

# MAPPING SPIRITUAL INNOVATION

**Initial Findings**  
**A Working Paper**



**CHAPLAINCY**  
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| Glean Network

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# Mapping Spiritual Innovation: Initial Findings

## A Working Paper

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### Introduction

The landscape of religion and spirituality continues to shift in the United States. The fastest-growing portion of the American religious population is those without religious affiliations, often called the “nones.” The Pew Research Center reported increases from 16% in 2006 to 28% currently (“Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe” 2024). The impact of disaffiliation is reflected in a range of phenomena including declining religious service attendance and congregation closure. Over the past 20 years, regular attendance at religious services among US adults has decreased by 29% (Jones 2023).

The congregation, a traditional delivery system for spiritual and religious content in the United States, is also in flux as people are less interested in this form of gathering. By “delivery system,” we mean the ways in which individuals learn about and connect with religious, spiritual, and other meaning-making systems. Congregations are still a major delivery system but are less central to peoples’ lives than they once were. Membership in local congregations, including churches, synagogues, and mosques, decreased from 70% of the public in 1999 to 47% in 2020 (Jones 2021). This shift, not surprisingly, has led to widespread congregational closures. Exact numbers are impossible to determine; in 2019, Lifeway Research estimated that for every 3,000 Protestant churches that opened, 4,500 shut their doors (Earls 2021). At the same time, other delivery systems are emerging.

These changes are frequently commented on in popular culture and public discourse. Articles in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* have highlighted the implications of religion’s shrinking influence on American life, posing questions about how Americans are finding community and meaning outside of traditional religious structures (Grose 2024; Thompson 2024). In the context of what the U.S. Surgeon General is calling a loneliness epidemic in the United States, these questions seem even more urgent (“Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community” 2023).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All authors have contributed equally.

<sup>2</sup> Religious disaffiliation and the loneliness epidemic are a felicitous entry point to this discussion, but are not the only major trends or events of the 21st century to shape the current religious and spiritual environment. Other major events like 9/11 and the global war on terror, the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, the COVID-19

Alongside these stories of spiritual and religious decline are examples – largely disconnected from one another – of people in the United States engaging with spirituality and religion in new ways, including efforts to make or be a part of broader social or civic changes. Some of these changes are focused very locally while others are more nationally oriented. Some include people physically coming together while others are taking place entirely virtually. Some are being led by people with formal training in religious or spiritual leadership, including degrees from graduate programs, while others are not. Many of these efforts seem to take place apart from existing spiritual and religious institutions, making them difficult to identify and track as well as to understand as a phenomenon.

This working paper is a first effort to describe and begin to understand new efforts emerging as traditional congregations, and in some cases broader religious institutions, are in decline. We focus specifically on *groups*, not individuals, started since 2008, that are inspired by the world’s religious traditions<sup>3</sup> to create social change (i.e. change outside of themselves),<sup>4</sup> often but not always by disrupting traditional delivery systems, providing different aspects of those traditions, and/or translating them in new ways. We understand social change broadly as efforts – regardless of content – that aim to make a contribution to the public good such as through charitable work, political advocacy, community building or in other ways. We exclude from our approach efforts focused only on creating new spiritual or religious communities absent the creation of a new delivery system or explicit intent for those communities to make some change in the world. As we did in our earlier work [studying chaplaincy](#), we begin this conversation on the supply side, with a focus on spiritual innovators themselves. More research is necessary to understand the demand side, or the spiritual “consumer.”

We focus specifically on groups started between 2008 and 2023. The year 2008 is a good starting point for three reasons. First, the majority of people in the Millennial generation (born 1982-1996) came of age by 2008, and Millennials characteristically exhibit distrust of major institutions, including religious institutions: A 2016 poll of 18–29-year-olds showed that the sole institution trusted by more than half of Millennials was the U.S. military, but even then, only 51% of those surveyed trusted the military (“Opinion among U.S. Millennials on How Often They Trust Major Institutions in 2016” 2016). Generation Z (born 1997-2012) is even more distrustful of institutions (Hrynowski and Marken 2023; Della Volpe 2024). Second, trend data show that the number of people not religiously affiliated or describing themselves as “nones” grew considerably after 2008, accelerating an already existing trend (“Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe” 2024). Third, the financial crisis of 2008-09

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pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter movement could each serve as a lens to understand how and why the religious and spiritual status quo is disrupted.

<sup>3</sup> We would argue that having no religious/spiritual tradition is also an identifiable tradition, although this was not represented in our present sample. We also note that there are some spiritual innovators who do not wish to claim any particular spiritual lineage yet are often in dialogue with the world’s religious traditions.

<sup>4</sup> In sociology, “social change” refers to transformations within the social world, including changes in relationships and interactions. It is a change that is not internal within a participant but directly impacts society. Among our respondents, “social change” is positively regarded, as it is in the expression, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” As sociologists, we note that not all social change is beneficial to all people.

impacted many areas of American life including existing religious institutions and the ways people find and create meaning in transitions (Roozen 2011).

Absent a shared name or frame for the groups we seek to identify, we call them spiritual innovators. We draw on the term “social innovation” as defined by the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals” (Phills, Jr, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). “Social innovation” as a concept came into common use in 2008. We suspect that some of the efforts described here are a spiritually-oriented subset of broader efforts at social innovation (Lahiri and Schwartz 2018; “The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data 2013–2023” 2024).

We use the term “spiritual innovation” a bit cautiously, aware that spiritual and religious people, institutions, and experiences are always changing and that it is too early to know whether this is another chapter in a long-told story or something more distinctive, perhaps linked to co-occurring efforts at social innovation. Many of the groups we describe have themselves adopted the term spiritual innovators, perhaps reflecting something in their cultural context or the beginning of a social or spiritual movement operating under this frame. Some spiritual innovators see themselves as the keepers of a tradition and some see themselves as a radical break from what has come before.

## Our Approach

Mapping groups that do not necessarily see themselves as part of a shared or common effort is not an easy task. With no clear list or sampling frame, we started with a clear operational definition, unit of analysis and time frame. We define spiritually innovative groups as those that are inspired by the world’s religious traditions to create social change, often but not always by disrupting traditional delivery systems and providing different aspects of those traditions and/or translating them in new ways. We focused only on groups, not individuals, that were started between 2008 and 2023. A detailed overview of our methods appears in Appendix A.

We gathered data in two phases. First, through networks, recent publications, and funding agencies, we identified people who have been or are leaders in this space working with and across multiple specific groups. Between March and July 2024, we conducted interviews with 29 of these stakeholders in an effort to begin to see the broader picture. The demographic profile of these individuals is included in Table 1 at the end of this document.

Second, we conducted interviews with the leaders of 71 specific groups across the United States between May and October. We identified these interviewees through networks, funders and the stakeholder interviews as well as through IRS records for nonprofits working around religious and spiritual development. The demographic profile of this second sample of local leaders is included in Table 2 at the end of this document and the interview guide in Appendix B.

This report is a working document designed to share initial findings, stimulate conversation, and inform the analysis we will continue in the coming months.

## Social Context

Spiritual and religious change – what some call innovation – has a long history and has taken many forms since the founding of the United States (Wuthnow 1978), including the tent meetings of the Second Great Awakening in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and preachers on horseback spreading their religious truths as settlers headed west. The places and ways in which spirituality and religion are shared are always shifting; new places, new people and new media – like the radio or the internet – are deeply entwined with these changes, as are broader demographic, political, and cultural changes (Anthony and Robbins 1982). Frames of religious change and realignment, spiritual diffusion, crossing, bridging, and others have been used by scholars and commentators to describe this constant and ongoing change (Tweed 2008).

In recent years, the growth of Christian nationalism and increasing numbers of “religious nones” have been central to how people understand the current religious landscape (Perry 2022). Alongside these headlines are quieter examples of people experimenting and innovating with new religious forms. In Atlanta, a Jewish community organization called Ma’Alot has been gathering spiritual seekers to explore Jewish traditions through music, art, and nature, and in Massachusetts, two Unitarian Universalist ministers have facilitated spiritual community through a dinner church organization called Nourish UU. Slowly and without much fanfare some of these groups – especially those who share funding courses – have built intentional relationships and begun to describe themselves loosely as in an ecosystem of spiritual innovation. Other groups – including within some existing religious organizations – have emerged in parallel through different networks doing closely related work.

Just after 2000, a set of newer and initially disconnected efforts to engage with traditional religious ideas began to emerge both inside and outside of traditional religious organizations. For example, a number of Jewish efforts aimed at rethinking Jewish traditions emerged. These included Moishe House<sup>5</sup> and Mayyim Hayyim.<sup>6</sup> Through his work at Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, Rabbi Sid Schwarz began to bring rabbis and other Jewish leaders together to educate them about

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<sup>5</sup> Started in 2006, [Moishe House](#) is an international organization for Jewish young adults. In a Moishe House, Jewish young people live in an intentional community and create programming like Shabbat dinners, movie nights, and community service projects for the surrounding community. Since its inception, Moishe House has locations in over 27 countries and engages more than 70,000 young people every year.

