Information Culture and Belief Formation in Religious Congregations

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by

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Information Culture and Belief Formation in Religious Congregations

Chapter I: Introduction

Belief is an important area of study given the extensive impacts of belief and the wide array of factors thought to impact belief. With the current study, I bring a unique information science approach to the study of belief, seeking to develop an understanding of the intersections of information behavior and belief formation. This is done within a defined scope—focusing only on United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations. Analyzing groups within local congregations, rather than an entire denomination, allows for deeper analysis according to the research objectives. Data collection focused on beliefs about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) inclusion within two UCC congregations located in Northeast Ohio. These beliefs help narrow the scope of analysis and act as potentially important data concepts, although discussion of any belief inevitably extends to other core beliefs. Given the widespread discussions of these beliefs, it is important to analyze any connections beliefs may have with a congregation’s information behavior.

Data gathered about a congregation’s buy-in regarding denominational beliefs is a potentially valuable tool for denominational leaders. Qualitative data on belief formation and its links with information behavior advance thought in information science, belief, and religious studies research. By focusing on the designation of Open and Affirming (ONA)—a designation that highlights a congregation’s beliefs about LGBT inclusion—the research provides UCC leaders with potentially valuable information about the role of information and beliefs in the development of a culture of inclusion. The UCC promotes this culture development as an important element of congregational vitality.
Term Definitions

References to the *church* are references to the UCC denomination as a whole. Local branches of the larger UCC denomination are referenced as *congregations*. *Attendees* include individuals attending the congregation on a regular basis who are not necessarily full members. Individuals in focus groups (FGs) are referred to as *participants*. Individuals in the context of business organizations are referred to as *affiliates* to avoid confusion. These include case studies commonly found in the organizational communication and knowledge management (KM) literature. A distinction is made between case study affiliates and congregational attendees, because most of the case studies reference for-profit organizations and lack the religious focus of the current study. The focus on religious congregations as *organizations* extends the traditional definition of organizations as large, industrial complexes (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). *Values* are explicit belief statements and, along with *beliefs*, are used to refer to either explicitly or tacitly held beliefs.

UCC

The precursors of the UCC tradition rose out of the 16th century Reformation in Europe, and the subsequent rise of Lutheran and Reformed churches proclaiming that the Bible itself was a more sufficient rule of faith than the Pope (Post, 2007). The present-day UCC formed from a combination of Congregational Christian Churches and Evangelical and Reformed Churches in 1957. This combined denomination valued both the traditional liturgical expression and the free congregational tradition (Post, 2007). In other words, it maintained traditional styles of European worship and liturgy while espousing the value of free expression not constrained by any established hierarchy.
The UCC is a Congregationalist denomination, meaning that the local congregations are in charge of their own organizing and politics (Post, 2007). This movement was a response to what was seen as the Puritanical rule over American colonial religion and the exclusivity of religious elites (Post, 2007). This exclusivity favored centralized authority and tighter conditions for church membership—concepts Congregationalists opposed.

The latest data from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) shows 5,320 UCC churches with over 1.1 million members. Ohio represents the 11th largest state distribution of UCC adherence in America (The ARDA, 2007).

**Open and Affirming**

I argue that the UCC’s ONA designations have been focused primarily on the inclusion of LBGT individuals. The UCC adopted the term, ONA, in 1985 at the Fifteenth General Synod of the UCC, reflecting language from the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Conference in 1984 where it was first introduced (UCC, 2013). Because of the denomination’s belief in equality, they have attracted a great deal of attention from groups both opposing and supporting LGBT concerns.

Research shows that religion impacts beliefs about homosexuality. According to a survey conducted by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, religion had the largest impact on beliefs about a) same-sex marriage, b) abortion, and c) the death penalty (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010). Individual congregations within the UCC decide upon ONA designation. This openness to the LGBT community has helped form beliefs in marriage equality and has extended to the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. The UCC was the first American Protestant denomination to ordain an openly gay person in 1972, with its ordination of Rev. William R. Johnson (UCC, n.d.b.).
Given the widespread struggles of denominations with the issue of ordaining gay clergy—highlighted by decisions from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in 2009 and the Presbyterian Church, USA in 2011 to allow ordination of gay and lesbian clergy (ELCA News Service, 2009; Matheson, 2011)—this belief statement is important for UCC leadership.

**ONA Opposition**

The seemingly progressive actions by the UCC are not without opposition. The Biblical Witness Fellowship (BWF), established in 1978, was a group of individuals from the UCC that organized in opposition to the “UCC’s theological surrender to the moral and spiritual confusion of contemporary culture” (The Biblical Witness Fellowship, n.d., para. 2). Established before the official adoption of ONA language, the BWF attacked the UCC on many fronts. Its most recent opposition, however, had been to the UCC’s stance on marriage equality, arguing that God’s plan for marriage is only for heterosexual couples (The Biblical Witness Fellowship, n.d.).

Other congregations decided to leave the denomination entirely because of its stance on homosexuality. UCC congregations may voluntarily withdraw from the denomination at any time (McKee, 2004). Suffolk Christian Church in Virginia agreed in a two-thirds majority vote in 2006 to leave the denomination following the decision to ordain gay clergy (Mohler, 2006). Reports suggest that about 200 congregations have left the denomination over its stance on gay marriage (Auchmutey, 2009).

In the current study, I look specifically at a congregation’s beliefs about ONA, and the information that groups within these congregations use when discussing the issue. The results of previous surveys show that approximately 24% of UCC adherents believe that homosexuality “is a way of life that should be discouraged by society” (The ARDA, 2007, para. 2). The other 76% either agreed that this way of life should be accepted or had no direct opinion on the issue. The
current study provides an opportunity to analyze this trend according to a congregation’s ONA designation. Given the widespread controversy of this issue, it is important to study any role a congregation’s decision to become ONA may have on its attendees’ beliefs and information behavior.

**Beliefs**

Beliefs have been explored in a variety of contexts: technology (Brossard, Scheufele, Kim, & Lewenstein, 2009; Ho, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2008), consumerism (Shaw & Clarke, 1999), political science (Dickson, 2006), and religion (Barret & Lanman, 2008; Hardin, 1997). Beliefs are pieces of information held by individuals as true (Barrett & Lanman, 2008). Some researchers have identified belief in terms of cognition (Rott, 2004). Others have identified it in terms of faith (Batson, 1975) and dialogue (Brecht, 2010). Still others have attempted to define religious belief in terms of neural resources and brain function (Boyer, 2003). In the current study, I view religious belief formation in terms of information behavior.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined belief in three types: descriptive, inferential, and informational. Descriptive beliefs are based directly on observable events; inferential beliefs include the influence of past descriptive beliefs on a current event; and informational beliefs include the additional variable of the credibility of the source that is making a belief claim. This final belief concept correlates with the current study, as I seek to understand how information sources influence beliefs. This information, as an indirect measure of something, may or may not lead to belief (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). I seek to develop an understanding of the intervening concepts that impact whether or not information about something leads to a belief about something.
It is important to note that Fishbein and Raven (1962) defined beliefs as a marker of the probability of something existing or not, and they defined attitudes as an evaluation of whether or not this something is good or bad. I combine these definitions of belief and attitude to represent a singular definition of belief. This definition comes from my analysis of the collected data, as the nature of qualitative research allows that such a definition can be supplied by the research participants rather than by the literature. Analysis in the current study shows that reference to religious belief indicates that an individual agrees both with the probability of the existence of \( x \) and the goodness of \( x \). Indeed, a religious belief would not be held if it was considered improbable, or if an individual thought it to be evil. Participants assumed the existence of \( x \) when they articulated their beliefs about \( x \). Thus, in practice, no distinction between belief and attitude was noted. The collected data provides justification for this definition.

**Collective Belief**

Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) understanding of belief formation is highly individualized and does not sufficiently take into account the role of other individuals. They concern themselves with the role of an individual’s own position in the acceptance of information, rather than with the role of a reference group or opinion leader in this acceptance. I suggest that this social role can be a more powerful determiner of the acceptance of information than individual judgment, and thus belief formation is more determined by the social context of an individual than it is by the individual in isolation.

In the current study, I accept Gilbert’s definition of *collective belief* (Gilbert, 2004). Gilbert argued that human beings are not the only units capable of cognitive states. Rather, collective cognitive states exist in which the cognitive state expressed comprises two or more
human beings (Gilbert, 2004). Collective belief may include times when all or most of a population’s membership believes a certain thing. However, Gilbert argued that this is not always true, as a collective belief is often given when many in the population do not believe the same (Gilbert, 1987; Gilbert, 2004). Individuals may subscribe to the collective belief to avoid argument or rebuke, and this collective belief may be a negotiated or compromised belief that does not exactly match the beliefs of any one individual (Gilbert, 1987). Thus, a collective belief stands “insofar as the members . . . have all indicated their readiness to let the belief in question be established as the group’s belief” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 98).

Orléan (2004) distinguished further between degrees of collective belief. The first degree occurs when every member of a group believes $x$ but does not know if others in the group also believe $x$. The second degree occurs when each member of a group believes $x$ and also assumes that everyone else believes $x$. Orléan (2004) argued that these degrees repeat indefinitely and become common beliefs when everyone in a group believes $x$ and “everyone believes that everyone else believes that everyone else believes $x$” (199).

Wray (2001) argued against Gilbert’s definition of collective belief, arguing that these collective beliefs refer more to an acceptance rather than an actual belief. He argued that, if this acceptance were viewed as merely another state of belief, the group would seem to act irrationally. I argue from Caplan (2003) that this seemingly irrational behavior is a chosen one given that the cost of disagreeing may be too great for an individual. Thus, individuals not only accept the view of the group but also often take on the view of the group; they are with these individuals for long periods in an intimate setting. So, acceptance can lead to belief and can do so simultaneously; in such instances the distinction between acceptance and belief is unnecessary.
Thus, the group belief impacts individual belief. Wray (2001) argued, “What a person or group accepts is accepted in light of a goal or set of goals. Beliefs are not like this. They are not tailored to our purposes” (p. 325). I reject this assumption, as I argue that beliefs are tailored to our purposes in so far as they are tailored to our rational decision to accept a certain amount of irrationality and the accompanied cost to maintain a belief. The desire to be part of the group can be so important to an individual that they will not only accept but also believe whatever the group believes, fully acknowledging that it is irrational, but deciding that it is worth holding.

**Individual to group.** In accepting the collective definition of belief, it is important to outline the role of the individual in this collective process. Caplan (2003) noted the role of individual and collective belief formation in politics, and the influence of information on these beliefs. He argued that individuals are able to choose the degree to which information impacts them. These *rationally irrational* individuals make a decision to forgo the benefits of increased information in an effort to hold onto beliefs that are considered personally important or are deeply valued. Caplan argued that these individuals are more difficult for politicians to sway than those who are completely irrational or ignorant. The latter will accept new information from politicians, acknowledging their lack of information. The former reject new information, having convinced themselves of the sufficiency of their current information. Such a personal stance can have negative impacts on groups, because individuals will make political decisions based on their own privatized concerns even if it is collectively damaging.

Caplan (2003) argued that the cost of one’s irrationality increases as it becomes more personal, and this increased cost correlates with a decrease in irrationality. Thus, beliefs that have a greater personal impact are more likely to be rational and balanced in terms of information from both sides of a debate. More effort will be made to ensure the belief is as
informed as possible. For beliefs that have less personal impact and are less costly to the individual, irrationality increases. Everyone in society benefits when all individuals are all more rational, but most of the things individuals choose to be irrational about are the things that are less costly to them personally.

I argue that individuals in religious congregations may be more responsive than others to the needs of the group even when an issue does not directly impact them. I argue that this is based on the biblical call to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27, NIV). Thus, religious groups may have an increased number of issues that have personal relevance. This increase in issues should cause an increase in rationality and subsequent information seeking.

Thus, in the current study I seek to understand group belief with the understanding that not all members of the group necessarily believe it. The focus of the current study is on joint commitment that is a creation of the group environment itself, rather than a necessary agreement of one’s belief with another’s. This commitment creates an environment of conformity (Gilbert, 2004). Collective belief is something entirely different from individual belief. In analysis within the current study, statements made by individuals are attributed to the group, unless there is a clear indication that others do not agree. The absence of vocal or non-vocal resistance to a statement is considered to be group-level acceptance, even though it may be possible that not all individuals accept it.

Socially constructed belief is more important to the objectives of the current study than individual belief. If individuals do not voice their own beliefs, as is often noted in FGs, this is not an issue, as I am concerned with the final—often compromised—group output. This is important to note, as it has already been established that belief has been defined often as an individual

**The sociology of religious groups.** According to the sociology of religion, religion exists as a unique system that provides individuals with a sense of identity and partial answers to life’s most complex questions (Dowdy & McNamara, 1997). Berger (1969) agreed that religion is a means of making the world more meaningful. Such a definition is one according to function, i.e., religion exists to satisfy humanity’s need for answers and its distaste for uncertainty.

This attempt for answers in religion is often done in groups. Durkheim (1976) argued that religious belief led to group ritual, which in turn reinforced belief. This sets religious groups apart from many other social groups in terms of its importance in people’s lives. Stark and Finke (2000) argued that participation in a religious group is founded in social support, and that participation itself engenders more participation. Johnstone (2006) argued that the study of personal beliefs and emotions is difficult, and that sociology’s emphasis on the group makes it adept at studying this aspect of religion. Other disciplines are not so quick to forgo the personal, thus my decision to study belief in religion as a group phenomenon is purposeful and driven by my research questions.

The group function of religion is, therefore, essential to the sociological study of religion. The collective nature of religion “makes demands on the individual, requires sacrifice, and provides comfort and a sense of psychic rootedness” (Dowdy & McNamara, 1997, p. 4). Because of the nature of religion as an attempt to understand and make sense of the world, Durkheim (2006) argued that religion is at the heart of every social advancement: “We can say that nearly all the great social institutions were born in religion” (Durkheim, p. 9).
Mutual Influence In Congregations

Due to the unique nature of religious groups, the possibilities for mutual influence among attendees within these groups increases. The social networks that develop within churches also have an impact on individual behavior. Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett (2010) found that the friends a person has at church are more influential than the friends a person has outside of church. In an analysis of religious volunteerism, it was found that religious social networks—such as close friends in church, activity in religious small groups, and friends with whom a person can have religious conversations—account for almost all of the variance in volunteer activities (Putnam, Campbell, & Garrett, 2010). In other words, an individual’s religious networks are more influential than that same individual’s non-religious networks, thereby affirming the importance of the institution.

Social capital. The study of social capital (SC) is one means of identifying the probability within a religious congregation of mutual influence among attendees in the religious group setting. Some authors claim that, although SC can be developed in isolation, it is seen most clearly on the communal level (Hoffman & Appiah, 2008). A primary reason for this is that SC is embedded within the relationships among people, something not possible in isolation (Coleman, 1988). SC requires community, as an individual can have a well-connected individual network and still not gain SC because of a poorly connected community (Putnam, 2001; 2000). The qualities of both the individual and the organization or community, therefore, are an essential part of the conceptual make-up of SC. Religious congregations seem to offer a very connected community environment.

Putnam (2001; 2000) distinguished between bonding SC and bridging SC. Bonding SC describes the ways in which individuals in a group create strong relationships with a select few
others. Bridging SC, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which individuals make a broader net of relationships that are not as strongly tied (Putnam, 2001; 2000). Williams (2008) provided a succinct operational definition of four types of SC within religious groups. This includes trust, bonding, bridging, and linking SC. Trust denotes a sense of trust in God and other people. Bonding describes relationships built by being in the church. Bridging describes the ability of church members to meet new people because of their involvement in the church. Linking refers to the ability to connect with the surrounding community because of church involvement.

Thus, religious congregations have unique ways of influencing one another that make it necessary to study it as a social entity. By analyzing information and belief within the religious group, it is possible to take into account these social influences. By taking into account the sociology of religious groups and the mutual influence within these groups noted by SC dynamics, researchers are able to analyze the ways in which the group dynamic influences individual behavior and thought.

**Impacts of Belief**

There are important impacts of belief—including political engagement, education, and health. There is increasing consideration of the impact of religious belief. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life keeps extensive statistics on religious belief and its impacts, yet little is known about its origins. Ohio ranks below the national average in terms of the importance the population places on religion—with 55% saying religion is important in their lives (The Pew Form on Religion & Public Life, 2009).

**Religious conflict.** In the political arena, beliefs about abortion can impact presidential politics. Those supporting the legality of abortion tend to vote for Democratic candidates, and those opposing its legality tend to vote for Republican candidates (Cox, 2012). Many oppose the
impact of religious belief on political belief and action, however; the results of the 2008 General Social Survey (GSS) suggest that 45% of those surveyed agreed strongly that religious leaders should not try to exert influence on how people vote (Putnam, Campbell, & Garrett, 2010). This is up from 30% in 1991.

**Healthcare.** The general consensus of many is that Americans are often divided by religion and politics (Haidt, 2012). Recently, Americans have become increasingly divided over the issue of healthcare. Often, divisions come along religious lines. Those against the implementation of *ObamaCare*, as it has been labeled, argue specifically that the federal government should not be able to force employers to provide birth control coverage to employees when such coverage violates religious beliefs against abortion and sexual promiscuity: “Surely it violates freedom of religion to force religious ministries and citizens to buy health coverage to which they object as a matter of conscience and religious principle” (Dolan, 2012).

Others argue, however, that the decisions of these religious groups to not provide contraception to employees is an overstep of religious beliefs into the lives of individuals: “Just because your boss has a particular view of a certain medication doesn't mean he gets to decide that the company's health plan won't cover it” (Filipovic, 2013). This side argues that the beliefs of a company CEO should not dictate an employee’s access to healthcare, as this could become extreme in the cases of beliefs that oppose transfusions, vaccines, chemotherapy, etc.

Although the argument appears to be about the freedom of religion, it more accurately represents a disagreement about the role of birth control. Widely utilized by the vast majority of women (Daniels, Mosher, & Jones, 2013), much of the religious opposition to its use seems to stem from an assumption that it increases sexual promiscuity, or that efforts to have the
government pay for it come out of already increased sexual activity: “There is no question but that many have felt freer to engage in intimate promiscuity as a result of birth-control techniques” (Jackson, n.d.). In a highly publicized statement, radio personality Rush Limbaugh accused Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke of being a slut and a prostitute for her outspoken support for women’s access to birth control (Fard, 2012).

Information about the role of birth control often becomes the source of beliefs. Those who subscribe to Limbaugh’s way of thinking may take his accusation of Fluke as an authoritative information source that directs their own beliefs in a similar direction. Haidt (2012) argued that Americans are more interested in looking good than actually being good. Thus, our divisions are based primarily on self-interests: “Our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our group’s interests, in competition with other groups” (p. 221).

Wealth gaps. Even economic issues are becoming part of the religious sphere, as 46% of white working-class Americans believe “capitalism and the free market system are at odds with Christian values” (Jones & Cox, 2012, p. 5). On July 11, 2013, the US House of Representatives passed a farm bill that removed funding for food stamps (Walsh, 2013). The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, among other religious organizations, opposed the cutting of food stamp funding in an open letter (FRAC, 2013). Pope Francis repeated the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “Not to share one’s goods with the poor is to rob them and to deprive them of life. It is not our goods that we possess, but theirs” (Vatican Radio, 2013). Those supporting the cuts, however, include openly religious legislatures like Rep. Paul Ryan. Ryan argued that support for the cut comes out of religious belief in a smaller role for government (Delaney & Kaleem, 2013). Similarly, Rep. Stephen Lee Fincher argued that food stamp programs discourage work and
therefore go against biblical teaching in 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (NIV). He argued, similarly to Ryan, that the real religious argument is over the size of government (Delaney & Kaleem, 2013).

Thus, one side uses religious belief to argue that food stamps provide needed support for the poor. The other side uses religious belief to argue that food stamps increase the size of the government, thereby created an unethical environment of a lack of personal responsibility. Both use different sources of information to strengthen their religious beliefs about the issue.

**Health.** The impact of religious belief is an international phenomenon. In Nigeria, researchers credit strong adherence to religious belief with facilitating the development of education and health (Irekamba, Taiwo, & Ajani, 2012). It has also been argued that religious belief impacts overall health. A University of Miami researcher tested, among other things, a participant’s ability to delay gratification (Kaleem, 2009). He found that those with strong religious beliefs tended to have greater self-control, noted by decreased drug use.

**Animal treatment.** Deemer and Lobao (2011) argued from sociology that religion and politics are both defined by their beliefs, especially as it relates to the more marginalized groups in society. They also noted that both religion and politics provide the platforms for discussion of public issues. Deemer and Lobao (2011) assumed that, because the sacred texts of religion call for merciful beliefs regarding animal treatment, it is expected that religious people would care about animals. Thus, the sacred texts of religion should impact one’s political attitudes toward the treatment of animals. They found, however, that increased church attendance correlated with decreased concern for animal welfare. However, increased reflection on one’s belief system
correlated with increased concern. Thus, deep reflection on beliefs tends to incite more mobilization of concern.

**International conflict.** Religious conflict is certainly not merely an American phenomenon. With the recent overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, the general sentiment is that Muslims in that area are becoming less tolerant of religious pluralism (Mattingly, 2013). This represents a governmental restriction on religious freedom, as only 36% of the population in a recent poll felt it important that religious minorities be able to practice their religion freely—leaving little room for pluralism (Pew Research Center, 2011). Thus, religious beliefs become the source of conflict and opposition.

**Impacts on Belief**

It is also important to understand the impacts on belief, i.e., the phenomena that cause changes or solidification of belief. In the current study, I outline a new model to describe the informational impacts on belief. This includes an analysis of potential changes in the acquisition and use of information that is religious in nature. Research by Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) suggests that individuals increasing their overall information intake through higher education also tend to be more interested in religious issues. Whereas 24% of young adults not attending college noted a decline in the importance of their religion, only 15% of those earning at least a bachelor’s degree reported the same decline (Uecker et al., 2007). Thus, information seeking can lead to an increase in the salience of religion and a subsequent increase in the number of religious beliefs impacted by information. It is important that researchers in this area consider both the kinds of information used by these more religiously affiliated individuals and the impact this information has on the formation of beliefs about religious issues.
Another important question is whether information makes any important difference in belief formation. Hill (2012) argued that beliefs about creationism, for example, are so strongly held that information makes little difference. Likewise, Brossard et al. (2009) found that highly religious individuals were less likely to support controversial nanotechnology regardless of their level of knowledge. Thus, the quantity of information did not impact religious belief. I seek to extend this finding by analyzing the type, quality, and source of this information—rather than mere quantity. This provides a means of analyzing the relationships between information and religious belief to determine if a correlation exists.

Brown and Duguid (2000) noted that the end game of all information and knowledge was human need. Termed endism, this can help explain the broader context of religious information needs. Likewise, Wilson (1999) noted that information is a secondary need extending from more primary needs. In the current study, I seek to understand this primary human need as it exists for UCC congregations, the information sources used to fulfill this need, and how this information impacts belief formation.

**Strength of Belief**

Religious belief is an important phenomenon for study given its strength even in the face of contrary information. According to Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter (1956), individuals will hold more strongly to a belief after confrontation with disconfirming information—especially if that belief leads to irrevocable actions. According to Hardin (1997), the need for religious beliefs to be true—as they may lead to irrevocable actions—causes religious individuals to feel compelled to believe in contradictory statements. Hardin (1997) noted the fundamental religious belief that believers go to heaven and nonbelievers go to hell. Given the hypothetical case of a generous and good-natured aunt who discredits this fundamental belief, one is required to believe
that this wonderful person will be condemned to suffering in spite of their belief in this person’s essential goodness.

Utilizing a quasi-experimental design, Batson (1975) had religious individuals take pre- and post-tests on beliefs about the divinity of Jesus and the infallibility of the Bible. An intervening variable of a fake disconfirmation story supposed to be from the *New York Times* was read between tests. This story claimed that parts of the New Testament were found to be fraudulent. Batson (1975) noted that a rational information-processing model would predict that believers would consider this information and decrease the intensity of their belief. However, in line with the rationalizing model in dissonance theory, believers in the divinity of Jesus and the infallibility of the Bible who accepted the story as being true were significantly more likely than those not believing the story to be true to increase the intensity of their beliefs after hearing the story. Thus, after reading information believed to be true that went against their own beliefs, religious believers increased the intensity of their belief. “Being publicly committed to their belief and not having derogated the source of the disaffirming information, their only recourse would be to intensify their beliefs in order to defend their present cognitive integration against the attack” (Batson, 1975, p. 182). If information has an impact on religious belief, it is important to analyze the nature of this impact.

Thus, a question remains regarding whether or not information has any impact in religious belief. If, as noted previously, both sides of the food stamp debate can claim religious belief as a source for their stance on the issue, the question becomes whether or not a middle ground exists that relies on pure information without the strengthening force of religious belief.
Research Questions

Religious congregations are similar to any other organization in their composition of individuals with unique beliefs about reality. I argue that the social context of a congregation informs these individual beliefs. This social context manifests itself in an information culture that may meaningfully impact both the beliefs individuals have and the ways in which these beliefs are formed. Information in any organization often requires legitimization from the social network before it can be counted as factual (Huebner, Varey, & Wood, 2008).

In the current study, I outline an understanding of what these beliefs are, what information is used to form them, and how this information is used to form them in the midst of a broader social network in a religious congregation. The ONA designation is used to focus the research for deeper analysis, rather than to analyze superficially a number of different beliefs. To approach this question, the following research questions were proposed:

• RQ1: What are the current beliefs of UCC congregations?
• RQ2: What information is available to attendees in belief formation?
• RQ3: How is information used to construct religious beliefs?

The Problem of Religious Knowledge

It is difficult to study scientifically the origins of religious information, and these origins are not the focus of the current study. I am concerned only with the use and reproduction of religious information, rather than ultimate knowledge or the nature of knowledge itself. The research questions relate to how individuals use human-produced information and are not concerned with questions of the ultimate origin of this information. This question of ultimate origin has been explored extensively in theological literature. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his 13th century book, Summa Theologica, argued that an Unmoved Mover was responsible for all that
was in the world. This is known as the *Cosmological argument* for the existence of God, and it assumes that all knowledge is from God (Pelikan, 1978). Aquinas rejected the notion that God can be *known* through natural reason: “It is impossible to attain to the knowledge of the Trinity by natural reason” (Pelikan, 1978, p. 287). The only way humanity can *know* anything about God is by understanding the effects of God’s creation. The argument that God could be known through God’s creation is at odds with Anselm’s *Ontological Argument*. Anselm wrote, “I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand” (Pelikan, 1978, p. 259). Anselm spoke of a God that simply was.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Research Question One

This section will outline the literature supporting the first research question: What are the core beliefs of UCC congregations? As noted, the UCC is Congregationalist and lacks centralized authority. The UCC affirmed local congregational autonomy in the Kansas City Statement adopted in 1913 (UCC, 1913). The UCC is structured in such a way that the General Synods and historical creeds are “testimonies, not tests of the faith” (UCC, n.d.a., para. 1). Thus, the broader denominational meetings speak to rather than for the individual congregations. These congregations are free to accept or reject statements and resolutions made by the General Synod after careful consideration. The statements of the General Synods seek a balance between “freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith” (UCC, n.d.a., para. 1).

Four statements from the UCC were used as a starting point for the uncovering of attendee beliefs. At the initial stages of data collection, these statements were found under the “New to the UCC” section of the UCC denominational website. The website was changed toward the end of data collection, however, with the final statement deleted from this list. The UCC promotes these statements as core contemporary interpretations of doctrine for congregations. These are statements of belief, as each statement explanation includes the phrase we believe. I argue that each statement is applicable to a congregation’s decision to become ONA, and thus provides an important starting point for the uncovering of beliefs about inclusivity. An effort was made to gauge congregational buy-in of the following statements:

a) “Our faith is 2000 years old; our thinking is not,

b) No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,
c) Never place a period where God has placed a comma,

d) Isn’t it time for religion with relevance?” (UCC, n.d.e).

Belief a. I suggest that the first statement, “Our faith is 2000 years old; our thinking is not,” is an affirmation of beliefs about proper ways to read and use the Bible. The Bible is a core document for the development of belief within the UCC denomination. The UCC affirms that the Bible is the “authoritative witness to the Word of God” (UCC, n.d.a., para. 1). The denomination affirms that the “Holy Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice” (UCC, n.d.c., para. 3). The UCC stated, “In the Bible God has revealed his will toward man by the Law and by the Gospel” (UCC, 1929, para. 5). Rev. Fred Trost, former president and conference minister of the UCC’s Wisconsin Conference, argued that the Bible is the standard by which the UCC as a denomination should measure itself, calling it a ruler and quoting Barth that the church will always have to "re-assess itself by the standard of the Holy Scriptures" (Trost, 2000, para. 39).

