will, how this might effect just one of our ecclesiastical processes – vocations and training – might be transformed by the effects of the Religion Singularity:

- **Vocations.** As our worship centers become smaller, our demand for full-time, mono-vocational pastors likely will decrease, while the demand for part-time, bi-vocational pastors likely will increase. A major challenge will be developing a structure to support

bi-vocational pastors over the longer term. A major benefit of bi-vocational ministry is that they likely will be less isolated from the challenges faced by the congregations and communities they serve, which in turn might make them more sensitive and adaptable to their needs.

- **Vocational Training.** Without denominational structures to require and support increasingly expensive, multi-year, residential, advanced degree programs for church pastors, the demand for such programs is likely to decrease. In their place are likely to arise alternative forms of vocational education that are more likely to be virtually based and experientially oriented, and therefore less expensive. As with vocations, the result is likely to be greater context-sensitivity and adaptability.

This is merely informed speculation, of course. Yet it is clear that while the impact of the Religion Singularity will be deep and widespread, in many ways it is also likely to have a salutary effect, clearing out the underbrush so that the new and more adaptive varieties can take hold.

A Wormhole Pilot's Toolbox – Necessary Capabilities for a Turbulent Environment

Peter Drucker once said, "Trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window." To this I would add the caveat, "especially when you have to build the car while driving it." Forecasting even the immediate future in a time of escalating uncertainty and accelerating change is even more dangerous than being a passenger in Drucker's car. Speculation in such circumstances can be little more than an educated guess: light on the educated and heavy on the guessing.

Still, it behooves us to ask, “How do you lead a faith-based community or organization into a future that is breaking in rapidly and uncontrollably all around you, and the final shape of which is impossible to predict?” We have hinted that this involves the capacity for experimentation, but perhaps we can be a little more specific. What are the qualities necessary for a successful voyage through the environment of escalating uncertainty and accelerating change that characterizes the Religion Singularity?

Agility. To survive and thrive in an unpredictable environment, an organization must possess agility. Agility means the power to move quickly and nimbly around obstacles and toward opportunities. But it also means the capability to make vital decisions swiftly and effectively, deftly discriminating between paths containing varying degrees of danger and opportunity.

Vision. Perhaps equally important to the capability of agility is the capacity for vision. All the agility in the world will literally get us nowhere if we don’t know where we are going, which is a near-impossibility in an unpredictable environment. Our inability to know with any certainty what will be the future physical form of the worshipping community makes it difficult to distinguish between those paths that move us toward that form and those that move us away from it. Yet even when we can’t know precisely the place we want to end up, we can still know what we want to be like when we get there, and we can evaluate the possible paths based on whether they move us closer to or farther from that vision. This is why a transcendent vision is essential for faith-based communities and organizations operating in an uncertain environment.

Lean. To put it bluntly, it is impossible to be both “fat and agile.” More mass means more inertia. More inertia means more difficulty changing direction, which by definition

decreases agility. This means that if leaders want their organizations to acquire the capability for agility, they must also help them become lean, by shedding all forms of excess “weight,” including all forms of waste. Faith-based communities and organizations contain many forms of waste. Traditionalism, dogmatism, clericalism, and any other “-ism” – in which a created form is worshipped nearly as much as the Creator – are all enablers of waste. Another enabler of waste is the failure to exercise good stewardship of congregants’ time, talents, and treasure. If they want their organizations to be truly lean, they must help their faith-based communities and organizations jettison every unproductive organizational process and structure. Meanwhile, in the place of those things they have discarded as waste, they must leverage the unique gifts, skills, and callings of every person in their congregations and organizations to the fullest, knowing that getting lean reduces our inertia, which results in greater agility. Finally, if we leaders want their organizations to become lean in a strategic fashion, they must have developed clear, transcendent, and shared organization visions, so that they might distinguish between those aspects of organizational structure and process that support the vision – and must be kept – and those that do not – and must be eliminated.

Contextual Attentiveness. In order to identify and steer clear of obstacles and move toward opportunities, leaders must be able to help their faith-based communities and organizations actively and continuously monitor their environments for obstacles and opportunities.