<sup>6</sup> Since 2004, [Mayyim Hayyim](#) provides mikveh services to men, women, and people of all genders in the Boston area who are Jewish or converting to Judaism, conducting over 1,600 immersions per year. They also provide educational programs, consultation services, art gallery tours, and volunteer opportunities to both Jewish and non-Jewish community members.

transforming their synagogues.<sup>7</sup> Initially based in Evangelical Protestant circles, Pastor Spencer Burke created a yearly in-person gathering of primarily Christian leaders to discuss faith-based solutions to modern social problems.<sup>8</sup> Numerous efforts to facilitate creativity in existing formal religious organizations also began to emerge, including Texas Methodist Foundation’s “Learning and Innovation” arm,<sup>9</sup> Ministry Incubators,<sup>10</sup> and the Unitarian Universalist “Beyond the Call” program for religious professionals.<sup>11</sup> These efforts emerged within existing religious organizations, while others emerged outside.

Around 2015, some separate efforts began to connect through networks developing among the leaders. A major contribution to this conversation was the “How We Gather” report written by Harvard Divinity School students Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile. This report described how Millennials were finding meaning, purpose and community to argue that some of the traditional functions of religion and spirituality were being met through secular efforts including potlucks, yoga, and group fitness. This report catalyzed future thinking supported by the Fetzer Institute,<sup>12</sup> which funded Casper and Angie to continue exploring spiritually-based community formation. Leaders at the Texas Methodist Foundation also saw the report as a framework for helping churches look beyond traditional congregational models in creating spiritual communities and established convenings of those thinking innovatively. These convenings began among United Methodist churches and then more broadly across faith lines.

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<sup>7</sup> Originally called the National Jewish Resource Center at its founding in 1974, [Clal](#), now known as the The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is an international organization dedicated to educating and supporting Jewish religious leaders in creating change for their synagogues and communities. Rabbi Sid Schwarz has created two organizations to accomplish a similar purpose. First, the Clergy Leadership Incubator, started in 2013, is a two-year program to help rabbis envision and execute change in their synagogues. Kenissa, a 9-year mapping project concluded in 2024, convened an extensive network of nearly 400 Jewish practitioners for support, connection, and capacity-building. Rabbi Schwarz created a report documenting the project’s results, which can be found [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Started in 2001, [Soularize](#) is a non-profit collective of individuals across all religious and spiritual identities seeking to create social change. This collective gathers every year for an event under the same name.

<sup>9</sup> Founded in 1938, [Texas Methodist Foundation \(TMF\)](#) provides grants and facilitates other avenues through which churches and nonprofits can receive financial support. In 2002, TMF created a “Learning and Innovation” initiative to convene and create networks among individuals and groups seeking to bring about innovation in their churches through new ministries.

<sup>10</sup> In 2012, Kenda Creasy Dean, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, co-founded an organization called [Ministry Incubators](#) to assist faith-based entrepreneurs in learning how to create their own innovative projects. The organization supports individuals through coaching, consulting, online courses, and teaching about project management, among other services.

<sup>11</sup> In 2014, the Unitarian Universalist Association devised a two-year executive education-style program to support Unitarian Universalists wanting to develop new ideas of spiritual community in the Unitarian Universalist community. This [Beyond the Call: Entrepreneurial Ministry](#) program was designed for religious professionals and sowed the seeds for the current [UU Religious Innovator’s Network](#).

<sup>12</sup> The [Fetzer Institute](#), founded in 1962, provides funding for, and conducts research on, individuals finding faith-based solutions to social problems.

Simultaneously, Ashoka – an international organization dedicated to supporting systems-level change through social entrepreneurship – was investigating social entrepreneurs engaged in spiritually-motivated efforts. Based on a mapping project studying efforts at the intersection of faith and innovation, Ashoka senior advisor Danielle Goldstone convened leaders from Ashoka and practitioners of faith-based social entrepreneurship for an initial conversation. Partnerships from this gathering eventually developed into Ashoka’s Spiritual Changemaking Initiative which aimed to empower individuals to create social change based on their religious beliefs or traditions. This initiative currently connects over 500 individuals across 50 countries who are working on a variety of projects. Over the next few years, Ashoka, Fetzer, and the Texas Methodist Foundation continued to support these explorations, bringing together individuals and groups trying to create change in their communities and congregations motivated by their religious and spiritual traditions.

Glean Network<sup>13</sup> launched in 2016 as the first national multifaith incubator. As the term is used in business, incubators nurture start-up efforts at the earliest stages. Support can be provided in a variety of ways, including mentorship and resources. Incubators can also help to grow more incubators. Among its efforts, Glean incubated the Adese Fellowship (an ecumenical effort sponsored by the United Church of Christ) and the Hatchery LA (a Disciples of Christ incubator for spiritual entrepreneurs, now defunct), and has supported the launch of others.

More recently, leaders in these efforts, including foundation leaders, began to move beyond convening for the sake of learning about spiritually-innovative social change and started to discuss what a lasting infrastructure for these individual projects would look like. Sue Phillips introduced the concept of “the spiritual infrastructure of the future” (Phillips 2024), suggesting an evolution of current assumptions about how traditional religious institutions will look in the future. As she notes, “Collective awareness about the importance of belonging, mental health, and connection to deeper meaning is growing, and the democratization of access has hugely expanded available spiritual and religious content. It turns out folks still want to visit landscapes of religious and spiritual wisdom. They simply aren’t following the old paths.” Innovation leaders, led by Angie Thurston, are currently exploring how to institutionalize and begin to build a stronger and shared base from which this work may continue.

It should be noted that the above context is not representative of all efforts around spiritual innovation. Rather, our aim is to highlight main touchpoints in the institutional history of what we believe to be an emerging ecosystem within and across religious and spiritual traditions. We recognize that this ecosystem as we have described it is composed primarily of Jewish and Christian organizations, and more research is needed to ascertain connections across other religious and spiritual traditions. For example, while we spoke to people involved in emerging Muslim innovative efforts, known by some as

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<sup>13</sup> [Glean Network](#), started in 2016 with support from Clal (note 3 above), assists faith-rooted leaders in starting their own entrepreneurial ventures through an MBA-level design-thinking course called the START Program, coaching, and access to a community of like-minded innovative thinkers.

“Muslim third spaces,” more work needs to be done to understand the key actors involved, as well as the challenges posed by the word “innovation” in an Islamic context.

## Initial Findings

We focus here primarily on what we learned in interviews from 71 spiritually innovative groups across the country. The majority of these groups are in the East (36%) or West (30%), though we also identified groups in the South (18%) and Midwest (16%) as described in Table 3 at the end of this document. These groups identify with a range of spiritual and religious traditions with the largest being unaffiliated (30%), Protestant (21%) or something else (16%) which includes Christian ecumenical, Jewish-Christian, interfaith, and all traditions. They have been in existence from just a few months to more than ten years with a mean age of close to 6 years. Organizationally they take many forms with about one in five (18%) affiliated with a local congregation.

We identified six key areas where groups primarily conduct their work and activities. The first area of activity is **community programming**, where the group is primarily involved in hosting events, convening, and/or community meetings. The second area of activity is **consulting**, which takes place when the organization provides specialized advice or guidance to individuals or to other organizations. The third area of activity is part of the **human services** sector, and these organizations offer training, assistance, and formal services in a nonprofit model. The fourth area of possible work is **research**, and these organizations, usually identified as think-tanks or labs, conduct and/or disseminate original research. The fifth area of activity is **education**, with the organization creating and providing materials and trainings to support a number of goals from individual spiritual formation to skill acquisition. Finally, the sixth area of activity is **advocacy**; these organizations advocate for their main constituents in the American civil sphere. Groups can theoretically participate in multiple activity areas, but we categorized groups based on their primary mission. The number of groups associated with each activity is found in Table 3.

Among the 71 groups, 45% started out of an existing organization, such as a church or university. The majority (69%) of the existing groups were religious such as the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, the Center for Loving Kindness at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, and churches such as Christ Church Denver and White Rock UMC in Dallas, Texas. The remaining 31% arose from secular organizations including the Harvard Innovation Labs at Harvard University, Phillips Academy Andover, and the Office of Women’s Health at the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Of the 71 groups, 44% are 501c3s or described themselves as nonprofit organizations, 20% are projects or efforts within larger institutions, and 13% are a limited liability company (LLC) or use a business-to-business (B2B) or direct to consumer (business-to-consumer or B2C) model. This signifies that they operate within a for-profit entrepreneurship framework. An additional 11% are informal membership groups and 9% operate under fiscal sponsorship; the former refers to groups that gather based on a common interest or mission, but without a nonprofit distinction, while the latter denotes

unincorporated groups that affiliate with formal, existing nonprofits for administrative support. We did not ask all efforts to report their organizational models; however, based on the business models of the groups we interviewed, we have a greater understanding of how innovative groups are trying to create change.