UCC leaders have been explicit that the Bible is not always clear or exact in its statements, however. John Thomas, the former president of the UCC, delivered a speech about the Bible at the Dunkirk Colloquy in 2000, in which he argued, “none of this tells us exactly what we must do in a given circumstance” (Thomas, 2000, para. 15). In particular, “It won’t solve our dilemmas over homosexuality or abortion or euthanasia or genetic engineering or the economy” (Thomas, 2000, para. 15). Rev. Trost argued in a speech at the same colloquy that, because of the Bible’s call for individual sacrifice, it does not resonate well with human nature (Trost, 2000). This makes it difficult to understand.

Thomas (2000) called for a liturgical reading of the Bible that takes place in a shared context of the church and the presence of Christ. This requires that individuals must take the Bible seriously by reading it before attempting to use it. He argued that the Bible should be read
to preach about it, seek answers to questions, and justify opinions (Thomas, 2000). He warned against using the Bible to exploit the marginalized, however. A text written in the context of persecution and exile has often been *read* in support for slavery, colonialism, etc. He noted that one should become nervous when “readings by those in the center disadvantage those at the margins” (Thomas, 2000, para. 20).

**Belief b.** I suggest that the second statement, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here” (UCC, n.d.e.) is an affirmation of belief in inclusivity and openness. It is also a statement that led the UCC into the political arena. The General Synod of the UCC voted in 2005 to adopt the *Equal Marriage Rights for All* resolution. In it, the UCC affirmed that the law should not discriminate against gay marriage, that the institution of marriage itself should not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, and that any discussion that contributes to hostility toward LGBT individuals should end. The UCC (2005) affirmed that same-gender couples should receive “all legal rights and protections” (para. 6) and that legislative efforts to ban such unions “undermine the civil liberties” of these couples (para. 7).

The ONA designation—managed by The UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns—is directly connected with this second statement and is an attempt by the UCC to encourage hospitality toward LGBT individuals. The denomination states, “No one should have to guess about the boundaries of inclusion of a congregation or other ministry” (UCC open, n.d.d., para. 20).

The decision to promote the ONA designation stems from the Open and Affirming action of the General Synod in 1985 and the Transgender action of the General Synod in 2003. The UCC stated, “Those of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions—or
‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender’ people—are welcome in its full life and ministry (e.g. membership, leadership, employment, etc.)” (UCC, n.d.d., para. 7).

There was precedent for this decision. The UCC held a colloquy in 1998 in Massachusetts to address the issue of same-sex unions. Andrew Lang, who is himself a homosexual and theological reporter for the UCC, argued in a paper presentation that same-sex relationships can also be part of the Christian tradition of covenant-making (Lang, 1998). He noted that both the Ramsey Colloquium—arguing against same-sex marriage—and the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family acknowledged, "Some scientific evidence suggests a genetic predisposition for homosexual orientation” (The Ramsey Colloquium, 1994, para. 31), and “homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen” (United States Catholic Conference, 1997, para. 24).

While the UCC does not require all UCC congregations to be ONA, it is a designation applied to those congregations that want to make public their inclusion of all sexual orientations. To become an ONA congregation, it is necessary to engage in a time of intense study and prayer that culminates in a congregational vote. The UCC indicates that it takes approximately 2 years to complete all steps to become ONA (UCC, n.d.d.).

The decision to declare explicitly the support of LGBT persons reflects the congregation’s understanding that the word, everyone, is often not inclusive to these individuals. ONA is one of several programs involved in the Welcoming Church Movement. This movement created the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR) in 2002, an institution made up of multiple denominations. The purpose of this institute is to “provide the resources to facilitate a paradigm shift in multiple denominations whereby churches become welcoming and affirming of all

Belief c. I suggest that the third statement, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” is an affirmation of the denomination’s belief that God is Still Speaking. The UCC, since 2004, has engaged in a Stillspeaking Campaign as an effort to make religion relevant again. This campaign is devoted to the UCC statement that, “We are committed to hearing God’s ancient story anew and afresh” (UCC, n.d.e, para. 1). Hammer (2000), former professor of biblical interpretation at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, N.Y., argued in a speech at the 2000 Dunkirk Colloquy that both the Scripture and the process of writing Scripture were canonized. By canonizing the process, it is argued that historical importance is placed—not just on the end product of Scripture—but also on the ways in which God was revealed to the biblical writers. Thus, Christians today have access to both the end product and God’s continued revelation. This means that the revelation of God recorded by biblical writers can still be heard by Christians today.

If this is the case, it allows that individuals can challenge the literal words of the Bible within the context of God’s continued revelation. Hammer noted Jesus’ own history of challenging the oral traditions: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you” (Matthew, 5, NIV). Hammer noted, “It is quite biblical to challenge the Bible” (Hammer, 2000, para. 14). In particular, he noted the necessity of challenging the call to dash children against rocks (Ps 137:9, NIV). With the religious opposition to homosexuality focusing on biblical statements (Whearty, 2012), the Bible has become an essential information source in the discussion of homosexuality. Those within the UCC that support the inclusion of LGBT individuals often note that the
continued revelation of God challenges the biblical statements that have historically been used to
denounce homosexuality.

**Belief d.** I argue that the fourth statement, “Isn’t it time for religion with relevance?” is
an affirmation of the UCC’s belief that religion should be applicable to changing society (UCC,
n.d.e). The UCC has been at the forefront of political change in religion: the first to ordain an
African-American pastor in 1785; the first to ordain a woman in 1853; and the first to ordain an
openly gay person in 1972 (UCC, n.d.b). The UCC was also the first to affirm same-gender
marriage equality in 2005. It is vital to note, however, that the statement on relevance was
removed from the website during data collection.

**Research Question Two**

This section will outline the literature supporting the second research question: What
information informs the beliefs noted in RQ1? This includes the information sources attendees
point to as evidence or justification for their ONA beliefs as well as a general analysis of the
information used by attendees. Wilson (1977) argued that the goal of information science is to
bring information to the point of use. It is important, then, to outline my use of *information* and
*use*. This section will also outline some prominent theories in information science that are
applicable to the current study.

**Information.** A simple way to define information is as part of a linear model that
includes data, information, and knowledge (Shedroff, 2001). Information is considered a more
developed form of data, and knowledge a more developed form of information. Information is,
therefore, contextualized data. A more complex definition of information, however, identifies it
as the amount of surprise in a communicated message (Shannon & Weaver, 1998; 1949). This
surprise, often linked with the concept of information *entropy*, leads to uncertainty in communication.

Information cannot be defined separately from users of information, however. It is often the user’s state of knowledge that defines information (Belkin, 1980). *Knowledge* and *information* are often used interchangeably, and this can be attributed to the notion that knowledge is a socially developed construct that uses information as the basis for its construction. It is only in a social context that a user determines what is *useful* (Taylor, 1991). A key distinction, however, is in dissemination. Information can be given to a person, whereas knowledge—as an intrinsic value—cannot be given; rather, it is developed within the person.

**Information use.** Information *use*, according to the six tracks noted by the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST), includes the repurposing of existing knowledge to advance knowledge, make decisions, and improve information literacy (ASIST, 2010). Although noted as a separate track by ASIST, it is clear that information use is a concern across the entire field of information science. The use of information will always be coupled with the information seeking behavior indicated earlier.

The use of information is complicated by the need for complex retrieval systems that can translate a user’s unknown needs into syntax for retrieval of the one perfect document. It is for this reason that knowledge workers are much more likely to ask another person for information than a database (Cross & Parker, 2004; Wilson, 1977). A key resource for bringing information to the point of use, therefore, is understanding that much of the information needed for use lies within the brains of people rather than in texts (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). A primary goal of the information scientist, then, is to capture this tacit knowledge and make it concrete enough to
be externalized. Once the information is available externally, it can be used by someone other than the knowledge creator.

**History of information use research.** User studies as a general discipline can be attributed to the Scientific Information Conference of the Royal Society in 1948 (Siatri, 1999). It has been argued that study on information use actually began much earlier, however, in the 1910s and 1920s (Savolainen, 2009). Wilson (2000) noted, however, that most of these studies focused on library use rather than information use. A user is any person attempting to find or use information from a document (Norton, 2010). Much of the early research on user studies focused on science-related disciplines (Siatri, 1999). This is not a statement about the priorities of researchers, however; rather, this scientific focus can be attributed to the fact that science fields at the time had more developed literature available for user studies research.

Much of this early research on the use of information assumed that information sources were used completely and in original formats (Kari, 2010). It is recognized today, however, that people use information only in pieces and through complex interpretation frameworks (Dervin, 1999; Kari, 2010). In contrast to the entire stock of public knowledge, for instance, individuals only have a fraction of that stock (Wilson, 1977). Much of this is determined by cost/benefit analysis (Norton, 2010; Wilson, 1977). Information use is identified by quality and relevance (Norton, 2010).

**Current study.** In the current study, I address both information and knowledge, accepting the view that knowledge is something created by groups of people (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998). It is not, therefore, a natural or individual phenomenon; rather, knowledge is an artificial construction. Unlike information, which can reside in books and a person’s own mind, knowledge can exist only through interaction of groups of people (Gherardi et al., 1998). One
cannot know about anything without participating in something. Knowledge is, therefore, both socially constructed and learned through practice and engagement. I follow recent scholarship in this area that views information use as a complex process determined by a number of contextual factors and environmental cues.

**Information poverty.** Information poverty is a term used by Elfreda Chatman (1999) to describe social contexts in which information is hard to find. It is used to describe the social conditions surrounding information behavior and is not synonymous with socioeconomic deprivancy. Groups can have plentiful information in spite of socioeconomic depravity (Hersberger, 2002/2003). Through interviews and observation of homeless individuals, the researcher found that the participants all felt overwhelmed with information in spite of their economic situations (Hersberger, 2002/2003). Yu (2010) also argued that it is a distortion to assume an association among the information poor and the socioeconomic poor.

The information poor “perceive themselves to be devoid of any [information] sources that might help them” (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). This poverty is the result of “a dichotomy between those with easy access to an abundance of information and those who do not know how and where to find it and even, perhaps, do not understand the value of information and how it can help them in their day-to-day lives” (Goulding, 2001, p. 109).

Jaeger and Thompson (2004) noted that information poverty is also the result of isolation from society as individuals form groups and seek information only from within that group. Individuals who do not seek information outside their own small world are “deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and . . . confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202).
Yu (2010) argued, “The information poor are disadvantaged by some kind of information deficiency in contemporary society” (Yu, 2010, p. 910). This is usually characterized as a lack of information and communication technology skill. In the current study, I follow Chatman’s assumption that information poverty is a behavioral characteristic of individuals with specific demographic and institutional attributes (Zhao, 2007; Murdock & Golding, 1999). Thus, information poverty is an organizational and social issue.

**Small worlds.** Chatman (1999) coined the term, *small worlds*, to identify environments in which social control determines what information is relevant for affiliates of an organization to seek. Small worlds create the environment for the development of information poverty. A shared worldview is developed through tradition and rituals, and this worldview is used to reject information outside of that world. Chatman (1999) challenged the assumption that uncertainty reduction is the desire of all individuals (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) in her study of incarcerated women, noting that the small world of the prison environment led women to reject information about the world outside of the prison. This included information about family illnesses. In this case, uncertainty about issues not considered relevant to prison life was a welcomed and necessary aspect of coping with this life.

Behavior in small worlds is reliant upon the normative behavior of groups (Dawson & Chatman, 2001). As these groups become more isolated, an insider/outsider worldview develops that can lead to the rejection of outsider information in which information poverty is a desired state (Chatman, 2000). Isolation leads to “self-protective behaviors to keep others from sensing our need” (Chatman, 2000, p. 197). There is little value placed in information produced outside of the group (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995). Outside information is sought only when the information produced within the small world no longer works to help make sense of one’s world.
Individuals engage in *boundary crossing* (Chatman, 1999) in these instances to seek out external information to make sense of what the internal information could not resolve.

A rejection of information characterizes Chatman’s concept of small worlds. In Huotari and Chatman’s (2001) study of information seeking in organizations, the researchers noted that individuals in a small world organization accept and reject information based on a number of different factors, i.e. possible loss of relationships, trustworthiness of the source, etc.

A small world, according to Chatman (1999), exhibits the following characteristics:

- Information needs are not being met.
- Others determine the relevancy of information to be sought.
- Individuals guard against information disclosure as a means of protecting themselves.
- Insiders often see themselves as outsiders because of a lack of trust.
- Information is produced in the same context in which it is used.

**Information sources used for belief formulation.** This section will provide a brief discussion of traditional information sources typically used within religious groups. This includes a discussion of how they have been used and to what extent. The Bible, religious creeds, and sermons comprise traditional information sources that attendees within a congregation likely share. In the current study, I seek to understand how these traditional sources are used in UCC congregations and if different sources are prominent in discussion.

**Bible.** The Bible is a document notably linked with Christian groups, yet research has shown that attention to this document has declined in recent years. The number of self-identified Christians who read the Bible during the week has dropped since 1991 from 51% to 46%—
making this group the minority (Barna Group, 2011). In the UCC, only 20% of attendees report that they read the Bible weekly outside of a religious service (The ARDA, 2007).

Todd (2005) noted that proper biblical interpretation is mass distributed in religious books that attendees actively read. Individuals in religious congregations, therefore, tend to use similar metaphors derived from these books to discuss biblical issues. Because they did not receive the theological training of the clergy, these metaphors work as heuristic devices to understand the Bible (Todd, 2005). The use of the same information by multiple members of a group constitutes shared information. Religious groups often show high amounts of this shared information (Lehtinen, 2005). Thus, while fewer individuals read the Bible, the shared metaphors from previous readings—as well as interpretations of religious leaders—continue to direct a shared understanding of the Bible. Group discussion without further biblical information acquisition serves to reinforce these shared metaphors.

**Creeds.** The Christian church has continually written conversations down as creedal statements that have proven to be powerful indicators of belief long beyond the context in which the original conversations were held. Tiénou and Hiebert (2005) noted that these creeds play the role of statutory law in Christianity in that they provide a manifestation of biblical principles. Similarly, Lindbeck (2002) cited Martin Luther’s belief that creeds are intended to be summaries of the Gospel. These creeds are given authority in religious circles because of their use of, and alignment with, the text of the Bible (Williams, 2011, para. 4). These creedal belief statements are passed down through multiple generations to institutionalize a belief within a religious tradition.

**Sermons.** Sermons serve many valuable functions in American congregations, two of which are central to the current study. First, sermons can help explain and solidify belief. Barret
and Lanman (2008) noted that many explicit beliefs of Christian theologians have had little impact because they are often not plausible, i.e. they are unnatural conceptions. Sermons can provide the necessary support for these unnatural beliefs to take hold in individuals. Any belief that is inconsistent with human logic can be supported throughout time through social avenues of ritual and instruction (Barret and Lanman, 2008). Sermons can serve a role in establishing the credibility and adoption of these beliefs.

Second, pastors can use sermons to introduce ideas to large populations of religious attendees (Davenport, Prusak, & Wilson, 2003). According to Davenport et al. (2003), if these ideas can be maintained over extended periods, they enter the organizational mind as a perspective. If the sermon can successfully implant ideas that become part of weekly congregational life, these ideas can become pervasive to the point where they become an unconscious and universal property of culture (Davenport et al., 2003). These beliefs, then, are not merely shared; they are institutionalized.

**Research Question Three**

The third research question, “How is information used to construct beliefs?” is an attempt to understand how the information sources noted in RQ2 are used in the construction of the beliefs noted in RQ1. This requires the development of a working definition of belief formation, which can be defined in terms of a decision made from a number of alternatives. This also includes an understanding of knowledge as a byproduct of decision-making that can be used in future decisions about belief. Research from the area of knowledge management (KM) will be used to explicate the intersections of information and belief formation.

It is critical to note that beliefs do not always equate with behavior, and the current study is not an attempt to explain behavior. Shaw and Clarke (1999) noted research by Netemeyer and
Bearden (1991) suggesting that the choices of consumers do not necessarily follow beliefs. In the current study, therefore, I outline the formulation of beliefs that may or may not lead to behavior.

**Belief formulation.** Rott (2004) defined belief formation in two ways. First, it is inference making from a set of statements that ideally leads to a balanced set of beliefs. Second, it is a readjusting of this belief set according to outside stimuli. Rott concluded that classical logic cannot explain belief formation and that a new solution must be provided. Hardin (1997) argued that knowledge would be counted as true if it a) is from a credible authoritative source, b) fits with other beliefs, and c) matches external reality.

**Belief formulation as a decision-making process.** According to Holsapple and Whinston (1996), problem solving and decision-making can lead to beliefs. In the current study, I am concerned with belief decisions—how groups decide what to believe about religious issues. Holsapple and Whinston (1996) outlined a knowledge-based view of decision-making. Decision-making is, in essence, a choice of any number of alternatives about how to approach a given situation. Holsapple and Whinston (1996) argued that, when a decision is made, new knowledge is created through the transformation of existing knowledge. In essence, because more is known about a certain context after a decision is made, the process itself involves the creation of knowledge and alternatives that did not previously exist. It is no longer necessary to rely on available alternatives, as alternatives can be created for a particular decision.

Decisions can be structured or unstructured (Holsapple & Whinston, 1996). Structured decisions occur in everyday situations with issues that are well understood and include knowledge that is readily available. Some congregations may assume that the Bible includes all necessary knowledge about a particular issue, making decisions about issues routine. In unstructured decisions, the situation is unique, and knowledge is difficult to acquire. In these
situations, a careful reading of the Bible along with the acquisition of knowledge about the issue is required—as the Bible itself is viewed as not providing enough information about an issue. Thus, unstructured decisions increase information seeking.

If there is no formal structure in place to specify how a decision should be made, individuals rely on personal creativity and reasoning strategies to aid in the decision-making process (Simon, 1960). According to Simon, individuals engage in a number of different behaviors when faced with an unstructured decision. *Lateral thinking* and *exploration* are of particular importance in the current study. In lateral thinking, individuals see the issue at hand from unconventional views or perspectives (Simon, 1960). In exploration, individuals explore the decision through the acquisition of more knowledge. Individuals also use analogies with the past to inform current situations. In both cases, decision-making involves some form of information seeking and acquisition.

**Role of knowledge management assumptions in belief formulation.** How an organization approaches the management of knowledge greatly impacts how it perceives that knowledge. The goal of KM as a discipline is the creation of intelligent organizations that have the ability to learn and capitalize on the expertise of its employees (Bollinger & Smith, 2001). Literature in this area has paid little attention to religious organizations, though I suggest that religious congregations can be understood as organizational units. McElroy’s (2002) distinction between first and second generation KM is of particular importance in the current study.

**First generation.** First generation KM environments assume that all knowledge that is needed already exists, and that codification of this knowledge is a main priority (McElroy, 2002). All current knowledge is assumed valid and is not questioned. The role of computers highlights the goal of this generation to codify knowledge in a way that the right knowledge gets
to the right people at the right time (McElroy, 2002). First generation organizations are, therefore, supply oriented—in that answers to new questions are dependent upon the existing, codified information supply. McElroy (2002) described the KM generations in terms of learning models. First generation KM engages primarily in single-loop learning as individuals learn how to do something. The initial rules applying to this action are followed mechanistically and without question.

As noted previously, if a belief is considered to be routine, new knowledge is not created, because the existing knowledge will be applied and considered sufficient. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) outlined the ways in which knowledge is transformed in a first generation KM environment (Figure 1). This shows a re-use of existing knowledge rather than a creation of new knowledge. As individuals socialize with one another, tacit knowledge is implicitly shared—maintaining its original form. As this knowledge is externalized through speech or text, it becomes explicit knowledge. This explicit knowledge can be combined with other explicit knowledge. When individuals or groups internalize this explicit knowledge, it becomes tacit. Knowledge is essentially re-used without validation.

![Figure 1. First generation knowledge management. Adapted from “The Knowledge Creating Company” by I. Nonaka and H. Takeuchi. (1995), Copyright 1995 by Oxford University Press.](image-url)
I suggest that the sermon itself represents a highly one-dimensional, single-loop learning process in which attendees obtain know-how about specific religious beliefs. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), many organizations focus too much on this individual learning model and become encapsulated by a stimulus-response mechanism of learning. In order to escape this, organizations must unlearn this mechanism and introduce a double-loop model in which individuals are encouraged to challenge the paradigms, models, and perspectives offered by leaders in an effort possibly to override them (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This is a learning process clearly best situated in the small group, or community of practice—as the sanctuary sermon does not lend itself to discussion. In these small groups, paradigms can be challenged through the medium of group conversation.

Second generation. Second generation KM organizations subject the existing information to a validation process that can fundamentally change this information. New information can be created to address questions. These organizations recognize the importance of producing new knowledge rather than merely managing current knowledge (McElroy, 2002). This second generation of KM introduced an existential question to epistemology: how can individuals really know anything without producing knowledge? McElroy determined that the concept of learning paved the way for knowledge production. First generation KM assumed that this knowledge existed in some objective state before being acquired by individuals—not realizing the role of individuals in its very production. Before it could be codified, it had to be created. Second generation KM reintroduces this production.

Second generation KM engages primarily in double-loop learning, whereby the rules are not merely referenced—they are challenged in light of current situations to which they are applied. If new knowledge is available that leads to a better alternative, this new knowledge is
compared with the current knowledge. Current knowledge is not abandoned in second generation KM; rather, new knowledge is produced to coincide with current knowledge to produce optimal results. In fact, it is not possible for new knowledge to be produced without an awareness of current knowledge. McElroy (2002) argued that, in order for an organization to engage in double-loop learning and knowledge production, it must first be aware of what it knows.

**KM generations in religion.** Second generation KM requires validation. This validation comes through an organizational peer assessment of the usefulness of knowledge, particularly in problem solving. For religious organizations, knowledge could be judged in terms of its ability to answer current theological issues. Introducing second-generation concepts—widely considered the preferred model over first generation KM—to congregations would likely be met with resistance, as subjecting traditional knowledge to the criterion of peer support and usefulness could be seen as heretical. The history of the Christian church provides examples of such cases in which new ideas were labeled heretical, even when this information was useful in answering theological questions. Augustine wrote, “Do not think that heresies could have arisen from a few beggarly little souls. Only great men have brought forth heresies” (Nigg, 1990, p. v). Therefore, it seems that the uniqueness of religion is that even logically sound ideas from idea leaders can be disregarded if found at odds with one document—the Bible.

If groups are encouraged to cross the information boundary of the Bible, they may introduce new ideas; these new ideas form the groundwork for innovation. As ideas are reliably replicated, they are called *innovations* (Senge, 1990). I suggest that Christian congregations that innovate would no longer rely solely on the religious institutional *model*—akin to a single business best practice. Rather, they would be open to new models and ideas. Emerson (1983) noted the following in an address at Harvard:
Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesley’s and Oberlin’s, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, ‘I also am a man.’ Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man’s (p. 89).

Likewise, Senge noted, “Great organizations have never been built by trying to emulate another” (Senge, 1990, p. 11).

**Culture**

How groups use information (RQ3) and what types of information they use (RQ2) are aspects of information culture. Culture can serve an important role in the development of small worlds and information poverty as it includes elements of social control over beliefs and habits. Sociology views religion as inherently cultural, relying on ritual as a measure of reassurance (Geertz, 1973). Mainline Protestant churches in America, for instance, tend to follow a similar structure for their weekly worship service. They often begin a service with singing, and even this order of song often includes an intentional mix of fast and slow songs to correspond with the readings of Scripture and prayer. This ritual provides respite from the uncertainty of other social activities. Many congregations repeat historical creeds on a weekly basis. If culture is influenced by ritual, this ritual is highly evident in religion. This ritual, then, establishes strong cultures within religion. Culture is also reinforced by religion, as religion brings this high degree of ritualization that establishes culture.
Shera. Shera (1976) outlined the importance of a basic body of beliefs and values that provide structure to organizations and societies—*Kulture*. Also known as culture, the concept “encompass[es] the inventions, arts, totality of ideas and beliefs that are characteristic of human behavior and that differentiate man from the other animals” (Shera, 1976, p. 42). Shera defined culture in terms three concepts: scholarship, physical tools, and social organization. This division of culture into three concepts is a response to Butler’s (1951) assertion that every human is a thinker, a user of tools, and a social being (Shera, 1952). These concepts must maintain balance, with no one concept advancing more quickly than others. Communication maintains this balance as it provides for the transmission of thought that allows culture to exist (Shera, 1976). For Shera, the library plays a central role in this communication process through graphic records. I make use of this definition of culture to recognize the importance of social contexts and social dialogue in the culture of an organization.

For Shera, culture serves a powerful role in society as it “imposes its will upon the populace, shapes the behavior of the individual in accordance with the goals and values the culture wants” (Shera, 1976, p. 45). Shera applied this culture concept to the understanding of how societies know what they know. This *social epistemology* focused on the make-up of this knowledge and the impact this knowledge has on culture and social contexts. It has a focus on “production, flow, integration and consumption of all forms of communication operating throughout the entire social pattern” (Shera, 1976, p. 50). This flow and integration of communicated knowledge—along with its impact on cultural beliefs—are important considerations for the current study.

**KM culture.** Culture is also a KM term that can be used to bridge discussions of KM and information science. Culture is “the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a
group holds and that determine how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments” (Schein, 1996, p. 236). These assumptions are developed from successful problem solving and are sustained through continued use. These cultures develop within groups of people (Willcoxson & Miller, 2000).

In Heisig’s (2009) study of critical success factors in KM frameworks, culture was the most frequently noted factor. Culture, like knowledge, is an essential human phenomenon. I accept the view that culture is not an individual process, nor an instantaneous product. Rather, it is highly complex and socially produced (Delong, 2004). Groups of people experience things together, and people begin to learn basic assumptions of the group (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Culture takes a substantial period to develop fully within any organization (Rosen, 2007).

Many cultural researchers include values and beliefs as core elements of culture (Cook & Yannow, 2005; Bolman, 2008; Shafritz et al., 2005). These values are largely intangible (Shafritz et al., 2005) and are shared among organizational affiliates (Schein, 2010). These values become stable through the passing of time as they pass through multiple generations and provide the basis for success. While personality is specific to the individual, and human nature is universal, culture is that which is learned as a group. Culture is made manifest through a number of avenues. This includes unstated understanding (Sathe, 1985), the embodiment of belief (Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1984), contextualized group value statements (Mills, 1988), and the patterning of these shared beliefs and values (Davis, 1984).

Institution

The discussion of organizational culture requires a more detailed analysis of the uniqueness of religious congregations as institutions. Many disciplines have noted the role of Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), whereby individuals actively produce and reproduce social
structures that in turn constrain them. In considering Chatman’s small world theory, it is possible that the small world is created by and, thus, constraining to the members of that world. It is also possible that symbolic convergence theory (SCT) can help explain the realities of small worlds. SCT posits that groups cooperatively create their identity, and this identity affects how they behave (Bormann, 1985). Groups come together according to a fantasy theme that helps converge various shared understandings. Other group members pick up on this theme to establish a chain that enhances group identity. For the UCC, the concerns of LGBT individuals present possibilities for the convergence of groups and the development of group identity. Bormann (1985) noted that humans tend to attempt to understand human action through the interpretation of signs and current experience.

Institutions develop out of ritualized patterns of behavior. Berger and Luckmann (1989; 1966) noted that all human activity can become habit when repeated frequently. These patterns of activity, when they occur at the communal level, develop into patterns of behavior. Over time, if a particular pattern is repeated by most members of a community, it becomes institutionalized (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). That is, it becomes an embedded part of what it means to be a part of that particular organization. Routines allow things to be done more efficiently, because one person knows based on experience what another will do, and little attention is needed to accomplish a given task (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). Religious institutions offer particularly relevant case studies for this phenomenon, as they tend to repeat patterns of worship and service.

It is easy for subgroups of the larger society to withdraw so deeply into their particular rituals that they become inaccessible to outsiders (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). They become isolated entities. This is of particular importance to religious groups who depend on new
members to carry on traditions and maintain stability. The study by Jacobs and Manzi (2000) of performance indicators in the housing industry revealed that these indicators concentrated on certain areas of performance while excluding others. Because of this narrow relevancy as determined by management, workers in the housing industry were failing to perform adequately (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000). The same dangers of narrowed focus and poor performance exist for religious congregations.