Common Cause Community. In order to minimize competition and maximize collaboration between themselves and other organizations, leaders of faith-based communities and organizations must be able to make common cause with organizations that have similar

visions and are heading in similar directions. In set theory this is known as ***Centered-set Community***, in which membership is determined by shared vision and goals. And it is the opposite of ***Boundaried-Set Community***, in which membership is defined based on boundary characteristics: all the ways in which the organization is different from all other organizations, and for which win-lose competition is the norm.

Rapid Hypothesis Testing. When operating in unfamiliar and rapidly changing environments, we as leaders of faith-based communities and organizations will frequently be making “educated guesses” as to the most effective course of action. To thrive in such an environment, leaders of faith-based communities and organizations have to be able to make and test strategic hypotheses rapidly, quickly discarding strategies that fail the test and continuing with and perhaps tweaking strategies that pass it, repeating this process as often as needed.

Actionable Metrics. To effectively test hypotheses, leaders must know how to develop evaluative measures that provide them with the necessary feedback to know how well their chosen strategies are working, moving the organization toward the shared vision, and how to adjust course.

And this last capability brings us full circle, back to Agility. To survive and thrive in escalating uncertainty and accelerating change, leaders of faith-based communities and organizations must be able to do all of these things quickly, adroitly, and as often as needed.

Critiquing the Singularity Analysis

I anticipate several lines of argument against the Religion Singularity analysis, both general and specific. These critiques include:

Critique – Oversimplification: Perhaps the most serious critique one could level against the Singularity analysis is that of oversimplification. In the numerical analysis, it could be argued that in pointing out the forest of the overall trend lines, I have overlooked the trees of variation along the way. Similarly, it might be argued that I have ignored the myriad interrelated factors that drive such things as growth rates of worldwide and local populations, the growth rates of worldwide and local Christian populations, and the growth or decline of the numbers or sizes of denominations and/or worship centers. In the course of human history, everything from transportation infrastructure, to communications technology, to religious upheavals, to wars, to natural disasters has had an impact on these rates of change.

Response: Both of these would be fair criticisms as far as they go, because I have, in the main, chosen to focus on the forest rather than the trees. Indeed, I would argue that another serious critique that can be lodged against some researchers is that they can get so caught up in identifying all of the trees that they forget the fact that all those trees form a forest, and perhaps even fail to notice that the unnoticed forest is on fire. It is precisely because the overall trends are so clear and strong and persistent that I have chosen not to obscure the macro-analysis with too much microanalysis.

Critique – Higher Growth in “Conservative” Churches: One might also argue against Singularity analysis based on the oft-quoted observations that “conservative” congregations tend to grow faster than “liberal” congregations, and that conservative church membership was

growing even when liberal church membership was declining.³³ (I have placed conservative and liberal in quotes to indicate that I consider these categories to represent a false dichotomy: merely different sides of the same theological coin, as I have argued elsewhere.)³⁴

Response: It is true that conservative congregations, especially those with a clear, evangelical mission, tend to have a higher attraction rate than liberal congregations, especially those liberal congregations that lack a clear, evangelical mission and have a high level of discomfort with proselytizing. It is also true that conservative mega-churches are common, while liberal mega-churches are rare enough that the term “liberal mega-church” sounds like an oxymoron. Yet it is also true that conservative congregations without clear, evangelical missions have similarly low attraction rates and are more likely to be in decline, while “liberal” congregations with clear missions and non-proselytizing (radical hospitality) approaches to evangelism have higher attraction rates and are more likely to grow.³⁵ And it is also true that conservative congregations – including mega-churches – tend to have a higher rate of splitting than liberal congregations.³⁶

There is also the problem of how to account for those SBC members who have left to form alternative, less-conservative Baptist associations or whose congregations maintain official connections to both the SBC and an alternative Baptist association.³⁷ And there is always the question of mega-churches. While the number of megachurches in the U.S. continues to increase³⁸, there is question about whether and how megachurches actually grow. Those that employ a “transfer” strategy – as opposed to a “conversion” strategy – to gaining members start big and stay big, with high levels of attraction masking high levels of turnover.³⁹ And even the decades-long increase in the number and membership of megachurches was beginning to

taper off by the end of 2012.⁴⁰ In any event, it seems certain that conservative denominations will follow liberal denominations into decline.⁴¹