The leaders of these 71 groups include people of all ages, as shown in Table 2. About two-thirds are white and the largest group, in terms of gender identification, are women (52%). They were raised in a range of religious traditions with the largest fractions Protestant (41%), Jewish (16%) or Catholic (11%). Today, their religious affiliations are more varied with the largest fraction still Protestant (31%) and roughly equal numbers of Jews (15%) and those who identify as spiritual (14%). This is a highly educated group in which 81% have a graduate degree. Many (58%) attended seminary or theological school and about one-third are ordained in a religious tradition.

### ***Genealogies***

To begin to conceptualize these groups we identified five genealogies or paths through which they were formed. These paths describe the motivations of their leaders and of the organizations more generally – not in terms of subject focus but approach to or mechanism of social change. Five types of innovators were represented among the 71 organizations that we selected. These are etic codes that reflect our observations of the field, rather than how innovators identified themselves. The genealogies are of individuals because, although groups were the focus of our study, the group leaders are the people with whom we actually spoke.

Each innovator belongs to at least one of these five genealogies: Faith-based organizers; community organizers; spiritual practitioners; educators; and entrepreneurs. A very small number belong to more than one category. The most common genealogies represented in our data were the community organizers and the spiritual practitioners, and the least common were the faith-based organizers and the entrepreneurs. See Table 4 at the end of the report for a summary of these groups.

## **1. Faith-Based Organizers**

The United States has a long tradition of faith-based community organizing, a term used to describe people of faith<sup>14</sup> who take collective action on a specific social issue. We take this concept and broaden it to include all spiritual innovators doing either activism or service work with a spiritual or moral component, as long as the work is focused on a specific social issue. We call this group faith-based organizers because of how closely they resemble traditional faith-based community organizers. The innovator’s religious or spiritual connection to the social issue precedes and drives the innovator’s decision to work on the issue. These spiritual innovators show that, while faith-based work is not itself

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<sup>14</sup> Faith is not a universal characteristic of religious or spiritual people, nor is it exclusive to religious and spiritual people. We use the term “faith” to align with the literature on faith-based community organizing.

a new concept, its practice is constantly reinvented and reintroduced as communities change and new issues arise.

Sister Mira described some of the innovative work being done by the Tri-State Coalition Against Human Trafficking & Slavery. Human trafficking is an old problem, and Catholic sisters teaching hospitality workers about how to detect and prevent human trafficking is a new solution:

*“[We] became aware of a group out of Omaha that was doing hotel and motel training. And so a number of us took that training, which enabled us to work with hotels and motels to recognize the signs of human trafficking....so we did that with some of the hotels [here]. And the biggest one that we worked with, we had a news conference at the end of the training.”*

Sister Mira’s work is conceptually similar to other groups fighting human trafficking, as well as other social initiatives by American women religious, but fits the definition of innovative because there previously was no religious group organizing on the ground to train hospitality workers about human trafficking in her community. Sister Mira exemplifies how faith-based organizers advocate for or serve a cause.

James spoke to us about the Camden (ME) Coalition for Social Change, a short-term effort to peacefully demonstrate for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. Like many religious and community organizations, the Camden Coalition for Social Change responded to the tragedy by drawing both on their shared faith traditions and on the specifics of Floyd’s murder. James was asked to speak at the first demonstration because “I’m the Black chaplain.” Around 400 people met in a public park:

*“Then we knelt for the eight minutes and forty-six seconds that Chauvin was on George Floyd’s neck, which was the longest eight minutes I think I’ve ever knelt in my life. It felt like it, only because of its connection. And from that experience grew the smaller groups meeting through the county and the region for about six, eight weeks.”*

Public demonstrations, kneeling, and small group meetings are old practices that the Camden Coalition for Social Change brought to bear on a new outrage. To make their actions specific to George Floyd’s murder, they incorporated what was believed to be the exact amount of time that it took Derek Chauvin to kill George Floyd.<sup>15</sup>

Housed in a former church, the Owenwood Farm and Neighbor Space was launched by a local United Methodist congregation in 2017 before becoming an independent 501c3 in 2018. Owenwood is a community center that houses other non-profit partners – primarily direct services – in a “hub” and

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<sup>15</sup> Eight minutes and forty-six seconds, represented as (8:46), became the standard length of time for the “die-in” protests that happened throughout the nation in June 2020 and also is used to symbolize police violence. Body camera footage released in August of 2020 showed that the actual time it took for Chauvin to murder Floyd was 9:29.

offers its own programming as well. Jessica told us about Owenwood’s offerings and her work to expand them:

*“We are in a food desert. We’re in a medical desert. We are in a transportation desert, every desert that you can think of. ...When I took over, I had a very brief CNA, a very brief community needs assessment, to just see where we were at, what we needed. My adults really needed a lot of help.”*

Owenwood fits the criteria for innovation in two ways. A direct services hub is new in this context; the local United Methodist congregation had never launched or spun-off a community center before. But perhaps more tellingly, it is Owenwood’s location in a closed church that speaks to spiritual innovation. Churches that close and either sell or repurpose their property are a significant element of the changing religious landscape. Owenwood demonstrates how a church can close yet continue to serve the community.

## **2. Community Organizers**

Community organizers work to create or strengthen communities around shared (communal) identity. This may overlap with faith-based organizing, but community organizers have a different objective. Whereas faith-based organizers have laser-like focus on finding spiritual or moral solutions to a particular issue or providing direct services, the objective of a community organizer is to build greater capacity in the community, however the community is defined. We often find a ministerial dimension to community organizing when the community organizer accompanies, or walks alongside, a community.

Carlos is a classic community organizer. He works with the Latino Christian National Network to build bridges among Latino Christians. He says his work involves two things. “One is the aspect of developing and strengthening relationships among the Latino leaders. And then together with that, it’ll be resourcing. By that I mean exchanging mutual resources that can enhance the work of everybody else.” This is community organizing in its most literal power-building sense – organizing for the ability to effect change. Carlos is proud of his ability to bring the leaders of very different Christian traditions together for what they deem to be the overall good of the Latino community.

Abbas is a different type of community organizer than Carlos. Abbas founded MIPSTERZ, an “arts and culture collective that amplifies and enables Muslims and Muslim-adjacent creative and artistic voices.”

*“We curate thinkers, creative artists within the community, and we do events, programming, various programming which ranges from artistic showcases, performances, talks, panels, film screenings, et cetera. We also do collaborative artistic projects that range anywhere from making short films, original music, visual art, illustrative art. And then we also do larger cross-collaborative things like exhibits, like museum exhibits that we curate, and also create new works for. We cross-collaborate with academic institutions to transform academic ideas into things that are multi-sensory, more acceptable to larger audiences.”*

Abbas went on to add, “We are a creating group of people. We’re a group of people that lean into creation. And so crafts and music and innovating in that aspect, I think was something unique to our community.” Central to the story of MIPSTERZ is that it is a “group” and a “community.” It has a shared religious identity but its focus is on creativity beyond religious identity.

Community organizers can also create community around truly unexpected things – even mortality. Karen founded the Date with Death Club (although, as its website astutely observes, “We are all already members of the Date with Death Club – that is the nature of mortality”), informed by her personal spiritual practice of “befriending death.” Karen built a curriculum to guide community groups that meet,

*“to come together either in congregational-based or other public arenas, such as libraries or senior centers, specifically to explore different topics and themes related, not just to death and dying, but to the concept and the lived reality of mortality. But to do it not just for individual consumption, but explicitly to do it in community in order to grow connections, as well as deeper conversations.”*

Organizers, including Karen, run these community conversation groups to talk openly about mortality and death, which otherwise might be taboo topics. Participants are able to ask questions. Some confront death anxiety and others are interested in gaining deeper understanding of a topic, and through these discussions, community is formed.

### **3. Spiritual Practitioners**

We define as spiritual practitioners as those who have trained in a spiritual tradition and primarily focus their work to benefit other people who practice similarly, both inside and outside of that tradition. These spiritual practitioners are trying to create new delivery systems, making them distinct from the church-planters that we excluded from the study. While church-planters are reproducing the congregation as the central delivery system, these spiritual practitioners are creating new delivery systems. Spiritual practitioners may be ordained if they come from a tradition that has a leadership structure built on ordination, but just as often can be lay practitioners or can draw on traditions with no leadership hierarchy. In both cases, these innovators possess deep connections to their spiritual lineages. (For more details on our choice to exclude church planters, see Appendix A.)<sup>16</sup>

Yu-Shuan is an innovator whose organization shares “learning and healing pedagogy that’s rooted in our traditional wisdom and practices” with BIPOC women and femmes.