Patterns can even develop on a broader scale between various social groups. Mizruchi and Fein (1999) noted that organizations tend to engage in institutional isomorphism, whereby an organization attempts to mimic other successful organizations. If a congregation does not become isolated, it will be important to study whether it mimics other religious organizations or other churches.

**Socially ratified institution.** There is an inherently social element to the development of the religious congregation as an institution. Collective agreement and participation in a ritual or belief is what allows it to become part of the institution. Taylor et al.’s (2006) texts and conversations theory (TACT) provides an interpretive lens through which to view the religious organization. They argued that an organization—as a social entity—cannot be understood apart from its realization in communication (Taylor et al., 2006). The term, organization, is not something to be had or something to be researched in isolation. Rather, it is something that can only be understood through the meanings that individuals give to it.

Individuals in religious congregations may have many informal conversations about social issues. If these conversations are written down as text—either on paper or in human memory—they take on a power of their own as documents. A document is mobile, general, abstract, and can both inform and constrain action and belief in an organization (Taylor et al.,
If this document is subjected to legitimization of the entire organization, the resulting agreement furthers the document’s power. It is in this context that the study of religious text can take place.

Texts, therefore, make-up what is actually said in a conversation, i.e., the content of a conversation. In order for a text to be generated, it must be materialized in some physical format. This could include writing it down or using it as the content for future conversations. As already noted, the Christian church has continually written conversations down as creedal statements that have proven to be powerful indicators of belief long beyond the context in which the original conversations were held. These creeds are given authority in religious circles because of their use of, and alignment with, the text of Scripture (Williams, 2011, para. 4).

These creeds are, essentially, the minutes of church meetings. These meetings tended to be rather contentious and complicated, but this tension is lost in the written versions. The Council of Nicea in 325AD involved a bitter dispute over the divinity of Jesus, in which Arians argued that Jesus was not like other creatures (Williams, 2011). The creed corrected this by asserting that the Son of God “was made man” and that he “suffered” (Wilhelm, 1911). Likewise, Van Oort (2012) recalled how Gregory of Nazianzus called the church assembly at Constantinople in 381AD, a “troupe of screeching crows” and a “terrible gang” (Constantinople 381 section, para. 2).

The creeds do not reflect the bitter arguments and complex theological controversy, instead reflecting what the writers felt were the important elements. Some theologians like John Calvin took issue with interpretations of these meetings (Jones, 2011), but the textual interpretation still took on a power of its own as text, and the creeds were used as a means of
detecting the faithfulness of subsequent religious statements to the orthodoxy of apostolic belief (Macchia, 2010).

**Modern social ratification.** Creeds are not the only texts in the Christian Church, however. Texts are being created every day. This section will consider some of the more recent religious texts that address the specific issue of homosexuality. This issue makes use of the Bible as an information source relevant to the current discussion.

The power of textualization for the standardization of religious belief and practice is evident in recent texts regarding homosexuality. The Catholic Church in 1990 produced a document titled, *Human Sexuality*. In it, they described the tendency toward homosexuality as one toward “an intrinsic moral evil” (United States Catholic Conference, 1991, p. 55). This document has served as a means of—not merely producing statements—but serving as an action to correct negative public opinion about the church and sexuality (Sparks, 2001).

In the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2008), the United Methodist Church (UMC) stated that it, “Does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (The United Methodist Church, 2008, p. 161). This book is considered to be a book of law for the church, as the UMC asserts that the General Conference *speaks* for it (The United Methodist Church, 2009). This conference produces the *Book of Discipline*. Thus, the text that comes out of this conference gives voice to the denomination and is legitimized as authoritative text to answer questions about homosexuality.

**The role of religious leaders in the power of texts.** The question becomes, however, why one person’s interpretation of reality should take precedence over another. According to Taylor et al. (2006), it is the force of an act that determines the effect it will have. In most organizations, speakers perform acts on behalf of a *principal* author who is not present at the
time of the speech act. The assignment of persons allowed to be an agent of another person’s text produces the roles and statuses seen in organizations. Because organizations are not people, they must speak through agents (Taylor et al., 2006). A person must be given the right to become such an agent for the organization through legitimization and sanctioning of their performance by enough people in the organization.

By making texts, content is no longer associated with a local context. Statements become objectified and made accessible to a wide range of interpretations. As leaders make their own interpretations of the legitimized text, they can set standards for belief and action. As noted in the UMC, the meetings of religious leaders are given the legitimacy to speak as an agent of the organization. Members are active in re-legitimizing these texts. The longer a text remains, the more staying power it has. It becomes institutionalized and no longer talked about, i.e., it becomes an implicit motivator of behavior and belief.

In 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America voted to introduce a textual resolution to “recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships” (ELCA News Service, 2009, para. 1). This was met with counter texts denouncing the decision from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS). The LCMS adopted a statement from the International Lutheran Council that “homosexuality—in any and all situations—violates the will of the Creator God and must be recognized as sin” (Kwon, 2010, para. 7).

In 2011, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. changed the text of its constitution by removing the wording surrounding clergy living “in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness” (Coleman, 2011, para. 9). This allowed gay clergy to serve in the denomination. The reactivity within the denomination was so strong that it led to
the formation of a new denomination—the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. The leader of this organization, John Ortberg, issued a statement to solidify the text of this counter group: “The problem is people are going to hell” (Liston, 2012, para. 2).

In both cases, decisions were made at general council and were not legitimized by the vast majority of members. This caused reactivity and a splitting apart of the denominations. Therefore, texts are not always authoritative; they must be legitimized. This has particular relevance for the current study, as decisions over becoming ONA require the legitimization of the local UCC congregations.
Chapter III: Methods

This section will outline the methodology and methods that were used in the current study. This includes a discussion of previous research, and a detailed discussion and outline of methods used in the current study.

Previous Research

Culture research has been conducted under both positivistic and interpretivistic research assumptions. Quantitative methods were used in many studies of organizational psychology and sociology before the 1970s (Rousseau, 1990). Yazdani & Yaghoubi (2011) adapted Hofstede’s (1983) culture questionnaire and utilized random sampling to determine the relationship between organizational commitment and culture. Timmers and Glas (2009) developed quantitative scales for information behavior. Rousseau (1990) noted the use of Q sorts as a method of structuring the research stimuli prior to research. Quantitative methods are often used to analyze the visible layers of culture (Allen & Dyer, 1980; Kilmann & Saxton, 1983).

The generalizability of quantitative culture studies came under suspicion in the late 1970s, however, because it was seen as abstracting too much from the collected data (Morgan & Smirchich, 1980). Qualitative methods can bring the researcher closer to the data by reflecting the understanding that culture is idiosyncratic and not well defined (Rousseau, 1990), and are thus more appropriate to address the current research questions. Schein (2010) went as far as to argue that quantitative assessment of culture is unethical, because it leads to generalizability based on categories not coming from the participants themselves. Rousseau (1990) outlined the arguments for the use of qualitative methods in culture assessment:

• Culture is unconscious and subjective.
• Probing is required to access this unconscious level.
• Each culture is different.
• A priori categories misrepresent what participants actually experience.

**Research Epistemology**

The current study was conducted under an interpretivist paradigm within social scientific research. For interpretivist researchers, reality is socially constructed. Most social constructionists are interested in all things that can pass as knowledge in any given society (O’Connor, 1998). Interpretivism holds a subjective epistemology that asserts that knowledge is locally understood and changes as context changes. Humans are not essentially the same, and knowledge changes form as it changes location. This means that research about one location cannot be generalized to other locations, as it cannot be assumed that knowledge is the same. It is only by going into these other locations that we can extend the breadth of an interpretivist theory. This is why these theories tend to be substantive, or mid-range theories, rather than the formal and broadly generalizable theories seen in positivistic research. They are theories and explanations about only specific contexts.

The focus in interpretivist research is primarily with everyday life and the experiences of individuals and groups (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). The importance of knowledge as it is socially constructed is that this knowledge is *real*. Knowledge is shared and stored within the minds of people and presented to them as real (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). Social constructionism is an important framework for the study of religious organizations, because these organizations place a high value on knowledge of God that is based in *experience* and is, inherently, social (Szuchewycz, 1994).

This epistemological difference influences the ways in which respondents are sampled. Because positivistic research seeks generalizable research across the consistent human
landscape, it requires that this population be randomly sampled to avoid biased and uneven results. Because interpretivistic research seeks local understanding about specific concepts, it requires more purposive sampling based on what a researcher is trying to understand. If a researcher is studying religious group information behavior, for instance, it would not make much sense for the researcher to include non-religious people in his or her sample. Random sampling would not ensure the exclusion of these non-religious people, and so the researcher must purposively select respondents.

**Social constructivism.** There is no objective *(T)truth* in social constructivism, but groups do the best they can to understand the world with the information they have. This is always limited by humanity, and thus individuals are forced to create something artificial to replace the absolute truth they do not have (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966).

Key elements in understanding the social construction of knowledge are the points at which individual assumptions come into opposition with another’s individual assumptions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). As long as an individual’s knowledge of the world works—to the extent that it provides pragmatic benefits—it will not be questioned. When knowledge no longer is beneficial, however, it must be changed. Berger and Luckmann (1989; 1966) noted that this change is a product, not of the individual, but of society. Berger and Luckman noted that a child learns language on his or her own, but plays this out in front of other peers. How this interaction with peers goes has a major impact of how the child uses language and who the child is. Thus, even the meaning of language can change based on social constructions of reality.

Key to this social change are the characteristics of the group within which it changes. Social constructivism does not provide universally accepted norms of knowledge. Rather, it
provides an understanding of locally created knowledge. The religious congregation is a particular societal structure and, as such, creates knowledge that is different than any other communal organization. Knowledge is determined by what is relevant (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). This relevancy is determined primarily by what those in a particular group believe to be relevant. The church, therefore, can set the agenda for what members think is relevant.

**Social knowledge.** In Bloor’s (1991) development of the *Strong Programme* for the sociology of knowledge, he identified four properties that make up knowledge. First, the sociology of knowledge is concerned with causality (Bloor, 1991). In an analysis of religious knowledge, therefore, it is important to examine it scientifically rather than religiously. A religious examination of religious knowledge would be rather short, as it could be concluded fairly easily that all religious knowledge is of God and from God. A scientific analysis of the problem of religious knowledge, however, seeks to understand the form that this information takes once it becomes the property of religious groups. This is not to deny or approve the inspiration of God for these religious congregations, but it is to assume that such inspiration cannot be scientifically studied. The effects of this inspiration, however, can be studied.

Therefore, the current research focused on the construction of knowledge that can be empirically observed. This is in line with Bloor’s (1991) second property of the sociology of scientific knowledge—that it is impartial to truth or falsity. No attempt is made to logically consider whether a socially constructed knowledge claim is actually true, because in this theoretical paradigm, the focus of study is the *reality* that the knowledge actually creates in a given social group rather than the validity of that reality in the broader realm of universal truths or falsehoods.
Third, the sociology of knowledge is not philosophical in nature (Bloor, 1991). To attempt a philosophical understanding of social knowledge would be to paralyze the mind (Bloor, 1991). So, rather than consider the nature of knowledge, this study considered social models used to explain the causal evidence of this knowledge. Finally, the sociology of knowledge is reflexive and seeks general explanations of the phenomena under study (Bloor, 1991).

Religious individuals often talk about facts. For the current study, facts were defined as contingent things, subject to interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1989; 1966). Many religious individuals would likely reject claims of contingency and interpretation regarding those things they hold to be true. It is, therefore, not the goal of social constructivism to argue that all knowledge is purely relative. To stave off a relativistic stance, Grint (1995) acknowledge that not all knowledge claims have equal status; rather, some claims are more significant than others. For the purposes of this study, it was important to determine why certain things have become so significant within religious congregations that they are considered knowledge.

Social constructivism and focus group epistemology. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011) outlined an extensive philosophy for FG methods. They noted that FGs could help researchers guard against assumptions of standpoint epistemology—the assumption that, when isolated individuals say similar things, they necessarily agree with one another. They argued that FGs could often correct individual assumptions. Human memory is often incorrect, but the group setting allows for peers experiencing similar things to correct the memories of others in a way that individual interviewing would not allow. Participants in FGs can question and challenge one another (Jakobsen, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004). FGs conducted under the paradigm of social constructionism assume that individuals enact reality collaboratively as they interact (Wilkinson,
Thus, FGs are not a means of eliciting pre-existing individual thoughts and ideas; rather, they are a means of observing how these thoughts and ideas occur in a social context (Jakobsen, 2012).

Jakobsen (2012) noted that the primary goal of FGs is not to understand individuals’ real opinions, but their socially constructed opinions. The goal, then, is to ensure that the constructions are performed to other respondents rather than to the researcher. The goal is an understanding of social construction rather than research-respondent construction.

**Why study knowledge in groups?** Individuals within social groups often have a different understanding of the world simply because they are in a group. Thus, it is important to analyze these groups. Mizruchi and Fein (1999) identified actors within social groups, and studied why these actors emphasize certain moments in time at the expense of others. Because of this emphasizing, the group of actors has a somewhat distorted picture of reality, as it is a modified and selective picture (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999).

Cook and Yannow (2005) noted that culture could not be understood apart from group practice and action. Likewise, Rousseau and Cooke (1988) noted that culture is a shared phenomenon of social units. Schein (2010) argued that, because culture is a group phenomenon, the study of it is best conducted with representative groups.

**Knowledge construction.** The process of knowledge construction is a phenomenological experience. That is to say, the process is evidenced in the conscious behaviors of people (Pentland, 1995). Holzner and Marx (1979) outlined five steps of the knowledge process. First, new information is added to groups—often through transfer from another group—and knowledge is constructed. In order for this new knowledge to make an impact, however, it must be organized (step two) in a way that allows for the examination of relationships within that new
body of knowledge. Steps three and four represent the storage and distribution of this knowledge. All knowledge is *socially ratified* in groups, and through this process knowledge is stored for the purposes of memory recollection and later application (Pentland, 1995). Once ratified, this stored knowledge is distributed to relevant places to further facilitate the final step in the process—application. For knowledge to make an impact and pave the way for new knowledge construction, it must be shown that knowledge is practical. In this way, knowledge allows an increase in performance quality; this increase is *learning* (Pentland, 1995).

Social scientific research has always been understood as a process of construction. The ways in which scientific paradigms change is inherently socially constructed. Thomas Kuhn argued that theoretical paradigms in science work in such a way to allow science to advance without criticism until a revolution of falsification changed the paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). Every paradigm has its faults, yet it is rather impossible to find the *perfect* theory to explain all theories. And, if one did attempt to wait for this perfection, much scientific progress would be lost (Kuhn, 1962). Kuhn added a social element to all theoretical work in the sciences, however, in the moments of revolution between paradigms:

> Something must make at least a few scientists feel that the new proposal is on the right track, and sometimes it is only personal and inarticulate aesthetic considerations that can do that. Men have been converted by them at times when most of the articulable technical arguments pointed the other way (Kuhn, 1993, p. 387).

Recent developments in the field of marketing and management have noted similar social processes in regard to knowledge construction. In particular, *value* in organizations is something co-created and inherently contextual (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). This is of particular importance in the interaction between organizations and the customers of that
organization (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). In what is called a Service-dominant logic, this co-creation is essentially a learning process (Edvardsson et al., 2011). To understand this value-laden process of learning, social context is essential. Learning is an important element of social constructivism, and the church is an important social source of learning (Szuchewycz, 1994).

**Evidence of religious social construction.** Szuchewycz (1994) conducted a study with members at an Irish Catholic Charismatic prayer meeting. She found that members of the group socially created a spiritual message by using linguistic conventions to attribute their own words to divine motivation. In doing so, they gave their own words authority and higher meaning. Thus, the knowledge that was said to come from God actually came from the members of the group, but together they created an environment whereby their own words were given a higher meaning. This was achieved by linking speech to hymns and by linking one’s speech to other content in the meeting to create a sense of cohesion in an assumed random prayer meeting. This cohesion was considered Spirit-led. Of course, members would argue against it being socially constructed, as they attribute it to the Spirit.

Szuchewycz (1994) argued that the construction was important, as it took a deliberate effort by the members of the group to say the correct religious words necessary to prove divine motivation. It was also social, in that the cooperation and attention of the other members of the group was required for the desired effect of divine motivation to be achieved. Although it was clear that each member of the group was purposive in their contribution to the prayer meeting, in the end every important thing that was said was attributed to the Spirit as knowledge.

**Methodology**

Methodology refers to a researcher’s approach to the research problem (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). The current study utilized a Grounded Theory (GT)
methodology. GT has its origins in Glaser and Strauss’ book, The Discovery of Grounded Theory, published in 1967. Although most associate GT with a coding methodology (Urquhart, Lehmann, & Myers, 2010), it is much more. The primary goal of GT is to develop theory that is “in intimate relationship with data” (Strauss, 1987, p. 6). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that GT findings come out of the data rather than coming before the data. In other words, researchers do not attempt to develop hypotheses before collecting data. Rather, they wait until after data is collected and analyzed to begin hypothesizing. In this way, the data is less subject to a researcher’s subjective assumptions. Thus, I outlined a series of questions rather than hypotheses, not wanting to draw conclusions prematurely. This increases the credibility of my results, as they come from the data and are not forced to fit prior assumptions.

GT as outlined primarily by Glaser and Strauss has its roots in Symbolic Interactionism and the Chicago School of Pragmatism (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Cutcliffe, 2000; Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). GT has its roots in the reflexivity required by Symbolic Interactionism’s notion of the I/Me duality of persons (Mead, 1913). “If the ‘I’ speaks, the ‘me’ hears” (Mead, 1913, p. 375). There is an inherently reflexive and introspective process in Pragmatism (Fisher, 1978) that is also required in GT. GT also has roots in the Pragmatic assumption that meaning changes with context: “The actual content and feel of hunger and sex, are indefinitely varied according to their social contexts” (Dewey, 2002, p. 153). This calls for a view of reality that takes into account local and historical contexts.

Theory development in GT is more than mere description (Richards & Morse, 2012), involving the generation of theories that are flexible enough to account for changes in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, I intentionally went beyond mere description in my analysis of the data. Through detailed abstractions, I was able to provide mid-range theories about the
phenomenon under investigation. Rather than describe existing concepts, I analyzed a set of broad categories developed through analysis and categorization of every word and concept in the data. These categories represent “an overarching explanatory concept, one that stands above the rest” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55). Research was discontinued when nothing new was being found. Once the concepts and categories were fully saturated with data, final claims were made.

In the current study, I utilized a specifically Straussian approach to GT. Although Glaser and Strauss are credited with the development of GT, the researchers parted ways in the early 1990s (Kendall, 1999). Strauss outlined a more structured approach to research that allowed for further abstraction from the data (Cutcliffe, 2000). Glaser retained a more emphatic emphasis on the data itself, rather than the categories and dimensions introduced to the data from the researcher (Richards & Morse, 2012). The current study, following a Straussian approach to GT, allowed questions to be asked of the data that include, “What if?” rather than merely “What do we have here?” (Cutcliffe, 2000, p. 1482). This allowed for further abstraction from the data.

Credibility and dependability. In the current study, I established credibility through the use of relevant concepts and a clear outline of procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I was transparent in methods to both the dissertation committee and the research participants. Participants were given clear instructions about their role in the research and what was expected of them. I also employed a research assistant to aid in the dissemination of materials and the recording of each group.

I also established credibility through the development of trust and rapport with participants (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2002). Along with the FG assistant, I set-up each FG at least 30 minutes prior to the set start time. Many participants arrived early, giving me
time to interact with them on an informal level to make them feel comfortable before any cameras began recording.

I also established credibility by recognizing subjectivity, maintaining reflexivity, and providing an adequate amount of data (Morrow, 2005). Throughout data collection, I guarded against assumptions learned from lifelong experiences in congregational settings. I grew up in a strict church environment, where information was only minimally sought out. There was, thus, an acknowledged tendency to assume the same would be found in the current study. By bracketing out these assumptions and allowing the data to drive the findings, I provided results very different from my assumptions.

To ensure dependability, I provided an audit trail of extensive field notes (Morrow, 2005). Every conclusion can be traced back to the very point in a videotaped FG in which sets of responses were made. Conclusions can also be traced back to extensive notes taken by the research assistant during the FGs and by the researcher immediately following the FG. Notes were typed or recorded, and included thoughts on methodology, the research design, and potential meanings that began to emerge. The participants were also given the option to review a transcript after each FG session, with time to review it for accuracy. This follows the suggestion of Poland (1995) as a means of engaging in member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These checks increase the rigor of the qualitative work being conducted. No participants asked for such a copy, but they were told after and before each session that this option existed.

Method

*Method* refers to how a researcher collects data given the assumptions of the research methodology (Jackson et al., 2007). GT does not outline specific methods that must be used (Strauss, 1987). In the current study, I utilized FGs as a primary method, as FGs are used
primarily for the generation of data about group norms (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Wilkinson (2004) argued that FGs could be used as a stand-alone method. Kotchetkova, Evans, and Langer (2008) noted that FGs are adept at “capturing the complexity and fluidity of opinion, compared to surveys’ ‘false certainty’” (as cited in Jakobsen, 2012, p. 127).

**FG precedent.** There is precedent for the use of FGs in culture research. Groysbert, Nohria, and Bell (2009) outlined the use of group qualitative techniques to extract responses from a general surgery unit. The nurse manager asked employees to write down things that bothered them, and these were read to the group. The group responses to these issues revealed the deep-seated cultural problems of intergroup conflict and lack of teamwork. Likewise, Dickson (2006) argued for an alternative approach to individualism that considers *group* belief to be the primitive methodological concept. Dickson argued that the choice faced by an individual is not a direct relationship between the set of available choices and the payoff. Rather, the choice faced by an individual must take into account the choices of others (Dickson, 2006).

Cook and Yannow (2001) noted that culture could not be understood apart from group practice and action. Likewise, Rousseau and Cooke (1988) noted that culture is a shared phenomenon of social units. Schein (2010) argued that, because culture is a group phenomenon, the study of it is best conducted with representative groups. In the current study, I sought out groups within religious congregations that could speak about the culture of the congregation.

Shaw and Clarke (1999) noted the use of FGs in belief research when little is known about an issue. Because belief is a social phenomenon, belief formation in the current study was investigated in groups. Hardin noted, “The fact of belief does not correlate with the content of belief but does correlate with accidental factors in the believers’ social context” (Hardin, 1997, p. 260). Likewise, Barrett and Lanman (2008) noted that the literature on religious belief tends to
agree that such belief is a result of “the way ordinary human cognitive systems interact with ordinary human social and natural environments” (p. 110). The formation of belief is a social phenomenon, but the product of this belief formation—as a result of social influences—is also a social product. Thus, it was determined that religious belief in the current study was best studied in groups.

**Sample and recruitment.** Denominational leaders in the Eastern Ohio Association of the UCC (EOA) were contacted for insight into the best representative congregations for both samples—one conservative congregation and one liberal congregation. The decision to include two different types of congregations was done to obtain more unique data, as it was assumed that two congregations of one type would lead to an oversaturation of main concepts. These leaders then made first contact with the pastors of the congregations to inform them of the study and inquire about their interest in participating. I then contacted these pastors, asking them if they would be willing to participate in the study. The first invited congregation declined participation in the study due to changes in the pastoral staff and uncertainty about the study’s reception within the congregation. After agreement, I met in-person with the pastors of the two participating congregations to explain the study, its requirements, potential risks, and possible benefits.

In GT, it is necessary to include as participants those individuals best able to express the problem under investigation (Morse, 1991). Schein (2010) argued that sampling in cultural analysis could not make use of normal random sampling, because the analysis must target “key culture carriers” (p. 160). The pastor of each local congregation was given a list of requirements for the sample group, and was given the responsibility of contacting potential attendees to participate. It was determined that each pastor would know his local congregation better than the
researcher, allowing them to target these key culture carriers. This method utilized by the current study follows Jakobsen’s (2012) sampling technique of putting leaders in charge of recruitment according to set criteria, as this shows respect for the organization and reduces the risk of skewing the sample. Wilkinson (2004) argued that FGs can be pre-existing groups or groups of individuals brought together from diverse places only for the purpose of the research. In the current study, I included participants who knew other participants through congregational activities, thus representing mostly pre-existing groups.

Pastors were given the freedom to choose those attendees considered best able to talk about the culture of the congregation. The pastor provided a list of these attendees, following a set of guidelines:

- Each pastor was asked to provide a list at least 16 attendees, split evenly between those who had attended five or more years and those who had attended fewer than five years. Contact information for each potential participant was provided.
- Each pastor was asked to ensure that participants were able to speak meaningfully about the culture of the congregation. This requires that participants attend regularly and are aware of what happens within the congregation.
- Full membership in the congregation was not required to participate.
- Each pastor was asked to refrain, as much as possible, from including married or relational couples in the same FG. This was done to avoid creating a unified voice in the FG that might detract from the need for all voices to be heard.
- Each pastor contacted the potential participants individually to obtain consent prior to giving the list to the researcher.
The literature suggests that the length of time an individual is in an organization is an influential factor in the strength of their cultural affiliation (Schein, 2010). Cultures tend to reach a midlife stage two generations removed from a startup (Schein, 2010). At this point, someone other than the founder is in a leadership or management position, and culture becomes a powerful force that influences behavior even if it is dysfunctional (Schein, 2010). If the average generation is 25 years (Matthews & Hamilton, 2009), each congregation is well into its midlife.

For the purposes of the current study, long-term attendees were those who had been attending the congregation for at least one-quarter of a generation—five or more years. Newer attendees were those who had been attending for less than five years. The logic of this is that culture is more embedded in those who have attended longer, and culture is more explicit in the minds of newer attendees as they are being taught the culture.

The EOA leadership noted that ONA designation generally signified a liberal congregation. Thus, the ONA designation was used to identify congregations as liberal or conservative. This distinction was used in the purposive sampling of congregations to ensure that the study included one conservative and one liberal congregation. It was not assumed, however, that one congregation would be more open to information than another. Below is a summary of the two congregations:

- The first congregation was founded in the early 19th century and has over 500 current members with an average worship attendance of over 200. The congregation became part of the UCC in 1964, maintaining affiliations with the Presbyterian Church and Society, the First Congregational Church, and the Presbyterian Church prior to its current UCC affiliation. This congregation was included because of its unique position as an ONA congregation that hired an
openly gay pastor before officially becoming ONA. This provided the researcher with a sample population that has experience with what it means to be ONA.

• The second congregation was also founded in the early 19th century and has over 1,200 members with an average worship attendance of over 400. It began as part of the mission for the township in which it operates. This congregation was included because of its unique position as a non-ONA congregation within a denomination that encourages ONA affiliation. This congregation was also larger, which provided opportunities for contrast with the smaller congregation. It was important to note if differences in approaches to new members and new information change when the congregation is not explicitly ONA.

The unit of analysis for the current study is the religious FG. The interactions and social context are relevant, meaning that while religious individuals make up the units of observation, the group interaction itself was analyzed. It is difficult to generalize to the entire congregation itself, as the sampling was made up of only those willing to participate in a FG. Therefore, although the selection of a congregation was important to ensure different types of religious groups, it is not the unit of analysis. Rather, it provides potential area for theory generation and future research.

Each potential participant was sent an email (Appendix C) approved by the Kent State Institutional Review Board (IRB) informing him or her about the study, the rights of participants, and the role of participants in the study. The breakdown of participants can be found in Table 1. The pastor of Congregation 1 provided a list of 61 newer attendees and 17 long-term attendees. Emails were sent to 51 attendees from Congregation 1, of which 34 did not respond, and 2 declined to participate. A total of 15 participants from Congregation 1 participated in the
research. Of these 15, six were newer attendees and nine were long-term attendees. Nine of the participants were female, and six of the participants were male. The pastor of Congregation 2 provided a list of 10 newer attendees and 8 long-term attendees. Emails were sent to all 18 attendees, of which 6 did not respond. A total of 13 participants from Congregation 2 participated in the research. Of these 13, eight were newer attendees and five were long-term attendees. Five of the participants were female, and six of the participants were male. Thus, 28 individuals participated in FGs. Fourteen participants were newer attendees, and 14 participants were long-term attendees.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Congregation 1</th>
<th>Congregation 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential Participants</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Participants</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Term Attendee Participants</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer Attendee Participants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
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**Process.** FGs were conducted on-site at each congregation, with four FGs conducted at each congregation for a total of eight FGs. Participants were asked to meet twice over a two-week period to ensure that adequate time could be spent on each section of the FG. For the most part, groups remained the same for both meetings, with some retention problems. Table 2 provides a breakdown of each FG, noting the participants, any new participants added, and the participants who had attended the previous FG. Because four different FGs met twice over a two-week period, there is a gap between each FG when a separate FG met. For example, FG2 met in the week between the first and second meeting of FG 1. The first FG included six participants from Congregation 1. These participants were asked to participate in a second time
in the third FG. FGs 1 and 3 are referred to as 1A and 1B in the findings section. Of the original six participants, four attended FG 3 and two unique attendees were added for a total of six participants. The second FG included eight attendees from Congregation 2. These participants were asked to participate a second time for the fourth FG. FGs 2 and 4 are referred to as 2A and 2B in the findings section. Of the original eight, six attended FG 4 and no additional attendees were added, for a total of 6 participants. FG 5 included five attendees of Congregation 2. These participants were asked to participate a second time for FG 7. Of the original five participants, three attended FG 3 and one attendee was added from FG 3, for a total of four participants. FG 6 included seven attendees of Congregation 1. These participants were asked to participate a second time for FG 8. Of the original seven participants, five attended FG 3 and no other attendees were added, for a total of five participants.