Critique – Higher Membership Growth in Third-World Churches: One might also point out that (conservative) churches in the third world are currently experiencing high growth.⁴²

Response: Again, this may well be true in the short run, and I do not at all begrudge them for their current expansion. Still, the overall trend is clear: the rate of growth of denominations and worship centers – mostly by splintering – has remained strong and steady at about twice the rate of growth of the Christian population worldwide for decades and give no indication of moderating in the near future. I would argue instead that when one “does the math,” the current surge in church membership in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South can be recognized as merely a transient upward “blip” – albeit a large one – in the overall downward trend.

Common to all these critiques is that they all employ examples of micro-numerical deviations as arguments against a meta-numerical trend. In other words, in focusing on the trees, they are failing to notice the forest. Or to employ another aphorism, they are the exceptions that prove the rule. The various successes and intricacies of individual ministries do not counter the overall downward trend.

The DNA of Death and Resurrection – Theological Reflection

Our discussion so far has focused on the demography of the Religion Singularity: describing current trends, projecting its future trajectory, and analyzing its impact in practical

terms. But what is driving the Singularity? What are the theological impulses underlying and motivating the dis-integration of Christianity as an organized religion?

Several years ago, I speculated about the theological drivers of the decline of institutional Christianity in a journal article⁴³ and book.⁴⁴ What I described was an institution coping with the collapse of its core theological paradigms of unity by doubling down on those very same instruments, creating a positive feedback loop that was continuously accelerating the very disunity it hoped to prevent. I was describing what I would later call a Singularity, though I did not know it then.

The theological paradigms I identified as crumpling were Christendom, Foundationalism, and Religion:

- 1. Christendom – Unity grounded in control.** The paradigm of Christendom, which came into full play in the fourth century when Constantine legalized Christianity and Theodosius the Great outlawed paganism and declare Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, is based on the assumption that Christian unity required uniformity controlled by power of institutional leadership. While no longer the “official” paradigm of Christianity, the memory of Christendom still has a powerful influence on the Christian imagination, especially in times of crisis.⁴⁵
- 2. Foundationalism – Unity Grounded in Certainty.** Christian theological foundationalism is a relatively new paradigm of Christian unity (about 400 years old) that grew out of the Enlightenment’s epistemological foundationalism, which in turn is based on the assumption that absolute truth can be grasped by the human mind through the perfecting of rational objectivity. “Conservative” and “liberal” Christianity, as well as

modern science and philosophy, can be traced directly back to the two main schools of epistemological foundationalism. However, modern quantum physics is proving to be the undoing of foundationalism in all its forms, thus removing the possibility of certainty from faith.⁴⁶

- 3. Religion – Unity Grounded in Security.** Organized religion – of the non-tribal variety – is itself a paradigm based on the assumption that unity requires the security of an organized and uniform system of beliefs and practices. Where Foundationalism sought unity in certainty about truth, those employing the paradigm of organized religion have sought unity in the security of organization. If the increasing number of people identifying themselves as “spiritual but not religious” is any indication, the paradigm of religion is no longer working very well as an instrument of Christianity unity.⁴⁷

Since all of the institutional church’s paradigms of unity have always assumed some form of uniformity, when they have shifted in the past, the loss of uniformity has often led to confrontation, schism, violence, and even war. So perhaps it is not surprising that many fear the rapidly disintegrating consensus around the nature of Christian community, seeing it much as one would a cancer of the body: rapidly-spreading, uncontrolled cellular mitosis that will ultimately prove deadly to the unity of the church.