*“We offer these workshops that’s embodied, that’s community-based, anti-oppression learning. And the learning is healing-based as well because we see healing and learning very much connected. It’s never compartmentalized. So we create these healing and learning circles for communities, for*

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<sup>16</sup> The “intrapreneurship” movement of spiritual innovators working within congregations are included in the category of spiritual practitioners. These spiritual innovators are part of the congregational delivery system but are working to create new delivery systems within it, not replicate the congregation elsewhere. We did not speak to any self-identified intrapreneurs for this report.

*organizations, for people in the movement, for marginalized communities...Where is that medicine from and how do we continue to build and strengthen that relationship, that reciprocity to the lineage? So it's offering peer-to-peer support for these practitioners that are doing incredible work and oftentimes in silos."*

Yu-Shuan says that the goal of the Sacred Roots organization is to create "diasporic interwoven medicine from different indigenous traditions and wisdom. And in doing so, as we learn about different people's practices, we actually come back to our own."

Vanessa's social justice work at the Puentes Collective also takes the form of drawing upon "BIPOC spiritual practices of healing and resilience:"

*"The majority of us do have a Judeo-Christian foundation and background, but are not necessarily aligned one hundred percent with everything. Some of our members, including some of our board members, are actually ordained clergy, mostly for mainline denominations. And others of us have taken a different route. I myself, we reclaim a lot of our indigenous practices."*

Later in the interview, Vanessa continued to describe what informs her spiritual practices and the practices of others involved with the Puentes Collective:

*"So, some of us don't have elders that are still alive that can tell us what it was like for them before colonization, or how people kept the traditions because they would be murdered, they were persecuted. But having ancestral callings, building altars...some people know botany, some people know I do more like limpias, which are spiritual cleanses. So I think a lot of it is through books and learning and traditional Western learning, but also diving deep into spiritual spaces of, 'Then what would it look like for our ancestors to visit us in dreams? What does it look like for our ancestors to show up when we light sage?'"*

Like Yu-Shuan, Vanessa has deep roots to draw upon a wide repertoire of subaltern or even partially lost traditions. Lost knowledge can make innovation a necessity. At the same time, it seems that innovation itself is a spiritual practice of the Puentes Collective, where people gather to imagine possibilities of faith and justice.

For Rachel, incorporating nontraditional spiritual practices like meditation and chant amplifies the resonance and authenticity of Jewish traditions. While serving as a rabbi in a traditional synagogue setting, she learned about Jewish spiritual practices involving music and chant through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality:

*"I was like, 'Oh, this is what I want to do. This is how I want to do it.' Meaning, rooting Jewish spiritual practice in mindfulness and contemplative practice and meditation, and the modes of prayer that I was getting exposed to there, in terms of music and chant."*

Innovation, from Rachel's perspective, does not mean departing from Jewish traditional practices, but rather seeking out new ways in which those traditions could be expressed. In her organization, Malkhut, meditation, music and chant serve as delivery systems for prayer, which appeal to both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals seeking spiritual community.

Mark and Adam are leaders at the Ministry Collaborative and ordained leaders in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). The organization they work for primarily serves leaders in Christian churches and offers programming to strengthen the practice of Christian ministry. Adam was a beneficiary of the organization before he was an employee:

*"I'm a Presbyterian USA pastor by training and experience, that's what I was doing for several years before I came here. And that's how I got into this program, I was actually a member of one of the early cohort programs....when I started here, it was mostly just piecing together our cohorts. There was a lot of traveling just to meet with pastors and others who wanted to participate in our program."*

Adam's experience as a cohort member before joining the leadership team exemplifies the horizontal nature of the work that spiritual practitioner-type innovators do.

#### **4. Educators**

We identified two types of educators using their roles to try to create social change. First, *theological educators* work in institutions of higher education such as seminaries and divinity schools to teach religious professionals. We spoke to theological educators who were spearheading new initiatives in existing seminaries. Second, *religious educators* teach lay persons, both inside and outside of schools and houses of worship. Religious educators also create their own organizations, usually attributing the creation to a previously unmet need. Both types are formal professions and express similar motivations for their work, often rooted in a particular tradition and the motivation to connect others to the teachings of that tradition.

David is a theological educator who filled out the questionnaire on behalf of the Ignite Institute. Theological education is in the midst of a challenging transition as enrollment declines and fewer pulpits are available for the ordained leaders that theological schools have traditionally served. David's work at the Ignite Institute, located at a theological school, is meant to prepare the spiritual leaders of the future by tackling the challenges of theological education:

*"The idea of Ignite is to create much more access beyond people that would pursue a graduate education for that kind of preparation [in ministry]. So it's expanding the audience and the communities that have access to it to diversify who has access to that kind of preparation....[Ignite is] expanding the reach and is shifting the financial model of the institution, in order to say, how do we deliver this education, but not just as a one directional thing, but also, move from a teaching institution to a learning network?"*

Lisa, another theological educator, filled out the questionnaire on behalf of the Center for Transformative Spirituality. While David is thinking about the form of delivery of theological education going forward, Lisa is thinking about the content and the role that eco-spirituality will play for future religious leaders:

*“We’re developing eco-pathways through all of our degree programs. So we’ll be initiating an eco-pathway for our Master of Arts in Interreligious Studies this fall and hopefully an eco-pathway for our chaplaincy degree this coming year or the following year. I hope it’ll be this coming year. And we’re just restarting our doctor of ministry program here and that has a track in ecological leadership. I think we’re calling it Ecology and Religion Leadership for Life on Earth. So that’ll be part of our D.Min program. So we’re going to have soon a co-concentration or pathway through all of our degree programs as well as this certificate. We’ve started a certificate last year in eco-spirituality.”*

In contrast to the formal degrees offered by David’s and Lisa’s centers, situated inside of theological schools, the people who work for Rabata are examples of religious educators. Rabata is an organization that provides “creative educational experiences” for Muslim women. Describing its work, Eamaan said:

*“So our goal is really to find those women who are up to the task of teaching and leading their communities and provide them with the knowledge and the skills that they need to be able to do that. We also have a huge part of what we do is in education and communication. So not only do I want people to understand their faith, understand other faiths and how we interact with other faiths and how we kind of intersect with other faiths or people of no faith, but also how to teach and how to speak and how to write, whether you’re writing a book or an article or a blog or even a social media post, being able to communicate effectively.”*

Another example of a religious educator is Andy, who until recently co-lead a private school program for high school seniors called Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard. Andy’s motivation for the program was his realization that Asian and Asian-American Buddhists are often de-centered in discussions of Buddhism in the United States.

*“What we’re trying to say to these students is, American Buddhism isn’t just what white mindfulness teachers are doing or Richard Gere is doing, or something like that; that there’s a long tradition of Asian-American Buddhism in this country dating back over 150 years. The Merrimack Valley is actually an extraordinarily rich and diverse place to learn about them, just because there are Vietnamese temples and Cambodian temples and Lao temples and Thai temples. There’s a Chinese temple....I think one last piece is just to help also introduce students to the internal diversity of Buddhism.”*

With the help of his colleague Chenxing, Andy – himself a white American Buddhist – provides secular education that aims to disrupt his own privilege.

## **5. Entrepreneurs**

Spiritual innovation likely shares its origins with social innovation more broadly. In this way, spiritual innovators of the entrepreneur type share attributes with the more common category of social

entrepreneur, and perhaps can be considered a subset. The entrepreneurs with whom we spoke were distinguished from other innovators by their formal business structures, be they for-profit or non-profit. Within our proposed typology, it would be generally true to say that while faith-based organizers work on an *issue*, and community organizers work on a *community*, entrepreneurs work on a *business* (even if that business is not-for-profit), although of course these goals and forms can and do overlap.

Entrepreneurs often try to establish new delivery systems that work within the constraints of the market, and this is the heart of their work. Scott is an entrepreneur whose proposed delivery system enables “digital spiritual engagement.” The type of engagement does not matter to Scott – ultimately, it is up to the consumers to decide for themselves what type of spirituality they are looking for. Scott’s start-up is building a place for it:

*“I would say that there’s been a massive, steady erosion of traditional religious faith engagement, and it has not been filled by anything else that’s clear and compelling and accessible, and that the fallout of that is widespread and deep and not well understood. I think if you look at deaths of despair, you look at the loneliness epidemic, you look at obesity, you look at community engagement, you look at civic attachment. I could keep going on, I could pound away at the stats and the factoids, but we don’t have that sense of purpose and meaning. And people are trying to fill the gap with social media dopamine or something like that. But people need a reason to get up in the morning. People need a reason to love and care for their fellow human beings. And I think we’ve just lost a lot of that.”*

Scott is not offering the meaning per se, but rather a way to access it.

Entrepreneurs are distinguished by the language they use, relying on business frames to communicate their expected contributions to spiritual innovation. Josh, who recently co-founded a new non-profit, told the story in entrepreneurial terms:

*“It’s like product/market fit. You can have a great product, but if your market doesn’t want it or know that it needs it, it’s a really tough sell. Then a few things came along that allowed it to, we were able to store up a little bit of a runway. And it was like, all right, well, let’s give it a shot and see....Maybe a year from now it’s like nothing materialized and we’re shutting the doors. It doesn’t feel that way, but it was worth the risk.”*

Spiritual innovators like Josh use entrepreneurship as a common language. He runs a non-profit, but it is still useful for him to talk about product/market fit.