Table 2

*Breakdown of Focus Group Retention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation 1</th>
<th>Congregation 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG 1</td>
<td>FG3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Jan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>Janelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callie</td>
<td>Callie</td>
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<td>John</td>
<td>John</td>
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<td>Peter</td>
<td>Peter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each FG was videotaped using two camcorders at different angles. A voice recorder was also utilized as a back-up to ensure good sound quality for transcription. Each FG was approximately 90 minutes in length. Effort was made to ensure groups started and ended on time.

All participants were required to sign consent forms per IRB requirements (Appendix D), and were informed that the research results would be written up in a dissertation and formatted for a future article submission. Before the first FG session began, participants were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire (See Appendix B). This provided simple demographic data to add richness to the data analysis as well as pertinent information about participants’ information behavior and church involvement.

All quotes provided in the findings section are from the FGs and are labeled in a way that ensures the confidentiality of all respondents. Congregational names are not identified, nor are any other identifiable markers of participants. Any more information about participants would allow individuals to discern easily who said what, since they are from the same groups.

In addition to the FGs, I attended three different Sunday morning services at each congregation, for a total of 6 services of approximately one hour each. This participant observation was done to verify data collected from FGs. Effort was made to attend a congregation’s service the week of a FG at that congregation. Thus, the participant observations were spaced throughout data collection to ensure that I attended the congregation of a FG the Sunday prior to meeting with that FG. For Congregation 1, I attended a 10:45 A.M. Sunday service, an 8:45 A.M. Sunday service, and an Easter Sunday service. For Congregation 2, I attended two 10:45 A.M. services and one 11:45 A.M. service.

**Questionnaire.** The questionnaire given to participants asked for general demographic information as well as information about their information behaviors. For instance, they were
asked how often they visited the UCC denomination’s Facebook page, or how often they talked with the pastor (Appendix B). On average, attendees of Congregation 1 showed slightly more information seeking behavior than Congregation 2—although the differences were not meaningful enough to warrant further analysis. Other questions addressed the amount of time spent talking with the pastor, visiting the local congregational and UCC websites, and visiting the UCC forums. There was also no meaningful difference in educational background or levels of congregational attendance.

**FG guide.** FG questions should allow participants to speak at length about each question (Silverman, 2005). A FG guide was constructed to highlight the primary points that the participants needed to answer (Appendix A). This guide was constructed based on the initial review of the literature and was refined after each FG. It was used loosely to provide some structure to the FG meeting without forcing a rigid structure to how questions were asked or how much time was allocated to each question. This semi-structured approach provided consistency to each FG while giving participants the freedom to discuss other issues that fit with one of the three RQs.

The FGs also included *projective* exercises that allow participants to “project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or objects” (Morrison et al., 2002, p. 63). The use of projective exercises is important to the current study as a method for the researcher to uncover the deeper and often unconscious feelings and beliefs that a participant may have about a topic. Religious belief, as already noted, is a complex issue. Often, it is difficult for individuals to articulate how they feel about complex issues. Thus, projective exercises offer participants a means of uncovering their own previously hidden feelings about something by having them consider a less complex situation. When used in conjunction with other methods in the
exploratory stages of research, projective exercises have been shown to exhibit high reliability and validity (Donoghue, 2000).

Two FG guides were used for the study, one for each of two sessions. Session one included an introduction, wrap-up, and three primary content sections that each addressed aspects of the RQs:

- ONA Culture Analysis
- Beliefs Projective
- Beliefs

Session two included an introduction, wrap-up, and two primary content sections that each addressed aspects of the RQs:

- Contemporary Beliefs and Belief Construction
- Information Poverty and Information Availability

**Analysis.** GT research allows analysis to occur at every stage of data collection, so it was not necessary to wait for all data to be collected to begin analysis. I began analysis after the first FG and continued through multiple stages of analysis throughout the research. First, concepts were developed. These concepts developed from the raw data of FG transcripts where patterns began to emerge. Then, categories were developed when multiple concepts were theorized to have similar attributes and follow similar patterns. These similar concepts were grouped together into categories. From these categories, general categories emerged that provided cohesion to the categories as well as all concepts that were grouped under these categories. These general categories represent the axes of my typologies.

Analysis of the data from the FGs was conducted methodically, following the steps outlined by GT (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Following the constant-comparative method of GT,
data was coded and analyzed at every stage of data collection. Coding involves *chunking* the data into meaningful pieces for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Videos of the FGs were transferred to transcription software the day after each meeting. This allowed me to watch the FG while transcribing, rather than relying only on audio. This first transcript was written word-for-word and finished within three days of the meeting. After this document was created, the video was watched with specific attention paid to body language. The coding from this body language analysis was added to the main transcription document. During this phase, the transcript was also checked for accuracy.

Once the main transcription document was completed, it was copied into NVivo for initial analysis and *open coding*. I first coded for each participant, and then coded the document according to the body language cues. I then coded the content of the transcript according to the rules of open coding, which involves approaching the raw data with an open mind, looking for concepts that emerge from the data. This is the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 61). The actions and interactions noted in the data were compared against each other, and similarities were found that allowed data to be grouped together.

I then reviewed the data concepts in a second coding process. This *axial coding* involved the researcher comparing concepts to one another and allowing certain concepts to rise to the level of a category. NVivo provided for the grouping of *child* nodes under *parent* nodes. The child nodes were the concepts, and the parent nodes were the categories. Appendix E provides a breakdown of how the concepts were grouped together to create categories.

I then initiated a third coding phase, reviewing the categories. During this *selective coding*, I looked for *general* categories under which other categories could be grouped. This is
defined as “explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories” (Creswell, 2007, p. 191). In selective coding, all categories were compared with each other, and general categories were identified under which several categories were grouped. These provide the highest level of abstraction in the coding hierarchy. As this analysis becomes more abstract, the theory becomes more generalizable (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Appendix E notes how the eight categories—each the result of the grouping of several data concepts—were grouped together to create a total of four general categories that account for all data. The small worlds category is not included, as it did not emerge directly from the data, but rather from an analysis of these four general categories and the relationships among them.

Thus, in my research, theories developed through analysis of collected data. After a complete transcript was ready, the three-stage coding process began. At each stage, concepts emerged based on their frequency within the transcript and their importance as noted by intense body language. As these concepts merged into one another to make-up broader categories, they were constantly checked against the initial transcript to verify that the abstracted categories did not distort the meanings of the raw transcript data. Abstraction continued until the researcher found that the data was becoming distorted. Only those categories that could account for a large portion of the data were listed as general categories.

The theories that emerged from this process are substantive, in that they are only able to explain and predict the behavior of those individuals directly participating in the FGs. The theories are not generalizable to the larger congregation or religious denomination. Rather, they provide important in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. This understanding is transferable to other contexts as researchers employ the same methods and ask the same questions. Findings from these other contexts can then be compared with the findings of the
current research. This comparison can either extend or restrict the generalizability of the current study’s findings. This is the process by which the substantive theories that are more than descriptive—yet less than broadly generalizable—become important initial steps in the broader understanding of complex problems. The questions asked in the current study require first an in-depth analysis—only after which can they be transferred to other contexts.

Typologies as Theory

Typologies have been used in a number of culture studies as a means of providing structure to the unstructured data of qualitative research. Denison (2000) categorized organizations in a typology that included two dimensions with opposing poles that must be managed: flexibility and stability; and an external or internal focus. Denison’s three case studies considered the ways in which companies fail to survive change because of deficiencies in one or more areas. He identified three separate organizational scenarios and noted their placement on a typology. Usually, these companies tend to score high on certain elements and low on others. By placing organizations within the typology, he was able to predict success based on the fully developed definitions of each extreme pole.

The theoretical significance of a typology is with its definitions of ideal types. Doty and Glick (1994) argued that this identification of ideal types is what makes typologies more than mere classification systems. These ideal types are theoretical because constructs within the ideal type are identified, relationships among these constructs are identified, and these identified internal relationships are falsifiable. Thus, in the current study, rather than hypothesizing relationships between independent and dependent variables, I hypothesize the relationships between an empirical example and its ideal type. The closer an empirical example is to the ideal type, the more likely it is to show whatever that type has been hypothesized to show.
This discussion of ideal types follows Weber’s (1949) analysis of ideal types as tools for the social scientist to synthesize selected facts into an analytical tool:

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (p. 90).

Thus, a typology allows the researcher to take unstructured data and apply structure to it in a way that gives it meaning as a tool of theoretical significance. Alone, these concepts are mere facts. By purposively combining them into ideal types, however, they take on a meaning as a unified construct. The meaning is theoretical in that only those constructs considered theoretically essential are included in the ideal type (Weber, 1975). In other words, only those constructs that are fully elaborated and unified can be identified as an ideal type.

Challenges

There are limitations to all FGs. Morgan (1997) argued that FGs are unnatural settings that encourage groupthink, thereby making the data less dependable than other methods. As moderator, I attempted to counter this by conducting each FG at the location of the participants’ own congregation. This was done to put participants in a more natural setting that would more closely mirror the discussions I was looking to analyze. An unnatural setting might have made participants uncertain about the FG process, causing some to defer possibly to an official group response without voicing their individual concerns. By conducting the FGs in a place where most participants had already met, it was more likely that each participant would feel comfortable voicing opinions and concerns without deference to the group.
Initially, participants tended to respond more directly to the moderator than to one another. These initial answers also showed participants trying to understand what the moderator wanted to hear, rather than what they actually thought. To avoid this deference (Jakobsen, 2012), I responded to participants with questions like, “What do you think it means?” In this way, it was made clear from the beginning that I was not seeking a specific answer, but was looking for any answer that addressed the question. Soon, participants responded to one another rather than the moderator.

Momsen (2006) noted that opinions are much more difficult to elicit from participants than factual statements. The culture of Jakobsen’s (2012) research participants, for instance, was one that encouraged the avoidance of direct disagreement. Because of this, the participants seemed to avoid stating opposing opinions. This was not the case for the FGs in the current study, however. Although participants in the current study come from a religious culture that might also attempt to avoid disagreement, the FGs showed many signs of healthy disagreement and negotiation among participants. Participants also showed strong body language throughout the meetings, showing passion and intensity as they offered opinions rather than descriptive facts.

Unstructured data. The data gained from FGs can vary substantially according to group make-up. Although the participants in the current study were given a similar series of questions according to a FG guide, they were still allowed to respond in any way that helped answer one of the RQs. Thus, while each group responded to one question, the answers given were often very different. Some groups would focus on different parts of the question or interpret the question differently. One group could also spend more time on one question than another group. This lack
of complete structure was intended and built into the FG guide, but it still presented a challenge during analysis.

I overcame this challenge by analyzing every word and phrase in the initial analysis as a distinct concept. This ensured that every piece of data was accounted for and given a conceptual label. The multiple phases of coding allowed me to note where these distinct pieces of data were similar on abstract levels. This allowed me to provide structure to the unstructured data to make it meaningful. As noted previously, typologies also provide structure.

**Technology.** I used three different pieces of recording equipment during each FG: two video cameras and one audio recorder. This provided challenges when attempting to load the recordings onto a single computer. Initially, it was impossible to play all three recordings on the same operating system. I was able to convert all three files, however, into a similar type that could be played on a single operating system. These files were then added to transcription software that could handle the file type. Once converted and added to the software, the files worked similarly and allowed the researcher to explore different angles without switching the software, and having the audio recorded at different locations in the FG room helped ensure the accuracy of the transcription.

**Retention.** As noted, not all participants were able to commit to both FGs. Thus, although groups stayed mostly the same, there were some new participants in the second meeting. Between the two Congregation 1 FGs, four participants did not attend both meetings. Between the two Congregation 2 FGs, two participants did not attend both meetings. This had the potential of disrupting the rapport built in the first meeting. This potential disruption was offset by the fact that participants already knew all of the other participants, so no new icebreakers were required for the participants to feel comfortable with one another. This was
also offset by the fact that the second FG had no carry-over of material from the first FG, i.e.
participants did not need to be present at the first group to participate in the second group. Thus,
each group was treated as a new discussion. The retention that was held did serve the function of
furthering the cohesion and rapport among group participants.

**Married couple.** Although an effort was made to keep married couples in separate
groups, FGs 6 and 8 from Congregation 2 included a husband and wife. Although not ideal, they
did not prove to be a hindrance to group discussion. Other participants talked to them separately
and not as a single unit. They also added different opinions and insights, rather than one unified
voice.
Chapter IV: Findings

In general, analysis shows differences according to congregation rather than FG. The findings are structured according to category. For each general category, the findings from Congregations 1 and 2 will be noted in the same section. When necessary, the specific FG out of which a quotation originated will be noted. This is done to allow readers to note potential differences among the FGs. Unless otherwise noted, however, a quotation attributed to a specific FG is characteristic of all participants from that congregation. The FGs from Congregation 1 are labeled 1A and 1B. The FGs from Congregation 2 are labeled 2A and 2B.

As noted previously, Congregation 1 is an ONA congregation within the UCC. It has an average worship attendance of over 200. Congregation 2 is also a congregation within the UCC but is not an ONA congregation. It has an average worship attendance of over 400.

Information Type

The typology of information used is made up of two dimensions: information type and information source. The definitions of both come from the data itself. Type refers to whether or not the information an individual holds is also held by other participants in the group. Commonly held information is shared information, while information that is not shared is unique information. Source refers to whether the information comes from within an individual or from an external source. For religious groups, shared information tends to come primarily from the Bible and the sermon—as these sources are available by every attendee of the congregation. Unique information tends to be less common, as only one or two participants have it and can bring it out in discussion. This includes information outside of the Bible and the sermon and can include the Internet, books, peer relationships, etc. For both congregations, the primary need fulfilled by information was the development of the Christ-like characteristics of kindness and
love. This goal was the motivation for information seeking about religious beliefs.

**Shared information.** This section outlines the shared information noted within both congregations. This information type is common to most or all members of a FG and often represents traditional sources, e.g. the Bible.

**Worship service.** Shared information in Congregation 1 came to participants through the medium of the Sunday worship service. Attendees of Congregation 1 were aware of the phrase, “Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.” This phrase was spoken every Sunday morning from the pulpit, either by the pastoral staff or a layperson. This was validated by participant observation, as the pastor opened three separate services with this phrase. The sermon itself provided context and description of specific behavior attributable to this statement. In particular, it was noted that the pastor often talked from the pulpit about needing to be more inviting to newcomers by sticking your hand out to say, “Hi.” 1A participants also noted other sermons from visiting pastors about the need to balance personal enrichment and the welcoming principles of Christ.

1A participants were aware of the connection between the Bible and the sermon, noting that the pastor based his sermons on Scripture while maintaining a contemporary message. 1A participants also agreed that the sermon was a means of making the Bible relevant, turning the sermon into a medium for the continued use of the Bible for those who may not read it individually.

Similar to Congregation 1, attendees of Congregation 2 received shared information through the medium of the Sunday worship service. The presence of biblical information within the congregation was due in large part to the sermon. One 2B participant felt that he had heard the entire Bible through sermons in spite of not having read through the entire Bible on his own.
This was confirmed in participant observation, as various readers read biblical excerpts each Sunday. Some readers showed more enthusiasm than others, likely a byproduct of the reader’s personality.

Also, similar to Congregation 1, Congregation 2 frequently pointed back to the UCC statement, “Wherever you are in your journey, you are welcome here.” Often paraphrased or quoted in part, this was evident throughout the discussion. I was made aware of this through participation in three Sunday services, where the pastor repeated this phrase of welcoming. Participants also referenced, “God is still speaking.” One 2A participant explained the quickness with which other participants recalled this information: “We use that statement a lot here in the church.” 2A participants, more than any other group, noted information received during Bible studies in which all participants read the same books and gathered to discuss them.

_Bible_. When discussing their core beliefs, 1A participants agreed that all of the beliefs they talked about were rooted in common principles given by God. As noted by one 1A participant, “That’s where it all came from—God, you know, through Christ. God teaches us all that.” The medium through which God taught these beliefs was the Bible: “I think that at the end of the day, the Bible’s the most, you know, it’s the best demonstration of where those principles came from and how they were practiced.” Group 1B added that the Apostle’s Creed, the Easter story, and the Christmas story summed up their core beliefs. These sources are all biblically derived.

1A participants viewed the Bible as a document that can be applied to everyday circumstances. Thus, although the Bible is a centuries-old document, one 1A participant noted, “I think you can point to different examples in the Bible and then you can point to our behavior today and that it’s those same values and beliefs at work.”
The Bible and Christian tradition were heavily relied on as an information source to establish the identity of Congregation 2. For 2B participants, the most notable parts of the mission statement were those that centered on the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.

Congregation 2 noted that, although the context in which it is read changes, the essential text of the Bible itself does not change. This is different from attendees of Congregation 1 who noted that the Bible itself changes meaning as theologians understand more about it. Congregation 2 participants tended to reiterate the static nature of biblical meaning in the face of contextual changes, while Congregation 1 tended to reiterate the changing nature of biblical meaning in the face of contextual changes. In understanding the Bible as a static text, the context of modern day realities must form to the static meaning of the Bible. In understanding the Bible as a changing text, this modern context has the ability to change this meaning of the Bible to form it to culture.

This static meaning for Congregation 2 is the result of an unchanging God. As one 2A participant noted, “Well you would think over 2,000 years just about all circumstances would have happened and, in that amount of time, it’s been enough.” When asked if all we need to know about God is contained in the Bible, participants agreed, “All of the precepts and concepts you’d need to understand are in there.”

Authority. 1B participants agreed that the group of scholars who came together to create the canon should be trusted, as they understood history and theology more than the participants themselves did. They agreed with the moderator that, for them, “the fact that it has gone through that process makes it more authoritative.” 1B participants would read other spiritual or religious texts, but “wouldn’t give it the same authority [they] would the Bible.” 1B participants noted that
the Bible is more authoritative even than the sermon, as the sermon represents only one individual’s interpretation.

Although attendees of Congregation 1 would often discuss certain problems with the interpretation of the Bible, there was a strong desire by one 1A participant, who had been attending the congregation for over 20 years, to reassure the moderator that the congregation was still Bible-based: “I just want to add that, don’t get the mistaken identity that the culture of our church absolutely rejects the Bible. It doesn’t.” In the discussion of the difficulties of interpreting the Bible, 1A participants did not take that as a reason for diminishing its status as an authoritative information source. Just as Congregation 1 was clear to reassure that they do not dismiss the Bible, attendees of Congregation 2 were quick to note in discussions of core beliefs, “It starts with Jesus.” The assumption of the group was that any beliefs they would list all fall under the “foundation of the belief in the loving God.”

1B participants shared this commitment to the Bible as a traditional document that retains authority. They noted that, although other inspired religious writings existed, they would not open the Bible back up after canonization to add these texts. The Bible served a function of tradition, something connecting them to the 2,000-year old faith. “What a group of people say the holy Bible is, I mean, that is what, you know, was done and I accept that that is the Holy Bible, the primary spiritual text.” One 1B participant noted, in terms of changing the Bible, “Then that seems to water it down.”

Congregation 2 reasserted the importance of authority by connecting their beliefs to tradition. In addition to its static understanding of biblical writings, 2A participants argued that the history of Christianity is an essential piece of information that must not be disparaged in favor of current trends. In terms of the UCC statement, “Our faith is 2,000 years old, our
thinking is not,” participants agreed: “It’s trying to sort of disparage or discount the past and the
core of the faith, which I think is probably not the best way to say something like that.” They
argued that such a statement favors current thinking over past faith. They overwhelmingly
disagreed with this assertion. There was a stronger desire in Congregation 2 to attach themselves
to the 2,000-year-old faith than was noted in Congregation 1.

2B participants agreed with the essential tradition of the Bible: “There’re some traditions
you just don’t want to mess with, so to speak—the Bible being one.” They noted a dilemma in
that “our faith is based in the Bible,” but at the same time, “it’s not really based on a set of
dogma that we’re told.” At the same time they affirm the centrality and authority of the Bible,
they note, “We’re not exactly bound that everything in the Bible is the truth.” Thus, 2B
participants place priority on their own interpretation of the Bible, but still affirm that the Bible
is a necessary foundation. There was a continuing effort within Congregation 2 to reaffirm their
connection to Christian history, likely a result of the challenges they noted facing from other
religious groups. The Bible was an important means of showing others that they were not a “sort
of new age, new wave, sort of reinvented, newly invented sort of faith.” The Bible allows them
to say that they are traditional but open-minded. Participants noted that the structure of the
services at the congregation help reinforce this tradition, in spite of their open-minded view of
belief.

2B participants reaffirmed their commitment to tradition by their unwillingness to re-
open the canon and change the Bible, even though they agreed that it was “written literature that
was edited arbitrarily by people who had an agenda at the time that was done.” 2B participants
viewed the Bible similar to the constitution in that, just as the constitution has amendments, the
Bible has other interpretations and books written about it that add insight. In neither case,
however, should the original document be changed:

No, I wouldn’t want to change it because that . . . it’d be like changing the constitution—that’s the way they wrote at that time. You might want to make changes to the constitution, but you don’t want to change what was the whole concept.

**Bible use.** The use of the Bible as an information source was not without its complexities, however. Some participants felt that the Bible was only proper for certain groups of people, noting that the Bible on its own was too complex for individuals just learning about Christianity and too harsh for children. Regarding its complexity, 1A participants noted a general inability even among themselves to understand all that is in the Bible. These participants argued for the need for education to go alongside the Bible, helping them understand its complexity.

Regarding the “harsh” nature of the Bible, some participants saw issues with using the Bible with children. One 1A participant noted, “Bible stories are scary,” and, “I don’t think that’s the way to teach kids to be nice and to share and think of other people is to teach those Bible stories.” Stories from the book of Job were mentioned as being particularly horrible stories.

Even though Congregation 2 promoted a static understanding of Scripture, through negotiation among the participants, the group consensus was that the UCC commitment to the phrase, “God is still speaking,” required an understanding of the Bible as evolving in some ways. In an effort to argue that the Bible is still relevant to life today, 2A participants had to alter their view of the Bible as completely static. 2A participants agreed, “In Scripture, in anything, right, you can’t assume that it’s not going to evolve.” Thus, when discussing the Bible itself there was a desire to reinforce its traditional and unchanging meaning; when discussing the Bible’s application to life, however, there was a desire to reinforce its relevance. Participants came to a compromised agreement that the Bible does contain all the information we need—which
represents a first generation KM understanding of information—but that God is still active in how individuals read this document. Thus, new discoveries and seemingly new knowledge creation—all second generation KM concepts—can be had with a storehouse that includes all of the information one would ever need. This seemingly paradoxical position is attributed to God still speaking to individuals, thus resolving the paradox of a static document that changes. Belief in God elevates these organizations to another level of epistemology and knowledge storage and production.

**Unique information.** This section outlines the unique information noted within both congregations. This information type is that which one or two members of a FG hold.

**Bible supplements.** Due to the inability to understand all that is in the Bible, and the noted presence of multiple interpretations and translations of the Bible, 1A participants supplemented their understanding of it with other sources—agreeing that the Bible required teaching from scholars to be understood. One 1A participant noted a lecture that argued that the Apostle Paul was being sarcastic in his comment about women being silent and that this sarcasm was lost in the translation to English. This represents unique information that only those in attendance at the lecture would have.

1B participants also noted unique information they had gained over the years that changed how they read the Bible. One 1B participant noted hearing a sermon where God was referred to as a woman, and that such an experience “kind of turns it on its ear and you have to look at it from different perspectives.” One 1B participant also noted reading a novel that discussed the biblical parable that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. She found from the novel the claim that the words have been translated incorrectly and that the camel actually referred to a coarse type of thread. This
discovery changed the meaning of the passage for her from the *impossibility* of a rich man to enter heaven to the inherent *difficulty* of entering heaven. One 1A participant referenced the Grammy awards as context for the world in which the Bible must be made relevant. Other 1A participants noted, in informal discussions of hobbies, a heavy interest in non-biblical reading, e.g. *Game of Thrones* and a biography of JFK. These all represent unique sources of information, as it was clear that only one participant had read the material. This differs from biblical information, of which it was clear that most participants had read.

Like Congregation 1, attendees of Congregation 2 were aware of religious writings other than the Bible and referred to these as *extensions* to religious writing. Pointing to writings omitted during the process of canonization, or to the revelation of God through acts and behaviors of other people, participants disagreed with the moderator’s statement that everything one needs to know about God is contained in the Bible.

2A participants noted that personal interactions became information sources that develop into knowledge about God: “Someone that you may meet, and maybe don’t even know, who helps you through a very difficult time because they are professing God’s love to you.” One participant pointed to a time when he chopped wood with some other men in the church, and how this established a sense of community for him that led him to a place where issues of faith could be discussed. These interactions would clearly be different from person to person, providing the grounds for unique information gathering.

Most of the discussions for FGs centered on the issue of religious beliefs, as beliefs were used to extract data about how information was used. 2B participants also pointed to a wide variety of information sources when discussing beliefs. One participant noted H.G. Wells, *Time Machine*. Another mentioned the History Channel’s series on the Bible, calling it a *Cliffs Notes*
version. Another mentioned the book, *Lord of the Flies*, and other sci-fi movies to indicate the common realities of humanity. One participant noted a significant piece of information he received from his mother and father that a sense of humor was the most important part of a successful marriage. He took that to mean, regarding core beliefs, “You don’t want to take yourself too seriously with all of this stuff.”

**Critical thought.** Because of the changing nature of divine revelation, attendees of Congregation 1 argued that reading the Bible requires critical thought. This requirement was not noted in Congregation 2. This critical thought was juxtaposed with assumptions that the Bible as written is true, as noted by one Congregation 1 participant: “Conscientious critical thinking and looking at different sides of an issue and thinking about it [is needed] instead of just, this is the answer; this was the answer; this will always be the answer.” Because critical thought requires an individual process not held in check by any common authoritative source, it represents a source of unique information.

Critical thought was juxtaposed with a literalist interpretation of the Bible, which attendees of Congregation 1 defined as thinking that everything in the Bible actually happened. 1B participants argued that the context of the Bible must be understood, rather than using the Bible as a “word-for-word guide.” It was noted that we no longer stone people for doing something wrong; neither do we follow dietary rules and restrictions. Others noted that not everything in the Bible actually happened, but some things are stories to help make theological points.

Because individuals bring different contexts and approaches to this critical thought, participants thought it impossible—and not desired—that everyone would have the same interpretation of any part of the Bible. The existence of multiple interpretations provides an
environment where unique information is heavily present. 1B participants noted that the choice of what translation of the Bible to use was a personal decision that came down to what was comfortable and easy to read.

**Information Source**

The second dimension of information use is information source. Source refers to whether information comes from within a person or outside of a person. Some information is considered an innate part of a person when participants noted a lack of outside information seeking. Information is still sought and found, but this seeking is done through personal meditation and reflection as a means of getting at the information that is within an individual as a product of his or her humanity, spirituality, or experience. External information refers to information gained from sources outside of one’s self.

**Internal information.** This section outlines the internal information noted within both congregations. This represents information that originates within an individual without direct external attribution. The information is impacted by external circumstances, but it is attributed to internal feelings, emotions, and thoughts.