But is uniformity really a true measure of the unity of a faith community? Is agreement really a sign of a community’s health and disagreement an indicator of pathology? If difference and differentiation is an indicator of health in a physical body, cannot the same be said of a spiritual body? Is this not, in fact, the clear message of Christian scripture?⁴⁸ If viewed in that light, perhaps an appropriate metaphor for the division happening is not the rapid,

uncontrolled self-replicating mitosis of cancer, but rather the rapid, differentiated, and healthy division of meiosis. Perhaps the diverging consensus in the church is not mitosis gone wild, but a return to healthy spiritual-theological meiosis. Perhaps God is preparing to birth a new paradigm of Christian unity that depends on the welcoming of differentiation as a way of becoming a more whole and complete body of Christ: one that is grounded in faith, hope, and love, rather than certainty, security, and control.⁴⁹

The Church has experienced much change over its nearly 2,000 years of existence. Yet somehow, it has adapted. In fact, one might say that it has reinvented itself many times over. Each of these reinventions has been, at least in part, a death and a resurrection. Sam Pascoe, American clergyman and scholar, once wrote about the Church:

Christianity started out in Palestine as a fellowship;

it moved to Greece and became a philosophy;

it moved to Italy and became an institution;

it moved to Europe and became a culture;

it came to America and became an enterprise.⁵⁰

If we are indeed heading into a wormhole, one thing is certain: we will have to be prepared to come out in a very different place – and perhaps even a very different time.

With denominations and churches splitting at an ever-increasing rate, and as a result growing smaller and smaller, we may end up with a Church that looks more like it did in its first-century state than at any time since: more diverse and less hierarchical, more faith than religion, more a movement than an institution. Indeed, it may well be that Christianity is poised to become a fellowship again. And that might not be so bad. In fact, it might not be going too

far to say that by the end of this century we may have witnessed the death and resurrection of Christianity as we know it: the death of Christianity as an organized religion and its resurrection as a movement of the followers of Christ.

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End Notes

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² Christopher Nolan, *Interstellar*, Film (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2014). The difference between black holes and wormholes is discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

³ *U.S. Confidence in Organized Religion at Low Point*, (n.p. Gallup.com, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155690/confidence-organized-religion-low-point.aspx>.

⁴ Cary Funk and Greg Smith, "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation. (Washington, DC: Pew Forum, 2012), 7.

⁵ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, (n.p.: Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁶ Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 5th ed. (United States: Princeton University Press, 2011), 46; cf. George Barna and David Kinnaman, eds., *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (United States: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 85-90.

⁷ Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists reveal why people are Done with church but not their faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015), 1-11.

⁸ Barna and Kinnaman, *Churchless*, 16.

⁹ "2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population," in *Cities & States* (n.p.: Barna Group, 2015), <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/728-america-more-post-christian-than-two-years-ago#.Vuq7d8f0EhY>.

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¹¹ Ken Howard, *Paradoxy: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 47.

¹² Dwight Zscheile, "Disruptive Innovations and the Deinstitutionalization of Religion." *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 14:2 (Fall 2015), 5-30.

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¹⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 13-17.

¹⁵ Mark Chaves, *The Decline of American Religion?*, 10.

¹⁶ Ken Howard, "A New Middle Way? Surviving and Thriving in the Coming Religious Realignment," *Anglican Theological Review* 92:1 (2010), 103-110.

¹⁷ Dwight Zscheile, "Disruptive Innovations and the Deinstitutionalization of Religion," 5-30.

¹⁸ Jonathan Bonk, "Status of Global Mission 2014," *Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 2010): 1. According to SGM's counting methodology, a denominationally-based mega-church with a central campus and seven remote locations would be counted as eight worship centers. Meanwhile, an independent mega-church with a central campus and seven remote locations would be counted as one denomination and eight worship centers. Also, it is important to note that, while the term "worship center" is related to the terms "church" or "congregation," it is not interchangeable with them. In many parts of the world, economic conditions and/or legal restrictions constrain the number of worship centers that can be built, driving the number of Christians per worship center higher in those areas and overall. All worship centers contain congregations but not all congregations have their own worship centers.

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- ²³ Jonathan Bonk, “Status of Global Mission 2014,” 1. *Data from SGM is the source of data through 2014. Data for 2015 through 2100 are projections.*
- ²⁴ Jonathan Bonk, “Status of Global Mission 2014,” 1.
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- ³⁶ Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *Megachurches 2015 Report* (Leadership Network and Hartford Institute for Religion Research), 15; cf. Eileen Renee Campbell-Reed, *Anatomy of a Schism: How Clergywomen’s Narratives Interpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention (dissertation)* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University), 9-10, 294-295.
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⁴⁵ Ken Howard, *Paradoxy*, 9.

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