Entrepreneurs are often focused on building a lasting product. Danny is an example: “We really see ourselves as building a platform to help people build resilience against meaninglessness, against despair, against apathy by giving people tools to find or build their own sense of meaning and purpose in life.” Danny has a product, a pitch deck, and two examples of customer personas – although he refers to them as “seekers,” not customers.

These five types – faith-based organizers; community organizers; spiritual practitioners; educators; and entrepreneurs – are not mutually exclusive categories of innovators. However, because their focuses and their modes of operation are quite distinct from each other, relatively few groups embrace multiple strategies. Although individuals are most commonly in alignment with their organization, it is possible for an individual to favor one approach but work in a setting that favors a different approach; for example, a spiritual practitioner may work for a community organization. For these reasons, we have refrained from presenting hard-and-fast counts at this time.

### ***Liminality***

In learning about these efforts, we also identified a set of shared themes in the experiences of their leaders. First, group leaders discussed liminality, which refers to transitional states, ambiguity, and the people who are “betwixt and between” established categories. In a broad sense, all innovation is liminal by design, because what is innovative cannot stay innovative forever; all innovations are transitions. Liminal space is often where innovators find the freedom to imagine, create, and move fast, characteristics that are also by design. But the consequences of liminality are not always pleasant or conducive to creating a movement. For example, liminality was central to the experiences of many leaders, as their work often does not fit within any clear field and/or intentionally bridges areas and conversations not typically bridged.

For John, serving as a chaplain to marginalized people means working outside of traditional church structures, as he believes that the church was “not ready yet for queer people:”

*“I had become accustomed and comfortable on the margins of the church, more aligned with being a person and spiritual worker at the margins of things, a bridge between communities. In fact, I have frequently, even since before I started seminary, identified with being called from the church rather than exclusively to the church. I am most comfortable operating where the church meets the world. Now that doesn’t mean I don’t also have a call to work within church structures, but my particular zest and vocation finds its fullest expression at the edges and the in-between...because I resonate more with accompanying people in their meaning creation than being too concerned or overly concerned about my own beliefs or dogma or conveying them.”*

For some leaders like John, innovation means shifting away from typical church activities like teaching doctrine in order to focus on individual needs, which churches may not always be prepared for or know how to address. This is done “on the margins of the church” and “at the edges and the in-between” – in other words, in the liminal spaces.

As leaders navigated in liminal spaces, they often spoke of the challenges of moving others from black-and-white thinking to trying to change in the “gray areas” between different fields. This was often lonely work and, for those who went to theological school, was often a departure from a clearly-defined career path and the networks that came along with it. Unsure of what the future looked like, a few group

leaders saw their efforts as temporary, contributing to some wider infrastructure they could not yet see or define. Eugene, a former pastor and founder of an organization that enables individuals to create their own spiritual communities, illustrates his own experience of departing from traditional models of religious gathering:

*“This could have been compounded by COVID, but just like the loneliness, the isolation. Because I had stepped out of my church community, cut off from everyone. In other words, I was walking away from something I was already very good at into this realm of experimentation and unknown.”*

Danny the entrepreneur is also building new spiritual worlds on the margins and described having to navigate between the separate “worlds” of religion and technology:

*“This is a very liminal space that we are in because we are trying to bring two different worlds together. The world of spirituality and religion is probably at best neutral, at worst hostile to technology....And at the same time, the technology sector and for-profit sectors are wary and cautious of anything that might be associated with religion or spirituality. Also with good reason because of course, profiting off things like meaning and values can create some perverse incentives, let’s call it. So we are navigating this strange liminal space that many people avoid for frankly good reason and in which we want to be aware of the concerns that people have.”*

Since traditional religious institutions have relied upon a top-down model of religious authority for hundreds of years, the idea of placing the responsibility of spiritual counsel in the hands of an app is concerning for religious leaders and for-profit tech organizations alike. Like many innovators we spoke to, Danny is trying to reconcile two different delivery systems of spiritual guidance. His primary struggle lies in the inability of both “worlds” to accept the liminal space in between.

For some spiritually-innovative leaders of color, bridging the gap between tradition and innovation also involved confronting how whiteness has shaped religion, especially Christianity, throughout the history of the United States. Vanessa described how crossing the divide between Indigenous spiritual traditions and modern expressions of Christianity can be uncomfortable for BIPOC people:

*“So I think a lot of the justice work that Puentes Collective does is, how do we know the difference of who God is, versus who religion tells us God is....So we have to talk about decolonization, we have to talk about what the life of our ancestors was before colonizers came. And that can mean what was the role of women? What was the role of religious people? Because we had religion, we had faith. What was the role versus what the role is today? And those conversations are deep, those conversations are very painful.”*

Departing from contemporary religious practices and moving towards a more inclusive understanding of religion and spirituality meant addressing the influence of whiteness on modern definitions of religion. For Vanessa, imagining Christianity outside of whiteness was painful because she had to confront how Indigenous practices became subjugated to white Christianity in the first place, often through violent means like slavery.

Other BIPOC group leaders described the challenge of being in a liminal space between white Christianity and inclusivity, such as Raymond, the leader of an Asian-American political advocacy group: “There’s this mass neglect that we experience and then we internalize because we’re not sure how to exercise our voice because so many of our communities were shaped by white evangelical expectations of us.”

### ***Lack of a Common Frame***

Related to liminality are the challenges that come from spiritually-innovative work not fitting – by definition – into a clearly defined frame. This often made it difficult for colleagues and possible consumers to understand and engage with the work. One innovator works with Catholic sisters to redistribute their privately-owned land to marginalized communities. She explained how trying to work without a frame that others understood made it challenging to establish trust with those she hoped the work would benefit: “This isn’t a field. It’s not like, say, you work in immigration or reparations or whatever, but we had to decide whether to try to make this conversation happen when it wasn’t happening at all.”

This innovator noted that getting Catholic communities to believe in her good intentions was already hard because they historically had been taken advantage of by other outside groups. This skepticism, in her experience, was amplified by the ambiguity of what she was proposing to do with their land. The labor of overcoming this defensiveness added to the demands of the work itself, an experience that many spiritually-innovative leaders share as they try to expand the reach of their efforts.

Convincing others to buy into using their new products or delivery systems was also a challenge. Scott, the entrepreneur described earlier whose organization is dedicated to building personalized spiritual AI platforms for churches and individuals, highlighted the struggle of selling a product that people do not fully understand:

*“And then I would say on the member side, the consumer side, because spirituality has been such a technology wasteland for decades, people don’t have a sense of how it could be better. If you say, ‘Could I buy a tennis racket online?’, people can lock their brain around that now. But if I say, ‘Imagine if you could talk to a spiritual AI agent.’ I have to do a lot of talking after that to get that point across.”*

As with many innovations of the past, such as the iPhone and Amazon.com, leaders of spiritually innovative groups find it challenging to convey their vision of a changing spiritual landscape to those who do not hold that same vision. Scott’s AI platform would enable users to ask questions and access curated religious and spiritual information, such as 12th century rabbinic commentary or the Bhagavad Gita, in a personalized form. His innovation is not a reinvention of religious or spiritual traditions; rather, it permits users to gain insight from those religious and spiritual traditions in new ways. However, persuading others to adopt this new delivery system is a barrier.

Ultimately, for some groups, building relationships provided the foundation for creating a common language and sense of a shared effort. Typical marketing strategies were not very effective at translating new ideas, as Uvinie emphasized:

*“We thought that we had to put up ads everywhere and do the Facebook ad thing and the Google search thing. But at the end of the day, people aren’t clicking on something innovative. They click on things that are safe, like I like harem pants and I want more harem pants. Things that are like the things they know.”*

Although many innovative leaders expressed that having a background in social media marketing would benefit their businesses or efforts, Uvinie’s experience points to the potential difficulty of trying to build awareness through social media or other impersonal networks. Getting others to understand the benefits of their spiritually-innovative efforts required leaders to make personal connections and explain their work, which took an immense amount of time and effort.

### **Sustainability**

Given the nature of this work, leaders often spoke about the challenges of sustaining it. These concerns focused more on grant funding than on attracting constituents, though there is reason to suspect both are a challenge. Many group leaders struggled with funding and aligning their goals with what they perceived to be the goals of funders, both religious and secular. Dori, founder of a mental and spiritual wellness organization, described the challenge of attaining financial support from funders:

*“And one of the barriers is, grants shape culture. So if you’re wanting to do something counter-cultural, you have to find foundations that are doing things that are counter-cultural, or you have to be super creative in the way you write a grant. And I think that the obstacles that I’ve identified is there’s a lack of trust in building something that’s not confined within any one religious tradition.”*

Dori later spoke about a conversation she had with a “huge funder” about obtaining financial support for a young-adult mental health fellowship, in which the funder told her (in her words) that “we need to focus on the development of young-adult clergy for X, Y, Z denomination. We don’t have the bandwidth, the capacity, the imagination...to know that the next generation of spiritual leaders are going to come from this multiple-religious-identity place.”