**Feeling.** 1B participants agreed that religious beliefs were feelings that could not be captured or received ultimately from anything external. Confidence in a participant’s own belief system was noted as a function of their internal feeling about a situation: “I’m pretty confident because I know when I make those decisions I feel better about making them.” 1B participants agreed, noting that beliefs “kind of feel like they transcend knowledge.” Participants agreed that the discernment of knowledge rather than knowledge itself was the role of belief. This discernment was allocated to internal senses, making external knowledge subject to the ultimate approval of an internal feeling. One 1B participant noted that her search for a congregation to
attend ultimately relied upon an epiphany: “I woke up one morning, and I realized I’m not in the right place.” No external information seeking was noted in reference to her decision to change churches, although such seeking was noted when deciding to which church she would change.

The perceived accuracy of information was a function of an individual’s internal reaction to it, as a 1B participant noted, “Sometimes you can sense it. It just rings true.” In this case, accuracy was a measure of the relevance and internal solidarity of information. “I think our gut instinct is a lot more accurate than a lot of times we admit.” When decided among the multiple translations of the Bible, there was no external information noted that helped them make a decision. Rather, as long as a difference in interpretation “doesn’t really feel like it changes the fundamental meaning of it,” it was accepted. The final decision on a biblical translation to use was based on an inherent sense of what was correct. One 1A participant noted the importance of individual guilt as a source that spurs the church toward more inclusiveness and openness: “I think it’s a source of enormous guilt, so guilt is a source here, because we don’t do a very good job in any of those areas.”

Similarly, when discussing why they attend this particular congregation, 2A participants often pointed to a feeling. There was no reference to a distinct information seeking process regarding the decision of which congregation in the area to attend. They attended or shopped multiple congregations until they felt that one was right. This internal sense was the only information participants recalled using to come to a final decision. They likely used other sources, such as a website, but did not view this as fundamental to their information search.

**Passive.** Participants often recalled pieces of information with no awareness of where they originated. This points to a passive receiving of information in which the individual is not actively seeking it, but receives it by a number of different means. It is possible they were
looking at a source for other information, for example, and did not realize other information they passively captured. Often when discussing beliefs and asked where they got their beliefs, participants of Congregation 1 would respond with, “I don’t know where I got it.” Although participants were quick with a response, they could not point to a source for that response. Participants often did not know where they received information. One participant, for instance, argued that the canonization of the Bible was a good thing because of thought surrounding religion before the Canon: “Literally every large town had its own bishop that sort of set himself up to be, you know, the pope. And so I think that helped get a lot of those things in order.” Although this information was specific, the participant was unable to refer to any information source that led him to this understanding.

Congregation 2 participants showed a similar storehouse of passive information—information gained serendipitously and recalled by certain stimuli in the environment, e.g., questions. When asked direct questions about what books, articles, and websites participants would use to explain their beliefs, they would often deflect the question and answer from their own internal knowledge base.

Congregation 2 participants also echoed participants of Congregation 1 that the Bible itself can be read by different individuals with different interpretations. Rather than reference a general feeling, however, these participants pointed to the role of personal context and emotions. Individuals bring something to the text itself to change its fundamental meaning based on how they feel at the moment they read it. Participants noted that they had read passages differently over time: “For different situations I’ve read different passages differently.” Thus, the internal emotional state of an individual impacts the meaning of the external biblical text: “Because some people have to cope with a need in a different way than someone else does.” This involved what
Innate. 1B participants defined belief often as an inherent part of humanity. Participants were asked to imagine themselves on an isolated island, confronted with a group of people with no knowledge of religion. They were asked how they would respond to a variety of situations. This included hypothetical reactions to questions about their religion, whether or not they would share their religion with others, and what they would do if others on the island started propagating a message that countered the FG’s core beliefs as stated prior to this exercise. This was done as a projective exercise to allow participants to think freely about the equality of other beliefs and the need to discuss personal beliefs in communal settings. In terms of the hypothetical island situation, these participants agreed that—even isolated from the rest of the world—the island people would have developed a system of beliefs. One participant went as far as to say that a requirement for the survival of any culture is that it maintain Christian-like principles: “If they’re able to sustain their culture they’re probably doing things that Jesus would dovetail.” Christian beliefs were seen as an innate part of humanity.

The moderator asked participants how they would react to disagreement over belief in being nice, to which one 1A participant responded, “Why wouldn’t we be? I mean I don’t know that there’s a good come back for why are you nice? Well, why wouldn’t I be?” That individuals would believe in the values of being nice without even the ability to come up with a hypothetical situation in which one would not want to be nice shows feelings that these beliefs are assumed. The moderator brought up the hypothetical market-based value of cheating others for profit—a case in which one would not necessarily want to be nice above all else—yet participants still assumed that the value of being nice was innate to everyone.

Congregation 2 participants responded to hypothetical disagreement in ways similar to
Congregation 1 participants. When asked what they would do if others disagreed, participants reacted in surprise that disagreement would even occur: “I mean, to me it’s so fundamental that I don’t even know how to begin to say it’s not or why would you not just think it’s so.” These beliefs were innate to them, and 2A participants had difficulty finding information sources or documentation to justify their beliefs—pointing instead to the obvious nature of these assumed beliefs.

2B participants also noted the innateness of belief in the golden rule, arguing that dissemination of beliefs would not be required, because the core principle of the golden rule would be already established in the island: “Most civilizations have that in some regard.”

**Inward seeking.** Often, 1A participants referred to an internal information search of their own personal faith or thought. Participants noted that one’s reassurance in a belief comes from an internal search of their personhood, a search aided by prayer. For them, prayer was an internal act, as God came to them. Asked what they would do when facing everyday problems, one 1A participant noted that she would pray. Another 1A participant jokingly noted, “You’re a prayer.” Another participant added non-sarcastically, “Good for you.”

1A participants valued this internal seeking of information over the external seeking of information when it came to religious belief, noting that using documentation, e.g. the Bible, to make a point is improper: “Other religions might give you that document and highlight that sentence and say, ‘That’s why we do it because it says so right there.’” Participants agreed that such use of external information makes the information irrelevant, as it becomes only a source for winning arguments. Internal information was also prized over external sources like the Bible because it was considered more relevant and in tune with a God who still speaks to individuals. For Congregation 1 participants, seeking out internal information is a seeking out of what God
says to them.

Even when participants read external sources like the Bible, it was important for them to refer to internal feelings to understand them fully. 1B participants agreed that the Bible was not a reference book. Rather than a book of facts, the Bible represented both tradition—as noted earlier—and something internally spiritual. Participants agreed, “You have to read it and then you have to think about it, you have to digest it and think about it for a little bit.” This digestion of external biblical information required combining it with internal sources such as context and feelings.

Congregation 1 participants also pointed to their personal expertise in areas of human experience when asked how they would confront everyday issues, like plumbing or financial troubles. Participants were asked what they would do if faced with a plumbing issue, a job loss, or a personal addiction. This was done to gauge the types and sources of information they would first seek under normal, everyday conditions. In reference to a leaky faucet, one 1A participant noted that he would “open up the toolbox and fix it.” In reference to financial difficulties, participants of 1A and 1B noted the need to go out on their own and get another job, and others noted how they would personally cut expenses and make budgets. Another participant pointed to her own expertise as an accountant for helping with financial issues. In reference to how they would help someone struggling with an addiction, one participant pointed to herself as having a PhD in the area. In these instances, participants would seek out their own internal information stores to find answers. Thus, the information used is both uniquely personal to the participants and internal.

Congregation 2 showed a similar reliance on internal stores of information, noted especially in answers to questions about how they would deal with life situations. For plumbing
issues, many would try and fix it themselves first without any information seeking. Only after an unsuccessful attempt would they seek help from a website or a plumber. Regarding responses to financial difficulties, most participants pointed to self-directed acts of budgeting and getting another job, yet they did not indicate any information seeking that would accompany this process—as if it were an internal push and reaction to the situation. One participant noted, “I think you have to depend on your experience and a little bit of common sense.”

An inward information seeking process was also noted in the construction of Congregation 2’s mission statement. One 2A participant was involved in developing this mission statement. He noted that a board of deacons gathered to discuss it and that decisions about what to include in the mission statement reflected “how we see ourselves as being vital and doing God’s work.” It was noted that the statement was developed extremely “thoughtfully,” although no reference to external information was noted.

Congregation 2 participants were more likely than participants of Congregation 1 to use intentional inward information seeking to find meaning in religion. Religion itself was described by 2A participants as an external process of God attempting to connect with humanity, as they noted that religion shows how “God has attempted to connect, relate, teach us, help us understand.” This is done through the Bible and the revelation of God throughout history. At the same time, however, participants agreed that religion was a process of “trying to understand myself.” Through internal meditation, participants were able to relate back to God.

**External information.** This section represents information that is directly attributed as source material for belief expressions. It may combine with internal information but is directly noted by participants as singular sources that made meaningful impacts on their belief expressions.
Environment. Congregation 1 participants acknowledged that, if the congregation wanted to stay relevant—something it deeply valued—it needed to adapt to changes in society. Congregation 1 participants noted changes in technology, needs of LGBT individuals to be accepted by religion, and the challenge of maintaining relevancy in the midst of constant external change: “We’re relevant. We’ve adjusted to the times. We still respond to the challenges that we face.” During participant observation, I noted a large banner of Martin Luther King, Jr., one that might stir up political controversy in other religious congregations. One participant noted that, had the UCC not been responsive to external changes, it would still be into witches and racial segregation. 1B participants added recognition of the changing nature of the family, as one participant noted her children asking the question, “He’s black, but why are his mommies white?” She noted that it was important that the diversity her kids experience outside of the congregation is mirrored within the congregation.

Not every external change was considered a call for internal change, however. For one 1A participant, the changes in society were not to be entirely celebrated: “We live in a very, very, very, very secular world compared to even 20 years ago. I mean we are dominated by media.” This sentiment was not noted in other 1A participants, however, indicating that most either thought secularism to be a good thing or did not agree that the world is secular. In general, participants wanted to be relevant even in what some might label a secular environment.

Congregation 2 focused more on the religious environment around them than the general societal environment. Whereas participants of Congregation 1 noted the importance of adapting to the external secular environment, 2A participants noted the importance of adapting to other religious traditions. Participants noted that the congregation had adopted many traditions from other Christian churches, most notably the tradition of Ash Wednesday from Catholicism. Thus,
they felt they could learn about other faith traditions within this congregation, not closing themselves off from the traditions of others. Congregants are “encouraged to learn.” Groups 1A, 1B, and 2B noted the diversity of religious traditions within their congregation, but did not expressly state a desire to learn about these different backgrounds.

2B participants showed a greater desire to look beyond religious traditions as a source of external information. Although agreeing on the importance of Christian tradition, participants also agreed that they wanted “a faith that is not so bound in tradition as to operate with blinders on.”

**Sermon.** The sermon was an external source that 1A participants often pointed to as a tool for maintaining spiritual relevancy. This was not as heavily noted in Congregation 2. Participants viewed the sermon as a means of providing direct relevancy and meaning to the Bible and Christian tradition. During participant observation on Easter Sunday in particular, I noted the pastor’s passionate plea to be more aware of homophobia and socioeconomic class imbalance. FG participants juxtaposed this use of the sermon with creedal statements from Catholicism that are merely repeated without any attempt to make them relevant. The primary source of information sought from the sermon, therefore, was modern application of historical documents.

**Church shopping.** *Church Shopping* is the process that Congregation 2 participants described of looking for a new congregational *home*. This process was not noted in Congregation 1. Participants often engaged in external information seeking when choosing a congregation. For 2A participants, this information included the music played during the service and the sermon. The very *structure* of the service was noted as an essential informational piece to “draw them in.” The importance of service structure was noted in my observation of the 11:59 A.M. service.
at Congregation 2, which was more contemporary than others Sunday morning services at the congregation. Walking in to the service, a white sheet covered the place where the organ and choir seating was. Attendees wore more casual clothing, and the music included drums, a piano, an electric bass guitar, and a singer soloist who led the congregants in singing songs that were not in the hymnal. The pastor was not wearing the traditional robe, opting instead for a suit jacket without a tie.

All but one participant across all groups agreed that the search for a congregation was first a search for a place to practice their personal faith and beliefs, with the community element coming as a logical next step. One 2B participant, however, noted that, in looking for a congregation, he was looking first for a community, not being entirely engaged in a faith. Thus, it was an external source of information about the ways in which he could become engaged in civic and congregational activities—rather than an internal sense of need for personal faith expression—that led him to decide on a congregation to attend.

**Degrees of information need.** As noted, when discussing how they would deal with household plumbing issues or financial concerns, participants first noted reliance on their own internal stores of information. As the hypothetical condition worsened, however, participants began indicating a more external dimension to their information seeking. Especially in terms of addiction, which participants viewed as an inherent loss of self control, it was thought that internal information was no longer adequate. This awareness led to the necessity of seeking external information and help. For most participants, information would be sought first from a qualified stranger, e.g., a doctor or professional at an outreach clinic. In their information search, anonymity was prized.

Even when engaged in an external information search, however, participants still felt it
necessary to maintain individual control. This was done by verifying the information gained from these professionals—usually through an Internet search. As one 1B participant noted, “So even a medical doctor, if they say well you have this disease, I’m gonna go home, and I’m gonna look up everything online.”

Congregation 2, similar to Congregation 1, noted degrees of information need. Rather than expressing it in general terms of where they would look for information, however, 2B participants noted how these degrees would affect their use of the clergy as an information source in certain circumstances. Participants agreed that the pastor would be an influential source of information and help, but would only be used as a last resort. They also noted that having other peer sources of information, such as strong family support, would make them hesitant to use resources others might need if their own need was not too strong: “It sounds like all of us would not want to tap into resources that others would need more. If all other resources weren’t there, I think we’re all saying we would feel comfortable coming here.”

2A participants were more likely than participants of groups 1A, 1B, or 2B to seek out external information when asked about what they would do about a plumbing or financial issue, as most participants pointed to a seeking out of information from another person. This person was usually someone with experience in plumbing or someone known as a handyman. Unlike other groups, 2A did not require a change in the degree of need to turn to external sources. They were much quicker to abandon the search of their personal information when confronted with even minor information needs. In addition to peers, 2A participants pointed to the use of the Internet and TV shows like Suze Orman as a reference point if they were struggling with financial difficulties.

Because 2A participants were already more likely to seek external information with less
severe needs, they engaged in similar external seeking tendencies regarding the hypothetical addiction need. Most participants agreed that the clergy would not be their first option, as they would not “have the guts to go to [the pastor].” Participants disagreed about the first steps of information seeking in dealing with a personal addiction. Some would make a first cut on their own by looking on the Internet or reading books, while others noted that such a first approach would not be helpful: “Personally I don’t think a book or a website is gonna help you through something like that. You can read all you want, but I don’t think you’re gonna read a book and look at a website and say, ‘Oh! Got it all figured out.’” Most participants noted the importance of peer support—evident in programs like Weightwatchers or Alcoholics Anonymous.

**Information Conclusions**

Figure 2 represents how the data was organized into typologies, and how the data from each congregation was organized. Congregation 1 is more firmly on the unique information side of the dimension because of their view of the Bible as a changing document open to critical thought. Congregation 2 is more firmly on the shared information side of the dimension because of their understanding of the Bible as more static and unchanging, and its stronger commitment to the tradition it shares with all Christianity. Both congregations revealed strong internal information sources.
Belief Expression

The typology of what and how participants believe is made up of two dimensions: belief expression and belief hierarchy. Belief expression refers to whether participants feel that belief is personal or necessitates communal expression. Communal belief is developed as a community, with the community playing a vital role in developing and maintaining the beliefs of individuals. Personal belief is developed in isolation by individuals and, because of this isolation, assumes that levels of disagreement and diversity of belief are a good part of any community. Belief hierarchy refers to whether or not individuals believe their beliefs to be better than others. Those closer to the equality end of the dimension espouse that all beliefs are equal, and no one should
be judged. Those closer to the superiority end feel that one or all of their beliefs are better than other beliefs.

**Personal expression.** This section outlines the personal expression of belief noted within both congregations. This view holds that beliefs are a personal matter not subject to the validation of the community.

**Diversity.** Participants of Congregation 1 agreed that beliefs are highly personal, mostly because no one individual can be confident enough of what is right to force a belief on an entire group. The group, as one 1B participant noted, celebrated diversity of belief: “It’s a personal relationship; my relationship with Jesus or God or whoever you want to call him isn’t the same as [others], and it’s not supposed to be.”

Although 2A participants agreed that beliefs were personal, they approached this issue differently than Congregation 1. Whereas Congregation 1 celebrated the diversity of beliefs that come from an understanding of belief as personal, Congregation 2 viewed the personal nature of belief as the starting point for conflict. In discussing the hypothetical island, participants agreed that peace required a lack of communication about personal beliefs and an agreement that participants are free to believe whatever they want: “I’m going to respect you for your beliefs; hopefully you can respect me for mine, and we can live peacefully and everything’s fine.”

**Personal responsibility.** Because belief is personal, participants of Congregation 1 argued that outcomes of these beliefs could not be controlled and are the responsibility of the individual. For example, Congregation 1 was located in a college town, but the absence of college students in the congregation was explained by group 1A as a general lack of commitment to religion by these students. Thus, in spite of personal beliefs throughout the congregation in the need for a younger congregation, they could not force it. Congregation 1 participants each believed strongly
that all individuals are welcome into their congregation. Even though they believed in the
importance of making newcomers feel comfortable, however, they stressed the responsibility of
newcomers to facilitate their own feelings of comfort. This was made clear during participant
observations, as I was new to the format of the worship service. Many actions were
commonplace for regular attendees, making it obvious that I was a newcomer as I struggled to
keep up. This included: when to stand and when to sit, when to open up a hymn, when to respond
aloud, when to sing, and when to remain quiet. Cues were given in the bulletin, but I was used to
a religious structure that provided cues from the pulpit. Those around me went with the flow of
the service that they were clearly comfortable with, either not noticing my struggles or deciding
not to help.

In the end, 1A participants agreed that each newcomer has his or her own reasons for
attending that cannot be known. Participants agreed that, because the expression of belief is truly
personal, some newcomers might want to “spend that hour connecting with God and not so much
with other people.” It was assumed that these newcomers would not want to be talked to or
approached. One 1A participant noted, “If they hide themselves in a corner of a pew somewhere,
then perhaps you wait awhile before you try to approach somebody like that.” Thus, in spite of
their belief in making newcomers feel welcome, the personal nature of this comfort made it
difficult to know how to accomplish this for others. They noted that cards are in every pew that
allow newcomers to leave contact information and indicate their willingness to participate in
various groups or projects. This was confirmed during participant observation, when I noted a
card in the pew on which was written with large font, “Visiting?” It then indicated that they
would “like to get acquainted,” and included space for the visitor’s name, address, phone and
email. The respect for the personal nature of belief expression trumped the participant’s own
beliefs about what constitutes feeling welcomed.

Whereas Congregation 1 participants viewed personal responsibility as a call to let go of attempts to control the outcome of belief for others, Congregation 2 participants viewed personal responsibility as a call to let go of attempts of others to control them. 2B participants argued against becoming ONA out of a desire to avoid the conflict noted in 2A: “I think that we would have our own version of an internecine war or struggle.” When asked if they would vote for becoming ONA, participants agreed they would not, as such a vote would be restrictive to their own ability to make their own decisions: “Don’t shoehorn me into something . . . my spine—what I have left of a spine—would stiffen right up if somebody’s forcing me.” There was a strong sense within 2B that they felt they were growing in the Christian faith, because they were not being told what to do but were doing it on their own terms: “I really feel like I’m learning to be a good Christian because I want to be a good Christian—not because somebody’s telling me this is the way to be that way.”

Communal expression. This section outlines a view of belief as expressed communally. Participants with such an expression value the community in the development of beliefs, and view community coherence as more important than personal expression.

Newcomer. Walking into Congregation 1 for participant observation during a Sunday morning service, I was greeted immediately upon entry by three individuals. These individuals shook hands with me and welcomed me into the congregation. The sanctuary itself was hidden within the walls of the old building, but signs helped guide newcomers to the necessary rooms. Upon entry into the sanctuary, I was again greeted and shook hands with an usher, handed a bulletin, and walked to a seat in the pews in a way that resembled a wedding. I felt welcomed, and the individuals within the congregation showed openness.
As I walked into Congregation 2 for the first of three participant observation sessions, no one greeted me at the door. A large coat rack greeted me and, unaware of the process for leaving a coat, I searched in vain for someone to help. As an older building, the path to the sanctuary was rather complex, and I found myself walking in the wrong direction in many cases. The first time I was greeted was upon entry into the sanctuary, when I was handed a bulletin.

Openness. In general, Congregation 1 agreed that beliefs were personal and that all were entitled to their own belief. One belief in particular, however, was discussed as a communal belief—the belief in openness. For participants, openness was exemplified in love and the welcoming of everyone into the congregation. The belief in openness and welcome was thought to be the responsibility of every individual in the congregation, and the participants of the group looked down on those not expressing this belief. Participants expected the congregation to believe in the value of openness and to express it by talking to newcomers and making them feel welcome. One participant noted that sitting in the balcony was a sign of regular attendees who do not want to talk to anyone, and who were failing to exemplify this assumed belief. 1A participants noted an environment of high touch in which newcomers were sure to interact with individuals at various locations throughout the church who are particularly sociable and would make an effort to welcome them: “It’s more than one person.” Thus, 1A participants placed the responsibility of providing an open environment on every regular attendee of the congregation. It was not seen as possible that anyone would not hold this belief in openness.

It was noted that a newcomer may desire a personal expression of faith, and this was seen as a normal part of what makes belief personal. It was not seen as normal or positive for regular attendees to show this same behavior, however, as it was expected that they would exhibit social behavior that would exemplify the belief in openness. This expectation was fulfilled during the
participant observation, as the high touch environment was active.

A similar assumption of shared beliefs of openness was noted when discussing the hypothetical island situation. There was an assumption that survival on the island was dependent on its inhabitants following Christ-like principles of love and acceptance. When the moderator posed the situation of an island with a long history of hating each other, one participant said with disbelief, “Really? Hating one another. Is anybody left?”

It was noted that 2A participants viewed beliefs as grounds for possible conflict and that they viewed the personal nature of beliefs as an argument for others not to force them into anything. Although they held this independent view of belief, they put one primary limitation on newcomers to the congregation—that they are committed to betterment. 2A participants agreed: “If [they] are here trying to put their life in good order . . . they’re welcome to sit by me.” This good order was noted as a reflection of the core beliefs participants expressed, thus confining the congregational welcome statement to those with similar core beliefs. This confining creates a paradox in which participants are open to all personal beliefs as long as they align with their definition of betterment.

2B participants espoused the equality of beliefs in terms of the ability of each person to have his or her own set of beliefs. For these beliefs to sustain a group of people, however, they had to be based on the Ten Commandments: “This is basically a framework that started the whole thing. That it was when man worshipped everything from sheep to bears to everything else, and God gave us these Ten Commandments, and if you want to be a healthy happy citizen, you go by the Ten Commandments.”

**Belief sharing.** Although Congregation 1 participants viewed beliefs as personal, they still showed a desire to engage in discussion and interaction about these beliefs in a communal
way. One 1B participant noted, in reference to the hypothetical island situation: “I might ask what they do believe in just to get a better understanding, more of a, not a religious sense, but a community sense I like to know people.” Thus, there was an understanding of beliefs as an important community element. It was not that this participant felt that all individuals within the community should agree but that the conversation itself should be part of being a community.

Although Congregation 1 participants agreed generally that complete agreement was not necessary within a community, they did indicate the hope and possibility of individuals changing their beliefs to match what the participants themselves believed: “Like if they saw us and how we acted toward each other, they may not want to be in their little hate group any more.” Thus, although Congregation 1 participants tended to focus more on reception of the beliefs of others rather than on direct sharing of their own beliefs, they hoped that their actions would be enough to initiate conversation about these beliefs.

Although participants of Congregation 2 agreed with Congregation 1 that all individuals were free to believe what they want, they also noted disgust and disapproval of certain beliefs. For instance, the moderator asked 2B participants what they would do—as participants believing that equality was better than inequality—if they met someone who believed in inequality. They responded that they “probably wouldn’t spend much time with that person.” Thus, they would clearly separate themselves from those believing differently from them in a core belief—justice—without directly initiating a conversation about these beliefs.

**Community development.** Although 2A participants described beliefs in personal terms, the development of these beliefs was communal. One participant noted, “Having a community is so important; it’s just so important, because I can’t do it alone.” One participant noted that mentoring programs existed at the church to spend an entire year with confirmands, “coaching
‘em, listening to ‘em, trying to get an understanding.” Thus, the community is responsible for the ability of attendees to develop personal beliefs.

2B participants took a unique approach to the communal nature of belief. Participants agreed that belief was a guide to behavior. In terms of the specific belief in equality, participants agreed that those disagreeing with equality would be condemned by the larger community within which they espouse beliefs on non-equality. Thus, participants would not impose beliefs on others individually, but it was assumed that a community could not operate with inequality, thus forcing the community to correct beliefs: “They may be shunned a little bit—ostracized or something.” The community only guaranteed acceptance if these individuals changed their beliefs: “We’ll also be accepting when they come back.”

Whereas Congregation 1 noted the effect of beliefs in creating communities, Congregation 2 noted that Christian tradition has already created a community of shared beliefs to which they belonged. 2A participants showed an affiliation with tradition, noting that statements of relevance need to be carefully worded as not to put down the history of the church in favor of its present day work: “That sort of to me is kind of saying that some of the old stuff doesn’t apply in today’s context, and I don’t think that’s appropriate.” This shows an element of solidarity with those who came before them in the Christian tradition, paving the way for their current worship.

**Belief Hierarchy**

Belief Hierarchy refers to how a participant feels about the overall equality of beliefs. Those closer to the equality end of the dimension espouse that all beliefs are equal, and no one should be judged. Those closer to the superiority end feel that one or all of their beliefs are better than other beliefs. These participants may feel that others should change their belief, or may not
be concerned with the change of others. In either case, however, they still feel that their belief is better in some way, e.g. more open, more accurate, or more relevant.

**Belief equality.** This section outlines the equality of belief noted within both congregations. This view sees all beliefs as equal in terms of their relevance for the individual and their validity.

**Belief expression.** Although participants of Congregation 1 agreed with the mission statement in the “Worship [of] a God of overflowing love,” participants agreed that the expression of this belief had no better or worse path: “We don't tell people how to do that. We just, you know, to each it's own.” Participants of both congregations did not like the UCC statement, “Isn’t it time for religion with relevance,” noting the arrogance in the assumption that other religions are not relevant. Although participants of both congregations chose their congregation because they believed it to be relevant for them, they did not feel that they could make a statement about the relevancy of any other means of religious expression for any other individual.

**Individual relevancy.** As long as opposing beliefs did not lead to actions that participants considered unjust, most were considered relevant. One 1A participant noted, “Confidence is really a willingness to let go of that fundamental thing in order to see the world differently.” 1B participants espoused a similar feeling of value in diversity of belief: “None of us is completely all one thing. You know, we all have these beautiful variances.” Participants agreed that they could not say who is right and who is wrong. One 1B participant noted, “I’m not God so I can’t say, yes you’re right, yes you’re wrong. It seems like there are a lot of religions out there that do.”

Participants of Congregation 2 were equally frustrated with the UCC’s statement, “Isn’t it
time for religion with relevance,” arguing that it assumes other expressions of religion are not relevant—a judgment they were not able to make. Participants also recalled a television commercial for the UCC that showed a variety of people groups in other denominations being ejected out of church pews and taken out by bouncers. Participants noted that this showed an assumption that the UCC is superior to other faith groups: “I think it really was disparaging other denominations and, you know, at some level I just don’t think that’s right.” For both congregations, irrelevancy was found only in assertions of absolute truth that excluded certain populations.

Participants noted disagreement with particular beliefs, but were quick to note that they only felt it wrong for them to have that belief—allowing that it can be relevant and appropriate for others to hold the belief. One participant who was a former Catholic noted disagreement with particular beliefs, such as papal infallibility, but could not label them as irrelevant. 2B participants even took issue with the congregational mission statement’s use of the word, righteousness. Congregation 2 stated on their website that their mission is to “strive to righteousness, justice and peace.” Congregation 2 participants agreed that this sounded judgmental and in opposition to their welcoming culture. They did not take issue with what it actually meant to be righteous but that the term itself sounded too rigid. For Congregations 1 and 2, relevancy was a personal issue. One participant noted that the different factions that split from the Roman Catholic Church have provided places for people to go when they feel “dissatisfied” with a particular belief. This was viewed as a positive event.