Isaac, the executive director of a Boston-area housing organization called Creche (Charles River Episcopal Co-Housing Endeavor), outlined the difficulty of garnering help from traditional religious institutions:

*“So we’ve got one foot in the nonprofit housing world, and we’ve got one foot in the church world, and that makes it really hard to access resources in both because from the church side, they’ll look at what we’re doing and say, ‘Well, that’s not really church.’ Or even ‘that’s a threat to church. People are going to be joining Creche instead of joining a congregation. And the thing that we need to be focusing on is saving our dying congregations.’ And that’s really frustrating to me because we are super innovative,*

*but we're also super traditional. The things that we're doing are not that new across the 2000 years of Christian history."*

Despite drawing upon the model of monastic communities, which have been a fundamental part of Christian life for many hundreds of years, Isaac felt he faced resistance from traditional religious institutions because his work does not align with their definition of "church." Isaac stated that "the modern church has become very focused on churches and parishes as the definitive way to be Christian," but personally believes "there's so many other rich models of how one can respond to the gospel with a transformed life."

Ironically, Isaac mentions that those living in Creche communities are more likely to become immersed in their local congregations, citing the example of a Creche house community member who became the president of her local church's building commission. Several other group leaders expressed a similar frustration with the lack of "imagination" in traditional religious institutions, claiming that they struggled to find funding if they did not commit to prioritizing evangelism or building congregations.

Several respondents also voiced common challenges in grant-making related to the transparency of funding priorities and the bureaucratic navigation required to apply for funds. The leader of a Jewish counseling effort highlighted her experience of applying for funding from a philanthropy organization. Despite having prior experience with grant writing, this leader was not aware of the other implicit steps necessary to successfully obtain a grant.

A few other interviewees noted their own lack of understanding about funder expectations, indicating that they only learned about these procedures through trial and error. This speaks to the "hidden curriculum" of the grant-funding world with which some leaders are not familiar.

Several leaders of innovative groups noted that certain barriers to starting an organization, such as learning about marketing and social media, were able to be figured out over time with hard work. However, to some, understanding the funding landscape felt unattainable because it depended on the actions and timelines of others. As Seanan stated: "I don't know how some of all this works. I don't know if individual donors, what they're thinking and what they're invested in. Just the way that this work is supported feels really out of my control. I feel like there's things I can do, but that's the thing that feels most reliant on other people's stuff lining up."

Interestingly, the innovators who spoke about sustainability challenges were focused almost entirely on working with grant-making organizations and did not often consider other business models for their work. This is an intriguing departure from the congregational business model that relies on constituent dollars. More work is needed to understand the other business models that could offer sustainability in this landscape, such as donations from constituents or fees for service.

## Next Steps

This working paper outlines a set of paths that led to spiritually innovative work among groups as well as a set of themes common among their leaders. It is a first attempt to describe disparate and disconnected efforts as parts of a larger phenomenon. The vast majority of efforts were started and are sustained by people with formal religious training, raising questions, again, about the changing delivery systems through which religious leaders today aim to work to best meet their goals.

This analysis focuses entirely on the *supply* of spiritual and religious materials, not at all on how they are received by those they aim to serve (i.e. the *demand*). Research on the demand side is necessary, but will be difficult because innovative groups have different capacities to gather and share information about their impact and their constituents. Research is especially needed on efficacy in order to help practitioners understand the landscape from the perspective of individuals.

We will continue analyzing these supply-side interviews to more fully understand the role of religious organizations and dollars, the variety of models for the delivery of content, the opportunities and challenges experienced by different unique communities, new manifestations of diversity and religious pluralism as people partner with organizations from other traditions, and important changes in the field since the COVID-19 pandemic, among other topics. We welcome feedback and questions [here](#).

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**Tables**

**Table 1: Demographics of Stakeholder Interview Sample**

	N	%
Gender		
Male	12	41
Female	17	59
Age		
30-39	5	17
40-49	7	24
50-59	11	38
60+	6	21
Race		
American Indian	0	0
Asian	2	7
Black	3	10
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0
White	22	76
Other/Two or more/Chose not to identify	2	7
Ethnicity		
Jewish	2	7
Non-Jewish	27	93
Hispanic/Latino	0	0
Non-Hispanic	29	0
Religious Upbringing		
Protestant denominations	17	59
Catholic	3	10
Other Christian traditions	2	7
Jewish	3	10
Muslim	1	3
Buddhist	0	0
Hindu	0	0
Sikh	1	3
Unitarian Universalist	0	0
Spiritual (includes SBNR)	1	3

Unaffiliated	1	3
<b>Current Religion</b>		
Protestant denominations	12	41
Catholic	2	7
Other Christian traditions	3	10
Jewish	3	10
Muslim	1	3
Buddhist	2	7
Hindu	0	0
Sikh	1	3
Unitarian Universalist	3	10
Spiritual (includes SBNR)	1	3
Unaffiliated	1	3
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>		
HS or Trade Diploma	0	0
Some college	0	0
2-year degree	0	0
4-year degree	1	3
Master of Divinity	10	35
Other graduate/professional degree*	18	62
<b>Attended Seminary/Theological School</b>		
Yes	22	76
No	7	24
<b>Ordained</b>		
Yes	16	55
No	13	45
<b>Region</b>		
Northeast	9	30
South	8	28
Midwest	2	7
West	8	28
Outside US	2	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Some individuals with PhDs and other professional degrees also earned a Master of Divinity. The total number of respondents with an MDiv. was 12.

**Table 2: Demographics of Group Leader Interview Sample**

	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	30	41
Female	38	52
Other	5	7
<b>Age*</b>		
26-30	6	8
31-40	17	23
41-50	30	41
51-60	10	14
61-70	7	10
71+	3	4
<b>Race</b>		
American Indian	1	1
Asian	8	11
Black	7	10
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0
White	50	68
Other/Two or more/Chose not to identify	7	10
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Jewish	9	12
Non-Jewish	64	88
Hispanic/Latino	5	7
Non-Hispanic	68	93
<b>Religious Upbringing</b>		
Protestant denominations	30	41
Catholic	8	11
Other Christian traditions	5	7
Jewish	12	16
Muslim	5	7
Buddhist	2	3
Hindu	1	1
Sikh	0	0
Unitarian Universalist	2	3

Spiritual (includes SBNR)	0	0
Unaffiliated	8	11
<b>Current Religion</b>		
Protestant denominations	23	31
Catholic	2	3
Other Christian traditions	6	8
Jewish	11	15
Muslim	7	10
Buddhist	6	8
Hindu	0	0
Sikh	0	0
Unitarian Universalist	5	7
Spiritual (includes SBNR)	10	14
Unaffiliated	3	4
<b>Highest Level of Education</b>		
HS or Trade Diploma	1	1
Some college	2	3
2-year degree	1	1
4-year degree	10	14
Master of Divinity	14	19
Other graduate/professional degree**	45	62
<b>Attended Seminary/Theological School</b>		
Yes	42	58
No	31	42
<b>Ordained</b>		
Yes	26	36
No	47	64
<b>Region</b>		
Northeast	29	40
South	14	19
Midwest	12	16
West	18	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>73***</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Mean age is 45.9 years.

\*\*Some individuals with PhDs and other professional degrees also earned a Master of Divinity. The total number of respondents with an MDiv. was 24.

\*\*\*For two groups, we interviewed two leaders at the same time.

**Table 3: Demographics of Organization Interview Sample**

	N	%
<b>Age of Organization in Years*</b>		
Less than 6 months – 2 years	15	21
2.1-4	18	25
4.1-6	11	16
6.1-8	8	11
8.1-10	8	11
10.1+	11	16
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Protestant	15	21
Jewish	9	13
Muslim	6	8
Buddhist	5	7
Catholic	2	3
Unitarian Universalist	2	3
Something else**	11	16
Unaffiliated	21	30
<b>Congregational Affiliation</b>		
Yes	13	18
No	58	82
<b>Primary Activity</b>		
Advocacy	5	7
Community Programming	31	44
Consulting	9	13
Education	18	25
Human Service	6	8
Research	2	3
<b>Organizational Model</b>		
Independent nonprofit	29	41
Project/program of an organization	15	21
Informal membership organization	8	11
For-profit	8	11
Nonprofit under fiscal sponsorship	11	16
<b>Region</b>		

Northeast	26	36
South	13	18
Midwest	11	16
West	21	30
Formal Religious Affiliation***		
Yes	49	69
No	22	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Mean age is 5.96 years.

\*\*This category includes Christian ecumenical, Jewish-Christian, interfaith, and “all traditions.”

\*\*\*This designation refers to groups that have either received funding from formal religious institutions (e.g. denominational bodies, churches, synagogues, or parachurch organizations) or are led by individuals with formal religious education (e.g. received degrees from seminaries or theological schools or are officially ordained) – in other words, groups that are connected to the existing infrastructure.

**Table 4: Five Genealogies of Social Innovators**

Category	Primary Religious Focus	Distinguished by...	Frequency in data
<b>Faith-based organizers</b>	Issues	One intense focus	Less common
<b>Community organizers</b>	Community	Bridge-building	More common
<b>Spiritual practitioners</b>	Praxis	New ways of gathering	More common
<b>Educators</b>	Teaching and learning	Curriculum creation and change	Reference category
<b>Entrepreneurs</b>	Market-based delivery system*	Market discourse	Less common

\*The definition of delivery system appears in the working paper as “the ways in which individuals learn about and connect with religious, spiritual, and other meaning-making systems.”

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## **Appendix A. Research Methods**

The data in this report represents what we believe to be the first attempt to map spiritual innovators working in the United States. It is a first look and is intended to present a descriptive, rather than representative, sample of groups working in this area. This means that our research strategies prioritized reaching as many groups as possible over gathering proportional samples of each possible type of group. Because the composition of the field is currently unknown, proportional samples are not possible because there is no frame from which to sample.

### **Phase I: Stakeholder Interviews**

To contextualize current efforts at spiritual innovation, we decided to conduct a set of interviews with key stakeholders in the emerging spiritual innovation ecosystem. Stakeholders, as we defined them, were individuals that had a broad perspective on the social history of spiritual innovation and/or held significant roles in groups or organizations working to develop the field of spiritual innovation. Some of these groups are referenced in the Social Context section of the working paper. This was the only stage of the research that centered individuals.

To identify our list of stakeholders to interview, we first asked for recommendations from our partners and Advisory Group, as many are leaders in organizations building networks of spiritually-innovative groups. We then selected an initial group of the ten people most frequently recommended to us and approached them for interviews. At the outset of this phase of the project, we aimed to interview 20 stakeholders, but as we received more recommendations from our partners and interviewees, we increased our list to 32 stakeholders. From March to July 2024, we interviewed 29 stakeholders.

Interviews took place over Zoom, were conducted by two interviewers, and were recorded and transcribed. Interview length ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours and 45 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 1 hour. Interviews were fully transcribed by human transcriptionists at Rev.com. Interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti for analysis.

### **Phase II: Creating the Sampling Frame**

A sampling frame is the list of members of a population. Many sampling frames are pre-existing, comprehensive lists. Our sampling frame was neither. One researcher focused on compiling a spreadsheet that listed all possible groups for inclusion in the sampling frame. Two other researchers helped to determine whether groups met the criteria for inclusion. By centering groups instead of individuals, we prioritized efforts with an organized element – i.e. e.g. creating a particular product, facilitating a type of community, or providing a service – and efforts with some structure to move the work forward beyond the commitment of one individual.

Because our focus was on the creation of new delivery systems, which we defined as the ways in which individuals learn about and connect with religious, spiritual, and meaning-making systems, we excluded from analysis all church-plants, unless the formation of a new worship community also

offered a delivery system for spiritual and religious content that was not congregational. In other words, the people who are working to reproduce the congregational model are not included in this sample.

Snowball sampling for innovative groups began during the correspondence with stakeholders, who informed us of groups they knew of or had previously worked with. A few of these stakeholders provided lists of innovative groups, which we looked through for groups that fit our definition, i.e.: Spiritually innovative groups are inspired by the world's religious traditions to create social change, often but not always by disrupting traditional delivery systems and providing different aspects of those traditions and/or translating them in new ways.

We also searched the websites of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Foundation for religiously- or spiritually-motivated innovative efforts that received grant funding from 2008 to the present. And we looked at the websites of 202 seminaries, theological schools, and religious colleges and universities for religiously- or spiritually-motivated innovative programs, and we reached out to the alumni offices of these organizations to put us in contact with alumni who might also be leading or starting innovative efforts. We also examined reports from organizations like the Fetzer Institute and the University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture that conducted similar mapping work on religious innovation. We searched public interest articles from websites like Philanthropy.com for groups doing spiritually-innovative work.

We identified additional efforts through IRS data. We first sampled New York religious and spiritual development organizations, using the IRS activity code. We focused on New York first because of the high levels of religious diversity in the New York City metropolitan area. We excluded congregations. We further narrowed the sample to organizations that had a ruling date of 2008 or later, brought in \$50,000 or more in income per year, and had \$25,000 or more in assets. We set these cut-off points because of our interest groups with sustainable models. We then contacted a random subset of these groups. After sampling New York, we determined that IRS records would be a good source of data for organizations outside of our existing networks. We then drew samples from IRS records for Utah, Ohio, Illinois, Texas, New Mexico, and Florida. We selected the other 6 states because they were regionally diverse, religiously diverse, contained large metropolitan areas, and had significant BIPOC populations. Neither time nor resources allowed us to sample from all 50 states.

Combined, these methods garnered a list of 878 organizations nationwide.

### **Phase III: Questionnaire and Cleaning**

We then distributed a survey to all 878 of the groups identified in Phase II and through the email lists of the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, Glean Network, innoFaith, the Fetzer Institute, and the Association for Theological Schools (ATS). Data collection occurred between February 6 and April 30, 2024.

We focused data collection on efforts that started as groups between 2008 and the start of data collection in 2024. In practice, this meant collecting information on groups formed between 2008 and 2023. In order to get an understanding of spiritually-innovative efforts across the United States, we collected data from groups and their leaders about group age, religious and congregational affiliation, staff and volunteer size, annual budgets, grant funding, beneficiaries, geographic location, and personal demographics.

After closing the questionnaire on May 1, 2024, we cleaned the data, deleting all entries produced by bots and keeping all entries that aligned with our definition of spiritual innovation. Out of the 1056 total responses we received, 228 fit our definition of spiritually innovative and suited the parameters we set: groups (not individuals) that are US-based, were founded after 2008, and have an organizational structure or stated purpose.

**Table A1. Number of Groups that Responded Based on Identification Method**

Method	N	%
Email solicitations and personal outreach	112	49
Through network/snowball sampling	68	30
Grantee lists	25	11
Personal research from team members	14	6
IRS records	7	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100</b>

Table A1 shows the methods through which we identified efforts. Of these 228 efforts, 3% came from IRS data and 6% came from personal research from members of our research team. 11% came from lists of grantees from the Luce and Lilly foundations, and 30% came from lists and data that members of our networks had compiled of spiritually-innovative groups. 49% of the spiritually innovative efforts on our list came through outreach efforts from members of our core team and advisory board, including all the email newsletter solicitations by the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, Glean Network, innoFaith, the Fetzer Institute, and ATS.

*Summary Statistics: All Groups (N=228)*

The data shows broad diversity within the 228 groups that responded to our questionnaire. Their annual budgets ranged from \$0 to \$4,000,000, and 40% of the efforts disclosed annual budgets less than \$100,000 per year. 71% of the efforts reported having paid staff, ranging from 1 to more than 15. The breakdown of paid staff, staff hours, and volunteer hours are shown in Tables A2, A3, and A4.

**Table A2. Groups with Paid Staff (N=159)**

Number of Paid Staff	N	%
1-5	90	56
6-10	38	24
11-15	9	6
>15	11	7
Unsure/No answer	11	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table A3. Total Staff Hours Per Week (N=159)**

Staff Hours/Week	N	%
1-40	41	27
41-80	24	15
81-120	23	14
>120	58	36
Unsure/No answer	13	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table A4. Volunteer Hours per Week Among Groups with Volunteers (N=151)**

Volunteer Hours/Week	N	%
1-10	56	38
11-20	26	17
21-40	20	13
>40	20	13
Unsure/No answer	29	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>100</b>

Funding played a significant role in getting many of these efforts off the ground. The three most prevalent forms of initial funding mentioned by interviewees were private donations, self-funding, and grants. Many groups received funding from a combination of these sources. Foundations, especially the Lilly Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Fetzer Institute, contributed greatly to the establishment of the 228 efforts we identified.

Groups affiliated with religions other than Protestant Christianity received funding from other foundations; for example, the Covenant Foundation was a significant funder of Jewish organizations, and the WF Fund provided grants for several Muslim efforts. Some efforts received administrative support from incubators and accelerators, such as the Beloved Network and Praxis.

#### **Phase IV: Outreach and Group Leader Interviews**

We were aware that Protestant groups and groups with white leadership were likely overrepresented in our sampling frame. By Protestant groups, we mean groups that identified as or affiliated with an Evangelical, Mainline, or Historically Black denomination, as defined by the Pew Research Center. By BIPOC-founded, we mean that the original leadership of the group self-identified as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color.