Although participants of Congregation 2 espoused this entitlement of individuals to their own beliefs, they noted that the pastor’s role is to bring consensus on issues of belief within the congregation: “[The pastor] works to try to get the people in the congregation to work toward
those [beliefs].” These beliefs were those the group considered fundamental beliefs for *them*. Thus, although they felt that everyone was entitled to their own beliefs, they saw the leadership of the congregation as having the role of consolidating these various beliefs to a set of core agreements.

**Belief superiority.** This section outlines the sense of superiority of belief noted within both congregations. This view holds that a particular belief held by participants is generally better than an alternative belief. This view forgoes personal relevancy and insists that a belief is universally better and leads to better outcomes for all.

**Openness.** 1A participants showed a sense of superiority primarily in terms of the belief against showing superiority. That group 1A agreed in the necessity of being open to difference while at the same time denouncing those who are not open to difference is somewhat paradoxical. It reveals that the ultimate core of UCC belief, and where it differs from many others, is in terms of its openness. Participants discussed this belief in much stronger language than any other. All participants of Congregation 1 considered openness the most important reason for why they attended the congregation. Participants did not merely argue that openness was better for *them*, however; they argued that openness was generally better than any alternative, e.g. being closed.

1B participants went a step further to denounce congregations within their own denomination. They argued that it was better for UCC congregations to be ONA, noting that it made it clear to people what their beliefs were. One 1B participant argued that the reason a former congregation was not ONA was because they were “closed-minded.” When thinking of the non-ONA congregations, participants struggled to find a means of describing them: “I don’t know if you call it closed and condemning if we’re open and affirming. I don’t know what you
call it, but you know, to sort of differentiate."

The congregations used the word, *tolerance*, in different ways regarding the concept of openness. Congregation 2 noted that they were very tolerant of all types of people—especially in terms of LBGT individuals—and pointed to this as a hallmark of their openness. Congregation 1 showed disgust with the word, tolerance: “No thanks. I appreciate that, but I don’t need you to tolerate me.” Thus, Congregation 1 noted with disgust what Congregation 2 considered a hallmark of its reason not to become officially ONA. As both discussions of tolerance revolved around the issue of LGBT inclusion, Congregation 1—as an ONA congregation—argued for an acceptance that went beyond tolerance; they argued for a validation of LGBT individuals and their actions.

**Fundamentalism.** Participants of Congregation 1 viewed fundamentalism as the opposite of openness. One 1A participant compared the strictness of fundamentalism with the lack of love: “Our church came through the Puritan era—which was very rigorous and defined—to more of an open, loving type of church.” Another 1A participant juxtaposed openness with the stuffiness of non-open congregations: “Most churches are stuffy sometimes. We are trying to project an open welcoming feel.” Here, the openness of their congregation is placed as a better alternative—not just to a few other churches—but to *most* churches. During my first participant observation, a visiting pastor noted the progressiveness of the UCC as something better than what she was “stuck in” when she was a conservative Methodist.

1A participants often pointed to Catholicism as a means of showing the weaknesses of fundamentalism. One participant noted that Catholicism’s structure of fundamentalism makes it so “you don’t have to think . . . you’re told more of what to think.” Participants also agreed that individuals within Congregation 1 do not need the intermediaries noted in Catholicism to read
the Bible or communicate with God: “Maybe it implies we don’t have priests in this church . . . we’re attached to the faith, and we don’t need this intermediary.”

Similar to fundamentalism was the group’s use of the term, *conservative*—a term participants generally avoided attributing to themselves. One 1A participant, for instance, referred to the pastor as being conservative. Another 1A participant corrected this statement, however, noting that he was, instead, more *orthodox*. With a laugh he noted, “He’s not conservative, I can tell you that right now.” This differs from 2A’s agreement that they are a “conservative congregation within a liberal denomination.” They viewed their upholding of tradition, as well as their decision not to become ONA, as markers of conservatism. They were clearly aware, however, of other UCC congregations that have become ONA. They also noted personal situations in which family members or friends assumed they were liberal because they attended a UCC congregation—an assumption that was not always correct for 2A participants. They used these examples to prove their conservatism within a liberal denomination.

There was also a subtle disparagement of conservatism within 1B. One participant noted how she would discover through conversation that a church attendee was conservative: “Oh, I didn’t know you were one of them.” Others in the group laughed and agreed with this sentiment. One 1B participant noted something the pastor said to them after hearing a message from a liberal visiting pastor: “Boy am I gonna hear about this.” This tends to degrade the concerns of conservatives as mere nuisances.

Like participants of 1A and 1B, 2A participants showed disgust with strict regulation. They argued that their congregation was a place where “you’re encouraged to learn . . . it’s not a church with its own particular set of dogma.” There is a sense of freedom that participants juxtaposed with fundamentalism: “We do the things we do here the way we want to do them.”
Participants often pointed to Catholicism as an example of the fundamentalism they oppose. One 2B participant of this group had experience with the Roman Catholic Church, a church that he described as lacking a process of “free thought” back in the late 1950s. He recalled a story in which he was asked what his favorite part of the Bible was, to which he responded, “I was raised Catholic; we didn’t read the Bible, whatever we needed to know we were told.” Another participant had experience with the Methodist church and assumed from that experience that adherence to tradition would mean, “Everybody would be carrying a Bible under their arms as they walk in the door.” This was seen as a negative approach to tradition and a sign of biblical literalism.

As noted previously, 2A participants argued that they were a conservative congregation within a liberal denomination. Their basis for this assessment was their upholding of tradition and their decision not to become ONA. This differs from 2B’s view of themselves as liberal. For 2B, this liberalism meant they were “free-thinking.” This liberal bias was juxtaposed with “other sects of the Protestant faith that, when I hear their names I think, rigid, inflexible, my way or the highway.” One participant described his experience in the Roman Catholic Church as “kind of a one-way of information, mostly from the nuns down.” Another former Catholic participant noted that the Catholic approach forced everyone to reach a specific point in their understanding and stop, while the current congregation allowed continued learning.

LGBT. Participants of Congregation 1 often pointed to previous religious experience as a means of comparing and showing the value of their current religious experience. One 1B participant recalled a UCC congregation that she used to attend that decided to leave the UCC over the issue of becoming ONA, deciding they did not want any part of ONA. She stated of this decision, “It broke my heart.” This shows a deep disappointment that others did not follow her
beliefs about openness. Another participant noted with some disgust the responses of a previous
curch to LGBT individuals. Noting a gay attendee who did not feel welcome, she commented,
“Those people weren’t welcoming to him because he was gay.” The LGBT inclusion issue was
not noted in Congregation 2 without the prompting of the moderator.

**Membership.** Participants of Congregation 2 noted that the people that make-up any
congregation determine its environment. They agreed that larger churches do not foster an
environment of feeling welcome, as they overdid things by overinvesting in large buildings and
programs. In discussion about their congregation’s mission statement, it was commented, “You
don’t see love in too many other church mission statements.” Participants noted that the people
who make up the congregation fundamentally change how the mission statement is implemented:
“I think you may be able to take that mission statement and put it into a different church and it
would come across as pushy.” Congregation 1 did not address this issue of membership, or
anything particular about the individuals in their congregation that would make the congregation
better than other congregations. Congregation 1 tended to be more judgmental of their fellow
attendees as noted in the previous discussion of openness and disapproval of those regular
attendees who sit in the balcony.

**Structure.** When discussing structure in their congregation, participants in Congregation
2 noted that it provided a means of dealing with staff retirement and other issues: “It’s awfully
nice to be able to have that structure to fall back on.” Yet, when referencing the structure in other
religious orders such as Catholicism or Methodism, the structure becomes an impeding force on
one’s ability to worship how they want—especially the hierarchy noted in Catholicism.
Congregation 1 did not note any specific elements of the structure of their congregation that
made it better than other congregations.
Belief Conclusions

Figure 3 shows how the data was categorized into typologies. Congregation 1 viewed diversity as something to be celebrated, whereas Congregation 2 saw diversity as a potential reason for conflict. Thus, Congregation 1 is more strongly on the side of belief as a personal expression, and Congregation 2 is more strongly on the side of belief as a communal expression. Congregation 2 also noted the effect of individual belief on the community and the role of the community and tradition in regulating and developing personal belief. Both congregations show elements of personal belief superiority, although in different ways.

Figure 3. Typology of participant belief.
Small Worlds

The discussion of small worlds is a logical one to be had after discussion of a group’s sense of superiority. This category did not arise directly out of the FG data as did previous categories, but was used to frame the discussions within the FGs. It was an existing category and theory that, after FG analysis, was found to fit the data and provide it with structure. This discussion helps unite RQs 1 and 2 and provides the basis for the discussion of RQ3. In ways similar to how both congregations maintained superiority of their beliefs in inclusivity, they exhibited characteristics of a small world. As noted previously, a small world (Chatman, 1999) exists when: a) Information needs are not being met, b) others determine the relevancy of information to be sought, c) individuals guard against information disclosure as a means of protecting themselves, d) insiders often see themselves as outsiders because of a lack of trust, and e) information is produced in the same context in which it is used.

Evidence of a small world can be noted in both congregations in terms of the inclusivity beliefs that participants viewed as superior to the assumed exclusivity of Fundamentalist religious denominations in America.

Information needs are not being met. For a small world to exist, there must be evidence that information needs in a group are not being met. Chatman (1994) noted that employees within a specific company lacked the needed information about job openings within the company because this information was not adequately shared. Employees who had the information would not share it, as sharing was seen as adding more competition to a job that they wanted. Thus, information needs required to advance in the company were not met.

Although congregational participants were not necessarily seeking jobs, both congregations noted a lack of information needed to express their beliefs. Participants indicated
that beliefs were important to them and that they desired more information about their beliefs. Thus, information about beliefs was a need for participants in both congregations. Rather than a consequence of stunted information sharing due to self-centeredness, however, the lack of information in each congregation was attributed to an individual lack of confidence. In general, members of Congregation 1 felt that they lacked complete confidence in their beliefs: “I don’t feel like you can be too confident [in your beliefs].” This was often because they lacked certainty: “This is what we believe, but we don’t know for sure.”

It was also noted that participants of Congregation 1 did not feel confident in their ability to follow their own beliefs. Even in terms of the documented mission statement, participants agreed that the mission was the ideal rather than the actual state of the congregation: “It’s not perfect in the execution.”

Like Congregation 1, Congregation 2 based their discussion of dissemination of belief information on their feelings of confidence in both the understanding of a belief and their own ability to follow a belief. They reflected the assumptions of Congregation 1 that the mission statement of the congregation reflects an ideal, rather than actual, behavior. It was an “aspiration” or what “they’re trying to provide.” Members also noted awareness that they did not perfectly execute their beliefs: “We’ve all got feet of clay in one way or another. How can you exclude someone who wants to be here?”

Congregation 2 participants often noted that they were not informed enough about beliefs to feel comfortable disseminating them: “I’m not educated enough to tell somebody all about religion—where it’s from.” Group 2B noted a specific inability to recall all Ten Commandments.

**Others determine information relevancy.** In small worlds, the relevancy of information is determined by social control. As noted previously, Chatman (1999) found that the social
environment of prisoners determined the normative behavior that ensured survival—actions that centered on the goal of parole. Chatman (1999) labeled this a life in the round, as this normative environment became predictable with insiders determining what information is relevant to the goal of parole. All other pieces of information were ignored.

Although clearly not a prison, both congregations showed evidence of basing certain information behavior decisions on others. The argument that every religious congregation should be inclusive and open to all people was present in both congregations. As noted previously, participants often chastised others within the congregation for not exhibiting characteristics of openness, e.g. shaking the hand of a newcomer. The exhibiting of these openness characteristics represented the normative behavior of the group. Dawson & Chatman (2001) identified this normative behavior as a means of social control. This social control impacts how participants in congregation 1 talked about ONA. No participant expressed hesitancy with this belief, possibly a result of retribution they would face if they did. Participants in Congregation 2, however, freely expressed concern over ONA—likely a result of the normative culture of the congregation that had not expressed an interest in becoming an ONA congregation. The insiders in this case made it proper for participants to discuss information supporting the decision not to become ONA. If Congregation 2 insiders desired to become ONA, the information seeking would likely reflect more information about the benefits of becoming ONA. A discussion about whether or not to become ONA would be avoided—as the insiders would have already decided they wanted to become ONA.

Congregation 1 noted the presence of long-standing participants within the congregation. These participants were attributed with ownership of the congregation and are similar to the insiders noted by Chatman (1999). They are also set up with a certain amount of social control:
“This is their church, they grew up in this church, they raised their kids in this church. Maybe they raised their grandkids at this church.” It was agreed by 1A that this group of attendees might become complacent with the internal happenings of the church and less likely to greet newcomers. One 1A participant noted that this resulted in individuals “[not] always greet[ing] the person next to [them].”

Congregation 2 participants reflected Congregation 1’s statements about long-standing attendees. This group contained three participants who had attended the congregation for at least 30 years. Newer participants of the group noted that these participants are “well-entrenched.” Participants remarked that the longevity of membership within the congregation can be difficult for newcomers to enter: “You’ve got people that have been here a long time, so you’ve got long established relationships, which I think [is] generally welcoming [to] new people, but it can be intimidating, too.”

Guard against information disclosure. Individuals in small worlds often guard against disclosing information about themselves for fear of retribution or chastisement. Chatman (1986) found that janitors viewed information sharing as a risk to their job security, because they perceived themselves to be isolated from other janitors. They were afraid that shared information would be used against them, as they did not trust coworkers whom they viewed as outsiders. This all occurred within a world that Chatman assumed was full of insiders—other janitors. Chatman (1996) remained puzzled by this discovery, but it serves as a basis for select findings in the current study.

It was noted that participants in the current study chastised those not behaving in an open and welcoming manner, so it appears that fear of expressing a more introverted personality or of believing that certain people should not be welcome in the church is justified. When asked what
they would do to find information about personal problems, e.g. financial difficulties,
Congregation 1 participants noted that although the congregation itself had many counselors,
there would be “some sense of shame [in] trying to go to someone I knew or somebody in this
church.” Congregation 2 participants showed a similar hesitancy to reveal personal information
about themselves. The use of websites and books was prized primarily because “You’re not
sharing it with anybody; you don’t have to tell anyone.”

**Insiders often see themselves as outsiders because of a lack of trust.** Similar to the
finding by Chatman (1996) that janitors were afraid that shared information would be used
against them, another study by Chatman (1992) found that individuals within a retirement
community neglected to share information about their health out of fear that this information
would be used against them to institutionalize them. This fear resulted from a severe lack of trust
within the retirement community.

Because of the clear disapproval of unwelcoming behavior, it is possible that many
within the congregation feel a similar desire not to disclose beliefs that may exclude them from
participation in the inclusive congregational community. Congregation 1 noted with disgust that
many sit in the balcony and talk to no one. It is possible that these individuals feel at odds with
the ONA position of the congregation, but fail to say anything about it because they do not trust
that the information will be kept secret. This information about their own exclusive beliefs could
be used against them and possibly force them out of the congregation. Instead, these individuals
stay at a distance. As one Congregation 1 participant noted, “[They] want to stay as far away
from the Holy of Holies as possible.”

Congregation 1 participants noted that many in the congregation do not agree with the
hiring of a gay pastor, but have stayed because it is *their* church. Because congregation 2 was
cautious to retain the community fellowship rather than upset it by introducing controversial things like ONA, fewer opportunities for outsider status were noted. Congregation 2 attendees showed fewer trust issues, as participants were generally less intense in their inclusivity beliefs. 

**Information is produced in the same context in which it is used.** Participants of both congregations noted general agreement with the statements available on the UCC website. As noted previously, these statements represent pieces of information produced from within the UCC denomination. Participants of both congregations agreed heavily with the following statements: a) “Our faith is 2000 years old; our thinking is not, b) no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” and c) “Never place a period where God has placed a comma” (UCC, n.d.e). Statement b was heavily present in the FGs of both congregations, as each pastor repeated the phrase before every Sunday service. Both congregations disagreed with the final statement, “Isn’t it time for religion with relevance,” arguing that it disparaged other religious expressions. Statement b in particular drove much of the discussion about inclusivity in both congregations, serving as an essential source of information to intensify their belief in inclusivity. Thus, information produced within the denomination was used by the denomination to justify and validate beliefs.

**Newcomers as outside information.** Inclusivity is the belief that seemed to hold both congregations together. It allowed them to operate within the community with some degree of certainty. This certainty is an aspect of a small world. Chatman’s (1999) work with prisoners revealed that many within the prison system rejected important outside information if it did not help them survive within their prison world. In a similar way, participants of the current study rejected information about the presence of exclusivity, because this information was seen as undermining the belief system that holds them together. They often rejected the very idea that an
exclusive society could exist, and they also rejected individuals that held exclusive beliefs. They noted that such individuals would not stay long within the congregation. I assert that this rejection of exclusive newcomers represents a broader rejection of the belief in exclusivity, an outside idea that the normative behavior of both congregations rejects and keeps from entering the congregation. Thus, the rejection of newcomers represents a rejection of outside information.

**Rejection by normative family.** Participants of Congregation 1 referred to the congregation as a *family*, something that participants often noted would be intimidating at times to newcomers. This family environment necessitated the presence of similar beliefs, as the church family gathered with “other people that have some of those same beliefs and they’re gathering for that purpose.” This similarity of belief within Congregation 1—especially the belief in God—is what made it a family and separated it from other social groups. As noted, in order for a person to feel welcomed by Congregation 1, they must hold the same open-mindedness toward opposing beliefs as participants themselves espoused. Participants agreed that newcomers who are not open would not be an active part of the family: “Well that person comes in and you know they’re not gonna be part of your mission because they are not open and affirming themselves.”

Congregation 2 also viewed the congregation as a family. Like participants of a traditional family unit reflect aspects of other participants of the family, the congregation itself was noted to “reflect the nearby surrounding areas” in terms of its lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity. In this way, the family closed itself off, as participants agreed that newcomers from outside the area would likely feel uncomfortable. Participants continually noted that comfort at a congregation was dependent upon seeing others *like* you there.
Congregation 2 was more detailed in its description of what its family looks like. Participants agreed that most look *successful*, because they come from a community that has many successful individuals in it: “They’re pretty successful in business—most of the them are.” It was also noted that the congregation was primarily Caucasian and that this was “a reflection of where we live as much as anything else.”

**Rejection by normative beliefs.** The moderator asked how a newcomer would feel if he or she had different political leanings. One 1B participant quickly noted, “I’m not sure they’d be here or stay here.” Another 1B participant agreed, stating, “No, they can’t.” Clearly, 1B was open, but felt that those with other feelings about being open would not bother to attend. The assumption of the group was that those not agreeing with the openness of the religious community would “be in other churches.” When some 1B participants noted feelings of worry that certain topics would “alienate” participants of the congregation, other participants assumed that those who would be alienated would not even be present in the congregation, and so these topics were acceptable to address.

The teachings about ONA are teachings that are created within the UCC. As noted, they were developed with a clear intent at welcoming LGBT individuals. This was a strongly held belief that participants of Congregation 1 indicated no possibility of changing. In general, Congregation 1 agreed that those not accepting the ONA message would choose on their own to leave, although it was noted that there are some attendees of the congregation who had been there for some time before the hiring of a gay pastor who are more conservative and have stayed simply because they felt it was their church. 1B participants agreed that newcomers must decide personally “whether they want to be part of that or not.” If ONA values make newcomers feel uncomfortable, such discomfort was considered the fault of the newcomers. It was the
responsibility of the newcomer either to accept the values or leave the congregation. Congregational participants would not be pushy about it, but “[newcomers] know coming in, basically what our message is gonna be.”

Congregation 2 assumed that newcomers to the congregation would be on some type of faith journey. Participants agreed with the moderator in the assumption, “This life’s journey is referring to some journey that is somewhat inquisitive, or thinking about God or Christianity, or trying to grow in some way spiritually.” One participant noted that the term “Christ” in the United Church of Christ immediately assumes that the church is Christian. Rejection of this belief would be a reason for participants to question why a newcomer was even attending.
Chapter V: Discussion

This section will outline some primary points of discussion prompted by the findings of the previous chapter. This includes a broad summary of answers to each RQ, along with implications of the findings for contemporary issues of religious communication and organizational legitimacy. The third RQ will be explored in more detail as a synthesis of RQs 1 and 2.

How was RQ1 answered?

The first RQ asked: What are the current beliefs of UCC congregations? The beliefs present varied according to the congregation a participant attended, as most of the variance in the data was attributed to the congregation rather than the FG. Both congregations noted that their beliefs were better than other beliefs. Although they argued that this does not make a belief any less relevant or appropriate, they felt that their core beliefs represented a system that works best for individuals, families, and communities. Participants of both congregations pointed to previous religious experiences to note the superiority of their current congregation. Both congregations also showed rigor and passion in terms of belief in openness, a rigor already noted as somewhat paradoxical: they believed it important for individuals to see all beliefs as equal, yet any belief that opposed this was not equal. Because belief in openness was used most often to define who they were as congregations, a certain feeling of superiority was apparent over congregations that were more strict in their beliefs or less welcoming of newcomers. Participants of both congregations espoused equality of all beliefs, which would lead to an assumption that they would land more heavily on the equality end of this dimension, but the vocalized superiority of their belief in openness is the reason for placing them closer to the superiority end.
Although both congregations believed their openness was superior to non-openness, they differed in how this belief should be expressed. Congregation 1, through its celebration of diversity of membership, noted a clear desire to have a multitude of personal views. Congregation 2, in its distrust of diversity and its fear that diversity leads to division, noted a desire to see a more homogenous congregation. Although Congregation 2 argued that they do not tell people how to believe—something that would put them on the personal end of this dimension—they also noted that speaking out in opposition to beliefs is often more trouble than it is worth. Thus, the actual personal expression of belief was suppressed in favor of a façade of homogeneity. This was noted most clearly in discussions about the ONA designation, as participants felt it unwarranted to speak out their support for LGBT inclusion—even though they personally held such support—to avoid communal division.

Although Congregation 2 argued strongly for the presence of personal belief—noted in their passionate claims against others telling them how to think—their expression of belief was conducted with close attention paid to how the entire congregational community would react. Thus, their expression of personal belief was halted when that expression was predicted to be at odds with others in the congregation. They were cautious of anything that would cause internal division. Congregation 1 was not as concerned with the homogeneity of the congregation as a whole, as they celebrated disagreement and negotiation among the different views represented. Participants of this congregation were not concerned that personal views spoken from the pulpit would offend other attendees or cause division, but instead celebrated such acts as a glorification of the personal nature of belief. Congregation 1 did agree with Congregation 2 that openness beliefs must be shared by all in the congregation, thus keeping them from landing completely on one extreme end of the dimension.
How was RQ2 answered?

The second RQ asked: What information is available to attendees in belief formation? The kinds of information present varied according to the congregation a participant attended, as most of the variance in the data was attributed to the congregation rather than the FG. Both congregations showed a high reliance on internal information sources. This was noted primarily as a reliance on feelings or emotion as an information guide for belief construction. Participants were not passive in their use of internal information, however, but actively sought out this information through prayer, meditation, and reflection. Participants were highly aware of this information and showed a strong passion to maintain awareness of the content of this information.

The congregations differed on the type of information they used, however, as Congregation 1 showed a higher reliance on unique information, and Congregation 2 showed a higher reliance on shared information. For Congregation 1, this unique information approach was paired with an internal information source through reliance on critical thought when approaching traditional information from the Bible, the sermon, or Christian history. Thus, although participants used these traditional and shared information sources—and showed a desire to retain their authority—they relied on their internal thought processes to provide unique interpretations that they would discuss with others in the congregation. Though both congregations noted the use of supplements to biblical material, Congregation 1 noted more non-traditional interpretations of the Bible from a wider variety of sources.

For Congregation 2, shared traditional information was paired with an internal information source to make them feel confident that they were on the right path. They relied less on their own interpretations of the Bible, the sermon, and Christian history, deciding instead to
utilize study books from theological scholars. This passion for shared information was noted in their view of the Bible as a static document, as they viewed this document as a storehouse for all the knowledge about God humanity would ever need. As such, it should be used to influence the internal information individuals have.

Both congregations showed commitment to and awareness of the phrase, “God is still speaking.” Thus, although there were subtle differences in the ways in which each congregation used shared and traditional information, participants agreed that new discoveries were possible. This makes sense given their reliance on internal sources, as they argued that God speaks to individuals internally.

**RQ3: A Synthesis of RQ1 and RQ2**

The third research question provides an opportunity to synthesize the findings of RQ1 and RQ2. This question asked: How is information used to construct religious beliefs? By looking at the answers to RQ2 about the information available to participants as well as answers to RQ1 about the beliefs participants have, it is possible to provide insight into how information influences religious belief construction.

In answering RQ1, it was noted that religious beliefs are primarily innate for participants of both congregations. In answering RQ2, it was noted that information is primarily found through internal sources for participants of both congregations. It seems logical to conclude that information found internally would be used as justification for beliefs that are considered innate. Thus, information is used in ways congruent with the beliefs espoused, i.e. internal information leads to internal beliefs.

Neither congregation felt comfortable using the Bible as a primary information source for articulating beliefs, primarily due to the articulated complexity of the Bible and the possibility
for multiple interpretations. These noted complexities surrounding the Bible made it a somewhat unreliable source for personal belief construction.

**Information culture.** RQ3 is essentially a question about the information culture of the two congregations included in this study. The information culture of Congregation 1 is one of using unique information from internal sources, as this has been shown to work in most cases. This congregation was more in tune with changes in the external environment, whereas Congregation 2 attempted to stay more rigid in terms of how it approached information. They noted that changes in other congregations have led to divisions, and those leaving other congregations often choose to attend Congregation 2. Because of this, Congregation 2’s information culture is one of shared information from internal sources—not wanting to deviate from shared, traditional information with the risk of causing division.

The communal expression of belief noted in Congregation 2 shows that their approach to belief is also a culture issue. Culture accounts for the assumptions of the entire group, but because Congregation 1 viewed belief as personal, they could not articulate beliefs of the entire group. It could be argued, however, that the belief in personal expression is, itself, an assumption held by the entire group and is, thus, an element of culture. The various conditions surrounding a congregation’s small world mentality are also cultural, as they indicate shared assumptions about new information and common worldviews.

**Small worlds.** One means of answering the question about the culture of a congregation was by noting whether or not a congregation is closed to outside information as noted in Chatman’s description of small worlds. Both congregations showed evidence of being a small world when discussing the issue of inclusivity. Both congregations lacked confidence in their beliefs, evidence that information needs were not being met. Both congregations also noted the
presence of insiders that held a central place in the congregation and could direct information behavior. Along with this insider determination of information behavior, participants of Congregation 1 noted instances in which individuals within the congregation could see themselves as outsiders. Because Congregation 2 lacked the intensity of belief that caused this outsider mentality for some, it was less likely that Congregation 2 attendees would feel alienated from the congregation based on their beliefs. This is a particularly interesting finding, as much of this behavior was noted in each congregation’s critique of Fundamentalism. Thus, similar reactionary behavior is noted in the critiques of Fundamentalism and each congregation’s own actions, although the content spurring this behavior was different.

I argued that newcomers to the congregation represent potential sources of external information. Thus, responses to newcomers reveal whether or not a congregation can be labeled a small world. Neither congregation fit directly into such a label for all newcomers, but there were clear instances when a small world rejection of outside information in favor of internal information would occur. Congregation 1 was more sensitive to issues of LGBT inclusion. Congregation 2 was more concerned than Congregation 1 that newcomers take responsibility for their own feelings of comfort and welcome. Whereas Congregation 1 noted a desire to go out to where the potential newcomers were—such as college students staying in their dorms on Sundays—Congregation 2 waited until the newcomers came to them. There was no expressed desire to seek out newcomers, as outside information, by Congregation 2. This can be related back to Chatman’s notion of boundary crossing. Although Congregation 1 wanted to cross boundaries to reach people, they indicated they had not been successful at doing so. They noted that it was not until a new pastor arrived that they saw the need to attract more college students and cross this boundary.
Culture conclusions

The relationships that exist between information and belief in both congregations tend to follow a similar pattern. First, the type and source of information can be viewed as impacting the presence of debate or information sharing and pooling within the congregation. Congregation 1 had more unique information, and the presence of this information seemed to prompt an excitement in participants to share this information. Indeed, it seems likely that one’s own researched information would be more fun or exciting to share with another person than information that this other person already has. Because there was increased information sharing, this creates an environment that fosters debate. In an environment with more unique information from different perspectives, one is more likely to find conflicting information than in an environment with shared information from the same perspective. This may help explain Congregation 1’s willingness to bring up controversial issues.