We prioritized interview invitations to groups that were not Protestant or were BIPOC-founded to offset their underrepresentation in our sampling frame. Given that this was an initial effort, our outreach focused on breadth – capturing the widest range of participants possible – rather than depth.

To select interview respondents, we first divided the groups into four categories:

- Non-Protestant BIPOC-founded
- Protestant BIPOC-founded
- Non-Protestant Non-BIPOC-founded
- Protestant Non-BIPOC-founded

We began interviews with the Non-Protestant BIPOC-founded category, knowing that this smallest group would be the most difficult to achieve saturation.

We also sampled for diversity within these four categories by thinking about the groups' theories of change (i.e. does the group aim to execute change at an individual level or a societal level?) and intended audiences/beneficiaries (i.e. does the group aim to serve the same population as its members or does it aim to reach outside that community and serve a broader population?). We created a 2x2 table (see Table A5) and placed each group in a quadrant. We then selected an approximately even number of groups from each quadrant.

**Table A5. Theories of Change Interview Strategy**

<b>Individual/Inward</b>  Effort focused on changing <i>individual</i> first; seeks to benefit <i>one</i> population represented by group	<b>Individual/Outward</b>  Effort focused on changing <i>individual</i> first; seeks to benefit <i>broader</i> population not represented by group
<b>Society/Inward</b>  Effort focused on changing <i>society</i> first; seeks to benefit <i>one</i> population represented by group	<b>Society/Outward</b>  Effort focused on changing <i>society</i> first; seeks to benefit <i>broader</i> population not represented by group

In total, we conducted interviews with leaders of 71 spiritually-innovative groups, 31% of which were BIPOC-founded. Interviews took place over Zoom, were conducted by one interviewer, and were recorded and transcribed. Interview length ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours, with most interviews lasting about one hour. Interviews were fully transcribed by human transcriptionists at Rev.com. Interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti for analysis.

### **Phase V: Data Analysis**

We used Atlas.ti, a qualitative coding software, to thematically analyze the interview transcripts. Two researchers coded the interview transcripts. The 29 stakeholder interviews were analyzed separately from the 71 group interviews.

Our analysis began as pure grounded theory. Grounded theory refers to the methodological approach where researchers have no preconceptions about the data and allow the theory to be derived entirely from the data. Because this is an area that has not been extensively studied, we were not guided by existing theories from sociology or other disciplines. Simply put, we would not have known what theories to draw upon.

As themes emerged in our coding, we began to draw on scholarly language to describe those themes. For example, we presented in the main working paper an analysis of how the innovative groups viewed themselves as “liminal.” Liminal is a term that has meaning both in the study of religion and the world of innovation, and we thought about those meanings after we discovered the theme. This was an interpretation that emerged from the data, rather than one that was imposed upon it.

### **Limitations**

As noted at the top of this appendix, this data is not representative and should not be interpreted as a definitive portrayal of the spiritual innovation field. Any similarities between innovative groups may be

due to the fact that data gathering was highly reliant on similar networks. Many groups were oriented towards progressive social change because our networks and partners are not as connected to groups that advocate for conservative social change.

Just as the innovators themselves struggled with finding a shared frame, the research also dealt with the lack of a common language. Some people did not answer a call for spiritual innovators because they do not know what that is or do not like to employ the term. In a sense, we sampled on the dependent variable: we mainly talked to spiritual innovators who called themselves “spiritual innovators.”

There is an optimistic or pro-social bias in the data. Bad innovations are not called innovations; they are called anything from “cults” to “crimes.” However, in sociology, deviant behavior is often siloed. Anti-social innovations are beyond the scope of the current research. There is also survivorship bias in the data. It was difficult to locate efforts that have ceased to exist and we were only able to identify five defunct efforts in total.

We suspect that Catholic innovators are very underrepresented in the data. It is unclear why. We also suspect that Muslim innovators are very underrepresented, and we believe this is due in part to negative connotations that the term “innovation” has in Islam.

## Appendix B. Interview Guides

### Interview Guide – Stakeholders

Thanks so much for your time. We are eager to hear about your work and experience. This interview is for the Mapping Spiritual Innovation project at the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, which focuses on the efforts of those inspired by world religious traditions to create social change. The interview should take around 30-45 minutes to complete.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your background and how you came to your current role?
  - a. Born where
  - b. Education
  - c. Religious/ spiritual affiliations over time
2. What is the mission of the organization where you work and how did you come to be involved in that organization?
  - a. Probe for connection between personal background and the mission of this organization.
3. We are learning about spiritual and religious changes in the United States, especially in the last twenty years. What do you see as the biggest changes during this time?
4. Can you say a bit about how you think about the causes of these changes?
5. The consequences of these changes?
6. How are these changes informing the work of your organization? What is its vision? What is your vision?
7. I know you have been involved with organization x/movement y. Can you tell me about it and, specifically, how it relates to broader religious and social changes in the last twenty years? (Skip if a repeat of 6.)
  - a. What are its aims?
  - b. How does it relate to other efforts in this ecosystem?
8. What are other creative efforts in the spiritual and religious space you have seen emerge in the last twenty years?
  - a. Do they group in certain ways?
  - b. How do they relate to each other?

9. Some people are using the language of spiritual innovation to describe your work and that of others. Does that language resonate with you?
  - a. What does the term spiritual innovation mean to you?
  - b. How, if at all, do you think about spiritual innovation relating to social innovation?
10. For funders, how has your organization thought about and allocated funds to support this work?
  - a. How, if at all, has that strategy changed over time?
  - b. What are the successes that have come out of that funding?
11. For incubators, what has your group focused on its incubation efforts?
  - a. How, if at all, has that strategy changed over time?
  - b. What are the successes that have come out of that funding?
12. For everyone, what have we not talked about that you would encourage us to think about?
  - a. Who do you see as leaders around spiritual and religious innovation?
13. Demographics - Individual:
  - a. Gender and sexual orientation
  - b. Age
  - c. Race/Ethnicity
  - d. Geographic location
  - e. Religious/spiritual affiliation
  - f. Education background
  - g. What is the religious/spiritual affiliation in which you were raised? Is it the same as now?
  - h. Are you currently employed? Full time? Part time? Student?
14. Demographics - Organization
  - a. Year of founding
  - b. Annual budgets since that time
15. Organizational model (i.e. 501c3, fiscal sponsor, etc.)

## Interview Guide – Groups

Thank you for talking with us today about your work in spiritual and religious innovation. You described NAME OF EFFORT in the screening questions. This interview is for the Mapping Spiritual Innovation project at the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, which focuses on the efforts of those inspired by world religious traditions to create social change. The interview should take around 45-60 minutes to complete.

Before we begin, I want to let you know that your participation is completely voluntary: you do not have to answer any question, and you may stop the interview at any time. Also, you may remain anonymous if you wish: if so, you will be referred to using a pseudonym in any final reports. Would you like to remain anonymous?

Is it all right to record this interview in addition to taking notes?

### Basics

1. In your own words, can you tell us about the mission of NAME OF EFFORT?
2. What are the main activities of NAME OF EFFORT?
  - a. What is the spiritual or religious connection here?
  - b. Is it connected to a local congregation?
  - c. Where is it located geographically?
3. Who are the main beneficiaries?
4. What is your role in NAME OF EFFORT and how, if at all, has it changed over time?
5. How did you come to be involved?

### Background

6. Can you tell us how NAME OF EFFORT got started?
  - a. What is the primary need you/the founder set out to meet?
7. What people and groups helped the launch?
8. How and where did you find funding?
9. What were the barriers to getting this off the ground?
10. What are the inputs to keeping this effort afloat?

### Delivery System / Organizational Model

11. Can you tell us a bit about what a usual week or month is like at NAME OF EFFORT?
12. What are the projects or goals that your organization is currently working towards?
13. What are your hopes for future successes with NAME OF EFFORT?
14. How do you know if you are successful?
15. What are some of its biggest successes?
16. What are some of its biggest challenges?

17. What are some of the areas you'd like more training, education, support in?
18. What has NAME OF EFFORT's experience been with working across difference (be they differences of religion, race, sexuality or other factors?) How do you work to mitigate differences that may arise from those differences?
19. What is the leadership model for this effort and how are decisions made?
20. Are there other groups or people that are key partners or collaborators?

## Conclusion

21. Given the opportunity to expand your programming, where would you like to see NAME OF EFFORT go next?
22. What have we not asked that we need to know to understand your work?
23. Demographics - Individual:
  - a. Gender and sexual orientation
  - b. Age
  - c. Race/Ethnicity
  - d. Geographic location
  - e. Religious/spiritual affiliation
  - f. Education background
  - g. What is the religious/spiritual affiliation in which you were raised? Is it the same as now?
  - h. Are you currently employed? Full time? Part time? Student?
24. Demographics - Organization
  - a. Year of founding
  - b. Annual budgets since that time
25. Organizational model (i.e. 501c3, fiscal sponsor, etc.)



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