After establishing that the type and source of information impacts the presence of information sharing, it next becomes logical to assume that this sharing has an impact on the expression of belief. A congregation’s preference for personal or communal belief expression seems to stem from the presence of more shared or unique information. For congregation 2, more shared information was present. Shared information, because it does not introduce conflicting statements and ideas, is less likely to spur debate as noted previously. This type of information is also more likely to create an environment in which homogeneity is prized. It is difficult to establish causality, but an assumption can be made that the concern for the impact of personal beliefs on the community stems from the already established presence of more shared information. Such a congregation with shared information has not had the debate and conflict that a congregation with more unique information has had, thereby making this debate new and
uncomfortable. Culture is about ritual, and shared information establishes the ritual of not having to debate with one another.

A third observation is that the culture of both congregations is derived from heavily established rituals. Both congregations noted the weekly repetition of the phrase, “Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.” This creates a culture of inclusivity in both congregations, even though Congregation 2 was not ONA. This ritualization helps to establish an institutionalized worldview of inclusivity, which led to a rationalization model of information processing about inclusivity beliefs. As noted, this rationalization helps to safeguard certain beliefs from the influence of outside information. These are beliefs that are considered especially important by individuals. The ritualization noted by sociological studies to be present in all religion helps to safeguard certain beliefs from the influence of conflicting information. Only those beliefs that are the most institutionalized through ritual are important enough in the view of participants to inspire the commitment necessary for information rationalization. Inclusivity is a heavily institutionalized aspect of UCC culture, thus inspiring commitment to the belief that led both congregations to consider it innate, and to question the existence of other views.

**Links with Previous Research**

**UCC history.** It was noted that the UCC rose out a combination of the Reformation and Congregationalism—a combination that came out of a desire to value traditional liturgy while allowing for free expression. This was noted most clearly in Congregation 2, as they argued for the importance of tradition while also passionately denouncing any attempts by religious officials to tell them how to think. Both congregations denounced the hierarchy of Catholicism in favor of a UCC structure that they viewed as more open and less inhibitive.
ONA. As noted, ONA has been a defining feature of the UCC in recent years. In its decisions to become the first to ordain a variety of traditionally marginalized groups, it has attracted both negative and positive attention. This attention was noted especially in Congregation 1’s heightened sense of awareness of external challenges to their perceived liberalism and social activism. The general categorization by American Christians of the UCC denomination as overly liberal and worldly represents one of these external challenges. Whereas this awareness led to an increased passion for ONA in Congregation 1, it was this awareness in Congregation 2 that led to opposition to ONA. The division that Congregation 2 was afraid of introducing was noted earlier in opposition from the BWF and the reported 200 congregations that left the UCC over its stance on gay marriage. It was noted that 24% of UCC attendees are opposed to homosexuality. No participant in the current study revealed any negative attitudes toward homosexuality, although Congregation 1—being an ONA congregation—brought up the issue unprompted by the moderator more often and was more passionate in its defense of the LGBT community.

Belief. As noted previously, beliefs have been defined in the literature as pieces of information that individuals hold as true (Barrett & Lanman, 2008). The current study agrees with this definition of belief, but adds that the indication of truthfulness comes from an internal judgment of information accuracy and usefulness. The current study also follows Batson’s (1975) study of belief as an issue of faith, as both congregations agreed with this statement. This study goes beyond both of these studies, however, to suggest that—not only is information subjected to an internal faith process to be labeled as accurate enough for a belief—this very information often comes from an internal faith process. Thus, internally created information is subjected to internal validation. Participants of both congregations relied more heavily on
internal sources of information than external sources, making emotions and prayer a source of belief rather than merely a test of belief.

I argued that Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) understanding of belief did not sufficiently take into account the social nature of belief. Analysis of the current study shows that the role of others greatly impacts an individual’s statement of belief. When discussing core beliefs, participants of both congregations often looked to one another before answering. They also referred to the role of the pastor and close friends in the development of belief. This developmental role of belief was most notable in Congregation 2, as participants indicated the role of the community in mentoring young believers. Thus, the study is a validation of Gilbert’s (2004) definition of belief as collective. I did not attempt to isolate individual beliefs in the current study, instead choosing to extract the negotiated belief statements of the group. This was accomplished as the moderator asked others to agree or disagree with any statement before moving on to the next topic. In a few circumstances, body language indicated uneasiness and possible disagreement, but these participants neglected to speak out. This shows a possible example of compromise and negotiation that occurs within collective belief.

**Information.** In the current study, I was interested in the impacts on belief, especially the impact of information. As noted, I was not able to quantify the amount of information participants had, as I looked more closely at the types of information they had. Thus, the study expands on the findings by Brossard et al. (2009) that increased information quantity is not an important factor for religious belief by noting that the source of information *is* an important factor. Most notably, internal sources have a greater impact on belief. This could be why Brossard et al. (2009) found no correlation between religious belief and information, as they were studying external information.
I also sought to answer the question of information endism for religious individuals. The primary need of participants within both congregations was the development of Christ-like characteristics of kindness and love. This need was fulfilled primarily through the internal information seeking, and the subsequent internal faith that justifies this information.

Participants of both congregations noted the use of supplements to biblical information as an aid to understanding. For Congregation 1, however, this did not lead to an increase in shared information. This was due, in large part, to a celebration of critical thought and individual thinking. Participants noted the use of creeds, but only as a means of showing what it meant to be rigid in belief. In general, they were uncomfortable writing down belief statements due to the changing nature of belief and, thus, they distrusted creedal statements. The sermon was found to be an influential source of information.

**The four ONA statements.** I argued in the literature review that the four statements noted on the UCC’s website all have ONA implications. Toward the end of data collection, the UCC changed its website and no longer included this list of four statements as part of its “New to the UCC” section, but it was still used as a primer for discussion about information and belief. It is unclear why the denomination changed the website, but the first three statements can still be found in different sections of the site. Participants of both congregations agreed with and supported every statement but the statement, “Isn’t it time for religion with relevance?” (UCC, n.d.e.). This is the statement that was removed from the UCC website. Participants concluded that such a statement was derogatory to other Christian and non-Christian religious expressions. They argued that relevance was a personal issue and so could not be judged by anyone else. Even those who left Catholicism did not argue that it was less relevant for anyone but themselves.
Interestingly, although the other three statements could still be found on parts of the UCC website, this last statement was absent after data collection.

Small worlds. As noted, both congregations show the possibility for small world mentalities. When a congregation does show small world-ness, they follow the characteristics outlined by Chatman (1999). Specifically, the rejection of new people and ideas on the basis of openness is something developed through tradition and ritual—such as the ritual of repeating the same welcome statement every Sunday. Participants of Congregation 1 were also more likely to reject information that promoted exclusivity on the basis that it did not help them achieve the goal of complete inclusivity. This is similar to incarcerated women rejecting information of the outside world because it did not help them achieve the goal of parole. In both cases, the internal worldview established criteria for the judgment of external information and its ultimate acceptance. In terms of information production within the same context in which it was used, the overwhelming amount of information about openness noted in bulletins, pamphlets, signs, and other materials show that both congregations produced their own information about openness to which they adhered.

Neither congregation could be labeled as a full small world, however, as the self-protective behaviors inhibiting information sharing within the group were not noted. Most participants noted comfort with sharing information about their own addictions with clergy and other professionals within the congregation, without fear of judgment. Congregation 2 noted some hesitancy to share such information, but agreed they would if the addiction progressed. Opportunities for boundary crossing were noted in the case of the hypothetical island situation, in which participants generally agreed that beliefs that counter openness would be allowed if
their own family’s survival was at stake, as this survival was considered more valuable than proving a point about belief.

**Summary of Primary Findings**

A number of concepts were found, but causes were difficult to isolate. These concepts included information use and belief formation, and were found to be important to each congregation, but it was difficult to establish causes for why there were differences in how the concepts were represented in each congregation. Despite expectations that ONA designation would play a major role in information behavior and belief development, it was not found to be important in establishing the general categories.

Table 3 provides a summary of the key categories under which congregational data was grouped. For each concept, it is noted whether it was an important part of discussion in one, both, or neither congregation. The concepts labeled as exclusive were noted in only one congregation. Unless otherwise noted, the importance of one concept does not negate the presence of another. Some concepts were present in both congregations, but not important in either.

**Information.** Analysis of the information behavior of participants shows what types of information participants used most. Using more of one type of information in discussion does not require that the other type was not present, but indicates the value placed in an information type. Congregation 1 used more unique information in discussion than shared information. Participants still had access to shared information, but they tended to value unique information and used it more often in discussion. Likewise, Congregation 2 used more shared information in discussion, but this does not indicate that unique information was absent. Rather, these attendees placed
more value on the traditional, shared information and used it more in discussion. No group used one type of information exclusively.

The presence of more unique information in Congregation 1 is explained further by their focus on their own creativity, critical thinking skills, and seeking out of interesting and unique information from other scholars and books. The presence of more shared information in Congregation 2 is explained further by their focus on the static nature of the Bible and their adherence to it. It is essential to note, however, that Congregation 2 realized that their belief in the static nature of the Bible came into conflict with the UCC’s belief that God was still speaking. This provides an example of religious participants adjusting personal beliefs to match the denomination from which many of their important beliefs came. They attempted to resolve this by evoking an approach to knowledge that is both first and second generation.

Analysis also shows that both congregations relied more heavily on internal information sources than external information sources, although this does not mean that external sources were not used. Rather, internal sources were more valued as they were seen as more accurate and were invoked more frequently in discussion. Both congregations attributed much of their beliefs to feelings and emotions, and often had difficulty relating beliefs back to a specific information source. This shows that religious beliefs in particular tend to be more influenced by information from internal feelings and emotions. This differs from information about financial or plumbing issues for which participants noted more extensive external information use.

Both congregations noted external information seeking only when the degree of information need worsened. Although both congregations noted the sermon as an external information source, the situations that prompted the most external information seeking when information needs worsened differed by congregation. Congregation 1 noted the need to respond
to social changes, particularly regarding issues of LGBT inclusion and racial issues.

Congregation 2 noted the need to seek out external information for religious needs, such as finding a congregation to attend or finding out about other religious traditions.

This external information seeking was different only for 2A participants, who turned more quickly to external information. This group was younger than 2B and noted more time talking with the pastor. It is likely that this willingness to talk with the pastor shows a general willingness to seek out information from external sources, a willingness not noted in any other group. Turning to external information requires an admittance that one does not have the information necessary to solve a problem. Although 2A participants noted more time talking with the pastor, they also indicated less willingness to talk with the pastor about sensitive issues like personal addiction. They noted that this was because they knew how busy the pastor was, given their increased time spent talking with him, and they did not want to bother him.

Belief. As noted, it is possible that individual members of each FG held beliefs that differ from the collective whole of the FG. However, the current study focused on collective rather than individual beliefs. It is likely that these individual beliefs, at many times, correlated with the group belief. Thus, individual and group beliefs—rather than isolated entities—ran on parallel tracks. Because of this likely intertwining of group beliefs with individual beliefs, it is difficult to establish cause and effect. A participant’s individual belief may impact the group belief if that participant feels strongly enough about it and has the personality required to advocate for it. At the same time, if a belief is a strong element of a congregation’s culture, it may override the individual belief. In this case, the individual will espouse the group belief in spite of opposing individual beliefs. The decision of the UCC to drop “Isn’t it time for a religion with relevance” from its website may be an example of collective sentiment impacting the beliefs of a select
number of individuals in charge of UCC marketing. Both congregations in the current study disagreed with the statement, and it is possible that this disagreement extended to other UCC congregations. If so, this is a validation of my contention that beliefs are socially influenced.

Although both congregations viewed their beliefs about openness as superior to beliefs about non-openness, they differed in their preferred expression of belief. Congregation 1 promoted a personal expression of belief as noted in their glorification of diversity as a celebration of individual expression. Congregation 2 promoted a communal expression of belief as noted in their fear that personal diversity would lead to communal division. As with all dimensions in the study, however, the increased presence of one view does not mean the absence of the other view. Congregation 1 still showed views of belief that were communal, especially in terms of the solidarity of attendee belief in openness. Likewise, Congregation 2 still showed views of belief that were personal.

Although both congregations espoused some element of personal responsibility for beliefs and the choosing of beliefs, they differed in how they discussed it. Congregation 1 stressed the importance of not telling others how to believe. Congregation 2 stressed the importance of others not telling them how to believe. This may seem minor, but it likely shows why Congregation 2 is not ONA. They viewed the ONA issue as a personal one that threatened the larger community, which is certainly made up of individuals who both agree with and disagree with the inclusion of the LGBT community. Because Congregation 2 valued the community over personal agendas, they rejected ONA. Because Congregation 1 tended to view ONA as a personal agenda worth having, they valued it over the community, even suggesting that division because of ONA would not bother them.
Although Congregation 2 espoused a belief that was communal—in that the larger community should correct and impact individual belief—participant observation revealed that the congregation was less explicitly welcoming than Congregation 1. This reflects the attitudes of Congregation 2 participants that individuals must benefit the community—including the larger community of Christian tradition and history—and follow the beliefs of the community before they can be accepted.

**Superior belief.** As noted, both congregations viewed their belief in openness as superior to beliefs in non-openness. Because they showed superiority in the belief they considered the most important, they were both placed on the superiority end of the hierarchy dimension. Participants did not directly espouse superiority, but revealed it through multiple negative comments about conservatism, fundamentalism, and biblical literalism—especially as it applied to Catholicism and Methodism. They espoused the equality of belief.

An interesting phenomenon was discovered, then, that allowed the congregations to espouse equality while maintaining superiority. Often, this superiority was noted to be nothing more than a personal expression, but it was made clear by both groups that openness was a naturally better option for all of humanity. It is likely that participants viewed openness as the only alternative. Many saw any opposition to openness as necessarily violent. Many alternatives to openness exist, however, without violence—especially in terms of social inclusion, as many denominations do not allow women or LGBT clergy. Another likely possibility is that the congregations feel strongly enough about their belief in openness that they are comfortable with the paradox of denying openness to those who do not, themselves, espouse beliefs in openness.

Although Congregation 2 showed more willingness to stick with traditional information, the approach to external information within both congregations is more congruent with the
rational model of information processing than the rationalizing model, as participants allowed information to alter the direction of their belief rather than intensifying their belief in the face of disconfirming information (Batson, 1975). Rationalization was found, however, with beliefs about openness, as participants increased the intensity of their belief in inclusivity when confronted with the possibility that some individuals would prefer exclusivity. They had already publically expressed the superiority of inclusive beliefs, and thus increased the intensity of these beliefs when confronted with hypothetical possibilities of a civilization thriving in an atmosphere of exclusion. Participants argued that such a civilization could not possibly survive. They also increased their commitment to the belief when discussing other religious organizations that do not espouse inclusivity, likely attempting to resolve the dissonance of a religion acting exclusively—something they had trouble accepting. This provides another possible explanation for the espousing of inclusivity while denying inclusivity to exclusive individuals, as disconfirming individuals act like disconfirming information and increase the intensity of these beliefs.

Participants were often hesitant to declare their beliefs, likely done not to put themselves in this situation of cognitive dissonance if confronted with reliable disconfirming information. Believers in Batson’s study tended to score high on the pretest in their intensity of belief (M = 4.07), indicating that it was the intensity of their belief in the beginning that required them to rationalize and intensify their belief after the disconfirming story. For the participants of the current study, this intensity was rarely present.

**Small world.** As noted, conditions were present in both congregations that could lead to a small world mentality regarding outside information. How a congregation dealt with newcomers was seen as an indication of how they approached new information. As with belief
superiority, this small world mentality developed most strongly when introduced with information or newcomers that opposed openness. Thus, as a congregation expressed superiority of belief, they also showed characteristics of a small world.

Opposition to openness was seen as an affront on the congregational family—a tight knit group. Both congregations espoused inclusivity within this family, but acknowledged that the longevity of this family-like group could inhibit this inclusion.

The specific conditions leading to small world mentalities differed according to congregation, however. Congregation 1 noted the importance of a newcomer having previous experience within the UCC. This acted as validation from the UCC of whatever that individual said or did. Congregation 1 extended this previous experience to an assumption of belief in the inclusion of LGBT individuals—something Congregation 2 did not specifically express. Congregation 2, because it lacked the specific ONA requirement, had fewer conditions that would lead to a small world mentality.

**ONA.** As the sampling was done according to whether or not a congregation was ONA, it is important to note whether the differences between congregations can be attributed to their decision to or not to become ONA. It is difficult to conclude that any of the differences between the congregations—outside of the very awareness of LGBT concerns and commitment to these concerns—can be attributed to whether or not a congregation is ONA. The discussion of ONA was a means of extracting data about a congregation’s use of information in belief formation but was not itself a cause or director of this use. Analysis shows that the culture of inclusion promoted by the UCC denomination was present in both congregations, showing that beliefs about inclusion are not dependent on a congregation’s ONA designation.
Table 3
Summary of Primary Finding According to Saturation of Data Categories by Congregation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Important in Congregation 1</th>
<th>Important in Congregation 2</th>
<th>Example from Congregation(s) where Concept is Important/Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared Information</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Tradition: “I think that at the end of the day, the Bible’s the most, you know, it’s the best demonstration of where those principles came from and how they were practiced.” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical thought: “Conscientious critical thinking and looking at different sides of an issue and thinking about it [is needed] instead of just, this is the answer; this was the answer; this will always be the answer.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“I’m pretty confident because I know when I make those decisions I feel better about making them.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External** Information</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“We’re relevant. We’ve adjusted to the times. We still respond to the challenges that we face.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Belief Expression</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s a personal relationship; my relationship with Jesus or God or whoever you want to call him isn’t the same as [others]. And it’s not supposed to be.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Belief Expression</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“Having a community is so important; it’s just so important, because I can’t do it alone.” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief Equality**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“We don’t tell people how to do that. We just, you know, to each it’s own.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief Superiority</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“[There are] other sects of the Protestant faith that, when I hear their names I think, rigid, inflexible, my way or the highway.” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationalization Model of Information Processing about Openness Beliefs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Both congregations had trouble accepting a civilization built on exclusion. “Most civilizations have [the Golden Rule] in some regard” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Important in Congregation 1</td>
<td>Important in Congregation 2</td>
<td>Example from Congregation(s) where Concept is Important/Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Model of Information Processing about beliefs other than openness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I might ask what they do believe in just to get a better understanding, more of a, not a religious sense, but a community sense I like to know people.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small World Conditions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous UCC Membership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Whether that's a tradition that they're maybe looking to continue, albeit in another place and another setting.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge Church Family</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“You’ve got people that have been here a long time, so you’ve got long established relationships, which I think generally welcoming new people, but it can be intimidating, too.” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge Inclusivity Beliefs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>“I’m not sure they’d be here or stay here.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge ONA Beliefs*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>“[newcomers] know coming in, basically what our message is gonna be.” (Congregation 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of Personal Responsibility*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>“[Newcomer] might have exuded a certain air that was not welcoming himself or that put, you know, a barrier or something.” (Congregation 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Unique to the marked congregation.

**Present in both congregations, but not important in either.
**KM and religious belief.** I noted in the literature review the potential impact of KM thought on the study topic. The results show that beliefs were, as indicated, approached as decisions. These decisions were noted most often in approaching beliefs about LGBT inclusion, religious activism, and religious pluralism. Congregation 1 often noted the decision they made to accept the congregation’s ONA designation, and the decision faced by newcomers to accept this designation or leave the congregation. Congregation 2 noted that the very process of becoming ONA is something that requires a vote by the congregation. Referencing the work by Holsapple and Whinston (1996), belief decisions tend to be unstructured. Participants noted careful and thoughtful reading of the Bible before deciding on a belief. Because unstructured decisions increase information seeking—and belief decisions tend to be unstructured—it can be concluded that belief decisions require more information seeking than more structured or everyday decisions, e.g. plumbing issues. Participants of Congregation 1 also tended to approach these belief decisions with lateral thinking, as the continued notion that God is still speaking required them to approach beliefs from the perspective of others to ensure that they understood the best belief to take (Simon, 1960). For Congregation 2, God’s continued speech led more to exploration, in that they sought more information from the Bible and study books to help them make a decision about a belief. Both congregations struggled with the decision to take the belief that all religious beliefs are equal, arguing that this was the case in all instances but the instance of belief in inequality.

Congregation 1 showed more evidence of 2nd generation KM approaches in their use of the Bible than Congregation 2—although both congregations showed at least some evidence. Congregation 2 showed a stronger desire to maintain the original store of knowledge contained in the Bible and agreed that the Bible contains all knowledge that will ever be needed. Thus, for
Congregation 2 the use of this knowledge was in its application to different contexts. For Congregation 1, current conditions required the creation of new knowledge to accompany biblical material. This new knowledge included new approaches to LGBT individuals and interpretations of the Bible that some biblical literalists might see as revisionist. Congregation 1 faced the strongest challenge of justifying their openness to the LGBT community while still promoting the Bible—a challenge they were somewhat defensive of at times. Whereas Congregation 2 followed more of the approach noted by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), whereby knowledge is reused in different contexts, Congregation 1 followed the approach of McElroy (2002) whereby existing knowledge and assumed religious truth is subjected to validation in light of current contexts.

**Grounded Theory**

As noted, a GT is a theory that comes out of the data. Rather than utilize an existing theory and attempt to falsify it through data collection—as a researcher might do in quantitative research—I derived a theory from the data as I completed each stage of coding. At each stage, my categories became more abstract and I was able to observe connections among categories and hypothesize about what my findings mean in light of the research context. These theories are substantive, in that they can only explain and predict the behavior of those directly involved in the study. They do not directly apply to the larger congregation or to religious individuals in general.

These theories have been noted in my discussion of beliefs, information behavior, and information culture. As noted previously, the theoretical impetus of my research is found in the development of ideal types. For the first RQ about beliefs that participants had, the two axes of belief expression and belief equality formed four quadrants. For the second RQ about
information that participants had access to, the two axes of information source and type formed four quadrants. These axes represent the general categories that emerged from data analysis, and the quadrants represent ideal types. As this typology is applied to the findings of other religious congregations, the behavior of participants can be explained by their proximity to the ideal type defined by each quadrant. The closer participants are to certain axes, the more likely they are to exhibit the characteristics of the defined quadrants from my study. Thus, the typology helps explain the behavior of participants in terms of equality and expression, and it also helps predict the behavior of participants as their behavior is compared with the defined ideal type.

So far, I have outlined the explanation of participant behavior. Participants believe certain things because of their preference for expression and their feelings of superiority. The information participants have is a result of their preference for internal sources and their seeking out of unique or shared information. I have also outlined the predictive element of my religious belief and information theories by defining the ideal types noted in each quadrant of my two typologies. These quadrants will be given a more complete definition in the next section, however, to aid in the future application of them to other congregations, thereby increasing the transferability of my study.

Information. As noted, the information typology (Figure 2) included the dimensions of information type and information source. The closer a congregation is to a particular quadrant, the more likely its attendees are to exhibit the behaviors and characteristics of that quadrant. The upper right quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of unique and external information. Groups matching this ideal type would show a high degree of interest in personal information seeking outside of their own internal presuppositions. This is a group of very interested individuals with information from a wide variety of sources: from lectures, books,
television, etc. The lower right quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of external and shared information. Groups matching this ideal type would exhibit a group mindset to information seeking. Members of the group would seek out external information from unusual sources as an aid to what they already believe only if it is recommended by a pastor or religious leader.

The lower left quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of internal and shared information. Groups matching this ideal type would favor traditional biblical interpretation with little effort to seek out additional information. They would be more likely to accept the information provided to them from within the congregation as a validation of what they already believe. The upper left quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of unique and internal information. Groups matching this ideal type are not interested enough to go out and seek outside information because they are confident in what they know. However, they maintain a critical approach to this information in an effort to play devil’s advocate. In other words, they are still informed by their own assumptions, but they question these assumptions in an effort to spur discussion.

Beliefs. As noted, the belief typology (Figure 3) included the dimensions of belief hierarchy and belief expression. The closer a congregation is to a particular quadrant, the more likely its attendees are to exhibit the behaviors and characteristics of that quadrant. The quadrants can be understood by referencing a projective exercise utilized in the FGs (Appendix A). Participants were asked to imagine waking up in the middle of a tropical island, where they encounter a group of people with no understanding of religion. They were asked to discuss how they would behave. The upper right quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of belief equality and communal belief expression. Groups matching this ideal type would stay on the
island and make an effort to bond with the islanders. The lower right quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of belief superiority and communal belief expression. Groups matching this ideal type would hold a block party with the expressed intent of trying to understand these odd new neighbors. The lower left quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of personal belief expression and belief superiority. Groups matching this ideal type would build separate huts for themselves and surround these huts with large walls to keep the islanders out. The upper left quadrant represents the ideal type at the intersection of belief equality and personal belief expression. Groups matching this ideal type would still build huts, but would forgo the walls in the understanding that they are no better than the islanders and therefore need not worry about their influence.

**Information Culture Theory.** A broader theory emerged from the study that incorporated the theoretical types of the first two RQs (Figure 4). This is a theory of how information culture is developed as a product of information type and belief expression—Information Culture Theory (ICT). Congregation 1 had more unique information than Congregation 2, which is more likely to incite sharing and discussion. With unique information, the novelty of the information increases the excitement and motivation to share. With shared information, everyone already knows it and the impetus to share decreases. This decreased discussion resulting from shared information impacts the preferred expression of belief. With more shared information, you have less opportunity for debate. Debate thus becomes culturally taboo, and a culture of communal expression of belief develops.

The frequency of sharing, therefore, acts as an *embedding* concept that is a result of information type and that embeds the belief expression into a culture. An embedding concept is a behavior concept that helps to solidify the connections among other concepts in a way that
promotes the continuation of the connection. As noted, cultures develop as a shared set of embedded assumptions. These assumptions develop through repetition of successful behavior. So, the type of information participants brought into the congregation required a behavioral component to become part of the congregational culture. This behavior also needed to be proven successful in order to be repeated over time (Figure 4). In congregation 2, the behavior of not sharing unique information was a proven means of maintaining peace and order within the congregation. Because this behavior continued to save the congregation from the divisions of congregations around them, attendees continued it. With each repetition of this behavior—and the lack of unique information acquisition that accompanied it—it became more and more an embedded element of the congregation’s culture.

The concept of information type addresses the individual information behavior of participants (Figure 4). As participants bring in unique or shared information, the social context of the organization impacts whether or not an individual shares unique information or merely agrees with shared information—adding no more additional information. So, there is an often unconscious and mutual influence between the individual and the social contexts that determines the nature of the information type and the embedding concept. This makes it possible that an individual seeks out unique information, but does not share it if doing so goes against cultural norms. In this way, culture is first developed through the process of sharing, but is later a reinforcing factor in its own sustainment as it restricts sharing behavior. This is what makes culture change difficult.

So, ICT states that information type is a predictive factor in how a congregation expresses belief. This expression establishes the cultural norms of communication about belief. A larger amount of unique information correlates with a higher frequency of sharing. This
increased frequency of sharing acts as an embedding concept solidifying the connection between the concept of unique information and the concept of personal belief expression. This connection is proven successful, creating a process of repetition. As personal expression is repeated, the valuing of diversity of thought that this expression promotes develops into a culture of increased communication about diverse religious issues. This cultural element then directs future sharing behavior of individuals in the organization. On the other hand, a larger amount of shared information correlates with a lower frequency of sharing. This decreased frequency of sharing acts as an embedding concept solidifying the connecting between the concept of shared information and the concept of communal belief expression. This connection is proven successful, creating a process of repetition. As communal expression is repeated, the consideration of communal impact from the sharing of personal beliefs silences personal expression, which results in an appearance of decreased diversity. This decreased diversity develops into a culture of homogeneity. This cultural element then directs future sharing behavior of individuals in the organization. This is noted in figure 4 as two paths to the development of information culture.

**Contemporary Applications**

Having already outlined the findings of the current research, this section will consider possible applications of these findings in contemporary society. These applications go beyond the boundaries of GT, thus it must be noted that they are only the informed opinions of the researcher.

**Pluralistic communication.** I noted previously that religion has spurred much conflict and debate. I asked the question of whether or not a middle ground exists that relies on pure information without the internal strengthening force of religious belief. The findings of the
current research suggest that internal beliefs are the most prized and important of all religious beliefs. These internal beliefs are also informed by internal sources of information, e.g. feelings and emotions. This finding agrees with the argument by Haidt (2012) that beliefs are primarily self-serving, and it has tremendous impact on the ability of individuals with different religious backgrounds to communicate with one another. If people are only talking about internal things, it is unlikely that a debate will accomplish anything, because neither party is likely to change who they are. However, if individuals relocate the source of belief to something outside of themselves, this source can be debated and changed, enabling conversation.

As noted in the study, when confronted with opposing opinions, individuals with internally derived beliefs will simply go to their own part of the island. If, however, individuals realize that they did not invent their beliefs but, rather, came to it through an external information source, it becomes easier to continue conversation. Individuals trained in this area can help differing religious traditions find the true information source that undergirds what religious individuals assume is innate and use it as an external marker for productive discussion.

True pluralistic dialogue can only occur when we realize that beliefs are not our own; beliefs all have information sources. We must identify those sources, go back and open them up, and have dialogue about that. Dialogue about personal beliefs do not get very far because these beliefs are assumed innate. Once this innate assumption is violated, communication ends. Given the feelings of Egyptians against the presence of religious minorities, for instance, it is important to find ways to open up conversations between those with varying religious opinions—especially as these differences lead to violence.
Figure 4. Two paths of information culture theory.
Given the role of religious belief in discussion of the American healthcare system, locating the original information source that provides the beliefs on both sides of the debate will open these sources up to debate in a way that internal sources are not open. For example, one may take on the view of Limbaugh and, in conversation, claim that it is a personal belief. Such a personal belief is difficult to be discredited without discrediting the person, thereby likely ending the conversation. If one acknowledges and recognizes that the belief is not his or her own invention, however, but came from Limbaugh, the credibility of this information can be discussed in a way that opens it up to critique. A more healthy dialogue can then occur.

**Rationality and information seeking.** I noted Caplan’s (2003) argument that beliefs that have a greater personal impact are more likely to be rational and balanced in terms of information from both sides of a debate. The cost of one’s irrationality increases as an issue becomes more personal. As an issue becomes more personal, individuals take in more information because the cost of not having that information increases. The members of Congregation 1, for instance, already had a gay pastor before deciding to become ONA. Thus, the personal cost to them for rejecting information about the potential divisiveness of ONA is lowered, meaning that—according to Caplan—the irrationality threshold increases. They are also located in an assumed more progressive college town, lowering the cost of divisive action. Thus, they claim to know enough about ONA to make the decision without the addition of more information. The non-ONA congregation, however, is able to take in more information about the divisions ONA has caused and possible alternatives to be inclusive without the problems of ONA, because the personal costs for them are increased by their location in a richer and more conservative area. These costs include division and loss of membership. Having increased costs associated with ONA, they are more rational about the decision and can take in more information.
about its impact. Of course, rationality in this case is not a qualitative determiner of good or bad organizations; rather, it is merely a means of describing information behavior. No assumption is made that the actions of either congregation are better or worse.

Considering this economic analysis of information, I argued that religious groups might have an increased number of issues that they consider personal. By focusing on inclusivity, the congregations in the current study increased the number of issues that they considered personally costly. That is, they were concerned with more than themselves as they advocated for justice and fairness for all individuals. This is consistent with the call from James 1:27 to look after orphans and widows. Thus, it is assumed that they would have more information about more groups of people. Attacks against LGBT individuals would be viewed as a personal attack against Congregation 1’s views regarding LGBT inclusivity and against their own pastor. Because of this increased personal cost, Congregation 1 should have more information about LGBT individuals. Analysis shows that this was the case, as Congregation 1 had more information about LGBT individuals than Congregation 2. This was apparent in Congregation 2’s use of the word tolerance regarding these individuals, as Congregation 1 noted that tolerance was not something that LGBT individuals wanted. Rather, they wanted acceptance and inclusion. Congregation 2 was not as personally invested in LGBT inclusion—not being an ONA congregation—thus, they had less information about what such inclusion means. They had more freedom to ignore information about the struggles of LGBT individuals than Congregation 1, because this issue was less personal. Congregation 1—as an ONA congregation with a gay pastor—was more personally invested in the issue and, thus, had more information about what it meant.
In noting both congregations’ small world reactions to exclusion, however, it is clear that they rejected information about the possibility of a society living with exclusive tendencies. Thus, the personal nature of inclusion, rather than increasing the amount of information received, can decrease this amount when it encounters contradictory information. Analysis from the current study shows that personal involvement with an issue tends to increase information gathering in a non-balanced way—suggesting that the belief is too valuable, so they are comfortable with accepting the costs of irrationality. As the personal cost increases, it is not the balancing of information that increases but, rather, the need to justify existing positions. The participants became so personally involved with the issues of inclusion that they rejected the examples of exclusion—despite these examples being readily available. This increased personal cost of the issue still increased information gathering, but only in the direction that supported their assumptions that exclusion could not exist for long in a society.

Adding this finding to the discussion of pluralistic communication, it is clear that more information is not necessarily the answer to political or religious stalemates. Having more information will make little difference if an individual has too much or too little personal interest in an issue. Thus, it becomes important to remove this personal attachment to beliefs as much as possible by relocating information about beliefs to an external source.

**Texts and conversations.** It was noted earlier that texts and conversations are important aspects of any organization. Thus, it is important to consider the make-up of these texts and conversations within the sample population. Participants of Congregation 1 noted having more debates and conversations about political issues, likely a result—as noted—of increased unique information. These political conversations tend to focus on the marginalized within society and represent a more politically progressive participant group than Congregation 2. Because these
conversations are more politically progressive, the texts that originate from them will likely attempt to reproduce this progressiveness. Because the texts of any conversation lose aspects of the original conversation by way of being written down on paper or in one’s memory, it becomes possible for the progressiveness to artificially increase. Participants of both congregations noted that family and friends assume they are politically progressive due to their affiliation with the UCC. As these texts are used in subsequent conversations, it is possible for the translation to get even more politically progressive as the original meaning becomes more distorted. At some point, certain texts of any organization become legitimized and established as the definition of the original intent. The website of the UCC argues for the advancement of LGBT ordination, a non-traditional interpretation of the Bible, and a non-traditional acceptance of individuals into the congregation. Thus, the legitimized text of the UCC is politically progressive.

It is important to remember, however, that these legitimized texts do not necessarily represent the meaning embedded in the local conversations. Participants noted the presence of attendees who disagree with the UCC and are actually quite conservative. I would argue that the UCC’s stance on church hierarchy—one that does not force local congregations to accept the views of the general counselors—helps ensure that local conversations are not misrepresented in legitimized texts.

**Implications for Congregations**

Understanding organizational culture is most useful for those congregations that desire closer alignment of outcomes with stated goals. Religious leaders can utilize the methods outlined in this study to gauge the information culture of their own congregations. This culture would then be compared with stated goals and mission statements to determine alignment of behavior and values. They can then apply the theoretical typologies found in the study to move a
congregation’s culture closer to a desired quadrant of belief or information behavior. Movement throughout the quadrants can be accomplished by pushing more heavily one or more certain axes. This would be done primarily through the introduction of information, e.g. preaching about the importance of inter-religious communication without feelings of superiority could push a congregation’s culture closer to the ideal type that includes belief equality and communal expression. Congregations would need someone trained in qualitative research to conduct FGs and analyze the data. Leaders can introduce information types and information sources to impact belief expression and superiority feelings in an effort to move a congregation’s culture closer to the targeted quadrant.

The findings of the current study can be useful for those congregations desiring a more open dialogue about religious issues. The implications of my findings for pluralistic communication can impact the ways in which religious individuals discuss religious issues in Sunday Schools, after church services, and with those outside of the church. By reinforcing the importance of information in the development of beliefs and convictions, congregations can become less isolated and more welcoming. By recognizing the powerful force of social legitimization, congregations can put in place cultural safeguards to avoid social pressures that can force opinions and close off information seeking, e.g., introducing multiple types of information from multiple sources ensures that one type of information does not take precedence.

**Limitations, Criticisms, and Future Research**

The study is limited in generalizability because of the sampling method and sample size. Any conclusions are restricted to the specific congregations and times under observation. This is a characteristic of all similar qualitative studies. It is, however, transferable to other contexts as researchers employ the same methods and ask the same questions. The study is also limited by
the willingness of participants to be recorded, which could limit the type of participants the research attracts.

**Sampling.** As noted, pastors selected the participants for each FG. Although I provided each pastor with a list of requirements for participation, it is possible that the make-up of the FG was skewed by the selection of pastors. For instance, pastors may have selected participants that they knew would exhibit the best characteristics of the congregation—purposively not selecting individuals with whom they may personally disagree. This was an accepted limitation of the study, however, as the benefits of the knowledge pastors have about their own congregations outweighed the possibility of a skewed sample. There is little reason to assume that a more representative sample would have come from a different sampling method.

**Use of a literature review.** There is disagreement in GT literature about the proper use of literature reviews. Many argue against its use (Stern, 1980; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Others argue for an adapted use of these reviews prior to data gathering (Hutchinson, 1993; Urquhart et al., 2010). The current study began with assumptions of how the research questions might be answered. These ideas are present in all research, and having these prior ideas does not necessarily make for bad qualitative research (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Corbin and Strauss (1990) argued that hypotheses are constantly made and questioned in GT research. Urquhart et al. (2010) noted a footnote in Glaser and Strauss (1967) stating that research in GT is not approaching reality *tabula rasa*, or as a completely blank slate. I argue that the comprehensive literature review provides preliminary hypotheses that are open to, not only falsification or verification, but also extension and revision as required by GT (Suddaby, 2006; Urquhart et al., 2010). The use of a literature review in doctoral work to identify gaps in knowledge is noted by Cutcliffe (2000):
Within the author's doctoral study, having identified that there is an absence of literature that explains if or how hope is inspired in bereavement counseling and thus a grounded theory method would be indicated, it may still be appropriate and indeed prudent, to review the available literature that focuses on hope and the literature that focuses on bereavement counseling. Such a review may help provide a sense of the key elements of hope that are implicit in the literature, it may help provide some conceptual clarity of the nature of hope and the nature and practice of bereavement counseling and this examination of the relevant literature would help the researcher to differentiate hope from similar and related concepts (p. 1480).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that a partial framework could be useful in making note of how the phenomenon is currently conceptualized. The current study began with such an analysis of current conceptualizations and hunches, but retained validity as GT research because the analysis was subjected to verification from the data.

**Participant observation.** Participant observation noted many similarities between the two congregations. Both invited children to come forward for a lesson during the worship service, noting the importance of future generations of the church. As this future generation was celebrated, I noticed that neither congregation was filled to more than 50% capacity. Both pastors made themselves available after the service to converse and shake everyone’s hand. In spite of this intimacy after the service, neither congregation had anyone sitting in the first few pews. Many of the differences between congregations 1 and 2 could not be noted from a casual participation in a Sunday morning service, especially as the purpose of this study was to note more subtle aspects of belief and information behavior. Thus, the primary findings were a result of in-depth FGs rather than surface-level observations.
**Future research.** It is important that this study be transferred to more congregations and a greater representation of these congregations. Given the presence of dialogue within the current study’s FGs about conservative denominations, it would be interesting to note if these assumptions are correct. This would require a similar study to be conducted with congregations that consider their conservatism to be a badge of honor in the same way that the UCC considered its progressiveness.

It is important that future research in this area makes use of a multitude of research methods and methodologies as a means of validating the current study’s approach. The area of study, however, does lend itself more to qualitative, in-depth methods. A broader and more generalizable approach can be helpful in determining what information sources congregants use and what beliefs they have, but it requires more in-depth research to understand how these sources and beliefs interact and influence one another.

**Conclusion**

The current research included a number of different core categories that were analyzed to answer the three RQs. These answers have implications for information use, belief formation, and organizational culture. The study of two inclusive congregations—one ONA and the other non-ONA—provided an opportunity to analyze potential differences in the use of information. For the most part, these differences were noted in a heightened awareness of LGBT issues for the ONA congregation. Differences in information source and belief expression are difficult to attribute to a congregation’s ONA status.

The current research has implications for how individuals with differing religious beliefs communicate. By locating the source of information outside of one’s self, it may be possible to have more productive conversations without the heightened distraction of personal emotion.
Implications also exist for increasing an individual’s involvement with information seeking in general—as such seeking leads to better decision making and an awareness of issues without direct personal effects. The current research calls for an approach that is neither too personal nor too impersonal.
Appendix A: Focus Group Guide

SESSION ONE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Length</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Introduction/Background</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II ONA Culture Analysis</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>III Beliefs Projective</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV Beliefs</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>V Wrap-up</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>90 minutes</strong></td>
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Research Objectives: My overall research objective is to understand the role of religious information culture on belief formation in UCC congregations in NE Ohio. For these groups with UCC congregants, I want to understand:
- What are the current beliefs of UCC congregations?
- What information is available to attendees in belief formation?
- How is information used to construct religious beliefs? What is the information culture of UCC congregations? What are assumptions about information

I. Introduction/Background  10 minutes (7:00-7:10)

Welcome, and thank you for coming! Before we get started, I want to let you know a little bit about what we’ll be doing today.
- Please continue to fill out the forms if you haven’t finished, and be sure to put your name on your questionnaire
- First, I am here to understand what you think, so your opinions—positive or negative—are what I want to hear
  - Not working for any of the organizations we’ll be talking about—I won’t be tattling to the pastor or anything
  - I don’t have an agenda; I’m not trying to prove anything
  - Feel free to be honest
  - No right or wrong answers
- We will be meeting twice
  - It’s important that we meet more than once, and I appreciate your willingness to do so. Some are not able to, and I certainly understand that. I want you to feel comfortable with the process, and I also want to make sure that I accurately represent what you say. To that end, I will provide you with a transcript of this first session before we meet again. You can look this over and make sure that I accurately represent what you say. The most important thing here is that you trust what I am doing and that I am not trying to pull a fast one on you or anything. I’m here to learn from you, and so this step is very important.
  - Are there any questions about that?
Great! Now that we have that out of the way, I’d like to start getting to know each of you. To get us started, please tell me your name, where you are from, and how long you’ve attended this congregation. (start with myself my name is…)

II. ONA Culture Analysis (What is the culture?) 30 minutes (7:10-7:40)

Thanks. Now that I know a little bit more about each of you and we’ve talked through the process a little bit, I’d like to talk a little bit about the experiences of your congregation.

• Tell me, What is it like to attend this congregation? (if someone were to ask you what your congregation is like, what would say?)

• What does a typical newcomer to this congregation look like? [PROBE: What are they wearing? Are they young/old? Married? In a group? Ethnicity?]

• [write on flip chart] How do you think newcomers to your congregation are treated? (PROBE: How do you think they feel? What do you feel about them?)

• [write on flip chart] Now, I want to show you what your congregation’s website declares as its mission/value (PROBE: What values do you notice in this statement? What does this mean?)

• [point to flip chart] Do you notice any differences between your congregation’s values (what I read from your website) and how newcomers are treated (what we talked about first)? (PROBE: Do they perfectly line up? In a perfect world would you change anything to make these more compatible—what you say are your values what actually happens) (Do newcomers feel the values listed in the mission statement?)

III. Beliefs Projective (What are their beliefs, how is information used?) 30 minutes (7:40-8:10)

Now, I want you to go out on a limb with me here and imagine that this group woke up on an island in the middle of the ocean (many of you have probably dreamed about this, living in Ohio). You encounter a group of people who live there. The people you encounter have no concept of religion or what it means.

• What would you say to them about religion? (Probe: Is it important to have religion? Should they have a set of guidelines?)

Let’s say that you have talked with these people about religion and they have decided they do want to have a formal religion of some kind. They request help in drafting a document of main beliefs to help them get started.

• First, how do you develop these beliefs? What is the process? [PROBE: Is there anything that would help you get started (information source?)?]

• [Write on flip chart] What are the main beliefs that should be included in this document? [ (PROBE: What does this mean? What does this look like in practice? Do all group participants agree?)

  o What happens if the islanders disagree? (PROBE: Is there any sort of enforcing of beliefs? If so, who is in charge? Will there be punishment for not following this?) (for member checking ask if they think their beliefs are better)

  o Are the statements non-negotiable?
Do you foresee that this belief document will need any revisions in the future? (how does this relate to the Bible? Does the Bible need revisions? What makes your belief document different from the Bible?)

The island is visited by a large group of migrants from another island; you find that they have very different views about religion, which confuses the island’s people because all they know about religion is what you told them. How do you approach this situation? (PROBE: What do you tell the island people that you have just been talking with about these differences?)…(for member checking ask if they think their beliefs are better)

• As you are the new religious leaders of this island, are there any beliefs that would be problematic for these migrants to have if they wanted to move permanently to this island? (PROBE: What if they believed in snake healing? What if they believed that God did not exist? Is it ok to have any belief you want?)
• What information would you point to in an effort to explain your belief document to these migrants? (information sources)
• These migrants have their own belief document—just like you made—that they claim justifies even the oddest of their beliefs. What do you do with this document? (PROBE: read it? Throw away? Read it just to please them? Read with open mind that maybe snake healing is ok?)

IV. Beliefs 15 minutes (8:10-8:25)

Now, we’ve talked about your congregation, and we’ve talked about this hypothetical island. I want to bring it back to this group right here.

• These beliefs that you created for the island people, would you take those as your own? (PROBE: Is the process for creating the belief document the same with this group as for the island people? Would you tweak the beliefs at all for yourself, since you have experience with religion? What are the most important beliefs for you?)
• How do you explain your beliefs to other people? (PROBE: information sources?)

V Wrap-up 5 minutes (8:25-8:30)

• Is there anything here in this first session that you wanted to talk about but didn’t get a chance to?
• Well thanks again. I will email you a copy of the transcript from this first session, so that you have a chance to check it for accuracy and to reflect on some of these issues. I would also ask that you keep our discussions confidential, as there will be meetings with other participants of the congregation, and we wouldn’t want them to just copy all of the great things you all said. We will meet two weeks from now on _______. And we will dive into some more important topics. I hope this was a fun experience for you and will continue to be, and if you have any questions or suggestions between now and our next meeting, feel free to email me.
SESSION TWO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction/Background</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Contemporary Beliefs and Belief Construction</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Information Poverty and Information Availability</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Wrap-up</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Objectives: My overall research objective is to understand the role of religious information culture on belief formation in UCC congregations in NE Ohio. For these groups with UCC congregants, I want to understand:
- What are the current beliefs of UCC congregations?
- What information is available to attendees in belief formation?
- How is information used to construct religious beliefs? What is the information culture of UCC congregations?

I   Introduction/Background 15 minutes (7:00-7:15)

Welcome back to this second of two sessions, and thank you for coming! We will be getting a little bit more specific this week, but first I want to briefly recap last week and get into the discussions for this week.
- Again, we are recording this session for research purposes only, and you will also have a chance to review the transcript.
- Are there any lingering questions from our last meeting? (Probe: transcript, thought more about questions and wanted to add anything?)
- I want to remind you of what I mentioned the first time we met. I really want to hear what YOU think
  o Feel free to be honest—we’re here to get your opinions, ideas, and insights
  o There are no right or wrong answers
  o You are again the eight most important people in the world—What YOU think
- We know each other a bit better now, but Let’s go around and reintroduce each other, and this time tell us what you like to do in your free time.

II   Contemporary Beliefs and Belief Construction (How is information used to construct/defend beliefs?) 40 minutes (7:15-7:55)

[on flip chart] Great. Now, to start off this session, I’d like to ask you a few questions about the United Church of Christ. If you go to the denomination’s website and click on “New to the UCC,” you will be presented with four statements of belief. ARE YOU AWARE OF WHAT THESE STATEMENTS ARE? MAYBE JUST ONE OR TWO?
1. The first belief is this: Our faith is 2000 years old. Our thinking is not.
- What does this mean?
What is your reaction to this? (PROBE: Should the UCC keep it? Would you claim it as your own?)

How would you explain this belief to someone outside of the UCC? What types of information would you point to help explain your belief to someone really wanting to understand? (Probe: What makes that information authoritative?)

2. The second belief is this: No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

• What does this mean?
  - What is your reaction to this? (PROBE: Should the UCC keep it? Would you claim it as your own?)
  - How would you explain this belief to someone outside of the UCC? What types of information would you point to help explain your belief to someone really wanting to understand? (PROBE: What makes that information authoritative?)

3. The third belief is this: Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

• What does this mean?
  - What is your reaction to this? (PROBE: Should the UCC keep it? Would you claim it as your own?)
  - How would you explain this belief to someone outside of the UCC? What types of information would you point to help explain your belief to someone really wanting to understand? (PROBE: What makes that information authoritative?)

4. The fourth belief is this: Isn’t it time for religion with relevance?.

• What does this mean?
  - What is your reaction to this? (PROBE: Should the UCC keep it? Would you claim it as your own?)
  - How would you explain this belief to someone outside of the UCC? What types of information would you point to help explain your belief to someone really wanting to understand? (Probe: What makes that information authoritative?)

Of these four, what do you think is the most important and why? Is there anything that is missing that should be added? Should there be more or fewer beliefs?

What does it mean for a UCC congregation to be Open and Affirming? [PROBE: Do you agree with this? Why/why not?]

• [If they don’t mention LGBT]: What do you think people not accepted into other churches would feel or think about these beliefs? (PROBE: inviting? Confusing? Does it matter?)

• [If they say it’s an LGBT issue]: What do you think Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender individuals in your congregation would think about these beliefs (PROBE: inviting? Confusing? Does it matter?)

III Information Poverty and Sources Available
(Do they trust others with information, how often is new information introduced, how much info do they have?)

30 minutes (7:55-8:25)
Now I want to switch things up quite a bit here and ask some questions about your everyday life. I want you to think about times in your life when you had a question, and needed help finding an answer. Think about how you did/or would find answers to these questions.

- What would you do if you had a question about fixing a leaky faucet? (PROBE: Go to person or find information? Who would you go to? What sources would you use?) (how would you know this information is accurate?)
- What would you do if you were having financial difficulties? (PROBE: Go to person or find information? Who would you go to? What sources would you use?) PROBE: How much information would you give them about your situation? Would you trust that person to keep this information secret if you needed that?) how would you know this information is accurate?)
- What would you do if you were struggling with an addiction? (PROBE: Go to person or information? Who would you tell? How much information would you give people about your situation? Would you trust people to keep this information secret if you needed that? (how would you know this information is accurate?)

I want you to think about the various groups you are involved in here at the church. Think about a typical meeting of these groups. Are you ever surprised by things that are said or things that happen when these groups get together? (information is surprise) (PROBE: Are things ever pretty consistent/typical—you know what will happen each time? What do discussions be like? What do you talk about? Who else is there?)

- Do the Sunday sermons here ever surprise you? (PROBE: Is there disagreement? Do they all ask the same questions, seek the same information—or is there significant difference?)

What needs do your beliefs fill in your life?
- Do you feel that it is important to be confident in these beliefs? (If so, what makes you confident?)
  - (PROBE: Do feel that you have enough information to back up these beliefs or feel confident in your beliefs? (information) Do you sometimes wish you had more information; if so, what information would be important to have about your beliefs?

IV Wrap-up 5 minutes (8:25-8:30)
- Is there anything I should have asked you, but didn’t?

Great! Thank you for your help! I will send out copies of the transcript from this meeting just as I did for the last meeting. Again, if you have any questions feel free to email me. You will also have access to the written up report when that is complete as well. Any last questions? Thanks
Appendix B: Congregational Culture Survey

Instructions
To help us provide more accurate data, please answer the following brief survey.

1) **What is your gender?**
   a. Male
   b. Female

2) **What is your age?**
   a. 18-22
   b. 23-34
   c. 35-50
   d. 50-65
   e. 66+

3) **What is the highest level of education you have completed?**
   a. Less the High School
   b. High School/GED
   c. Some College
   d. 2-year College Degree
   e. 4-year College Degree
   f. Masters Degree
   g. Doctoral Degree
   h. Professional Degree (JD, MD)

4) **How long have you attended this particular congregation?**
   a. <1 year
   b. 1-3 years
   c. 4-5 years
   d. 5-7 years
   e. >7 years

5) **Which of the following church activities are you engaged in?**
   a. Small Group/Bible Study
   b. Choir
   c. Committee (List all: ____________________________)
   d. Sunday School
   e. Leadership (Describe: ____________________________)
   f. Other: ____________________________
Please describe the amount of time you spend doing the following activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Less than Once a Month</th>
<th>Once a Month</th>
<th>2-3 Times a Month</th>
<th>Once a Week or More</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I attend church:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I visit the UCC website:</td>
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<td>I talk with my pastor:</td>
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<td>I visit the UCC Facebook page:</td>
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<tr>
<td>I visit our local congregation’s website:</td>
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<tr>
<td>I visit or post to the UCC Forums:</td>
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Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear ______,

The Center for the Study of Information and Religion at Kent State University is working with your congregation, with the approval of your cabinet [pastor], to research congregational culture. We have chosen your congregation because of your unique designation as Open and Affirming. [We have chosen your congregation because of your unique UCC identity]. We will be conducting focus groups at your congregation starting in January, 2013. Rev. _____ has indicated that you would be a good participant for one of these focus groups.

The nature of the research is exploratory, meaning that the findings emerge from the data. In other words, we do not really know what we are looking for or what we will find, but we believe that the endeavor will generate vital information for pastors and congregations.

The focus groups will involve discussion and interaction among respondents, and will last 90 minutes. Your group will meet twice over a 2-week period. The sessions will be held at your local congregation. All discussions will be videotaped to ensure accuracy, as this is standard operating procedure for this type of research. Respondents will be asked to respond to questions from a moderator, and to complete activities with other focus group participants.

The study has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board.

If you would be willing to participate, please fill out the information below and send to Darin Freeburg (dfreebur@kent.edu) by January 14, 2013. You will be contacted with information about dates and times for the groups. You do not need to do anything to prepare.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Darin Freeburg
dfreebur@kent.edu
913-909-7573

Full Name:
Age:
Your availability for focus group session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Of</th>
<th>Days (Circle All that Apply)</th>
<th>Time (Circle all that apply)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>January 21</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 28</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 4</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 11</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 18</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 25</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 4</td>
<td>M T W Th F S Su</td>
<td>Morning Afternoon Evening</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>T</td>
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<td><strong>March 11</strong></td>
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<td><strong>March 18</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>March 25</strong></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>T</td>
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</table>
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: Religious Culture Assessment

Principal Investigator: Darin Freeburg

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose: This study seeks to develop an understanding of religious cultures. The information collected will allow the researcher to develop a written classification of the cultures of United Church of Christ congregations in Ohio, which can be utilized by other researchers, members, and church leaders.

Procedures: Focus groups will be conducted at two separate UCC congregations. These groups will involve discussion and interaction among respondents, and will last 90 minutes. All discussions will be videotaped to ensure accuracy, as this is standard operating procedure for this type of research. Respondents will be asked to respond to questions from a moderator, and to complete activities with other focus group participants. Respondents will also be asked to complete a one-page questionnaire about their religious culture.

Audio and Video Recording and Photography
All discussions will be videotaped to ensure accuracy. These tapes will be used to transcribe the results of each discussion for further analysis. All participants will be able to read transcripts upon request. These transcripts will not contain individual identifiable information.

Benefits
This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help us to better understand the culture of your congregation. *This study will also be of benefit to other researchers in the area of culture analysis.*

**Risks and Discomforts**
The study has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. No deception is involved, and the study involves no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., the level of risk encountered in daily life). Some of the questions we ask may be upsetting, or you may feel uncomfortable answering them. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go on to the next question.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**
Your study-related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researchers will have access to the data. However, because of the focus group arrangement there is no guarantee of confidentiality by participants. With that in mind, participants are asked to keep information shared in discussions confidential. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; only aggregate data will be used.

**Voluntary Participation**
Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Darin Freeburg at dfreeburg@kent.edu or Don Wicks at (330) 672-2782. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

**Consent Statement and Signature**
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature Date
I agree to participate in an audio-taped/video taped focus group about religious culture as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Darin Freeburg may audio-tape/video tape this focus group. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

__________________________________________
Signature

____________________________
Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to listen to the recording  _____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Darin Freeburg may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes/video tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____ this research project  _____ publication  _____ presentation at professional meetings

__________________________________________
Signature

____________________________
Date
Appendix E: Categories and Underlying Concepts

Belief Categories and Underlying Concepts*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstracted Category (Parent Node)</th>
<th>Belief Expression</th>
<th>Belief Hierarchy</th>
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<td>Beliefs As Personal</td>
<td>Beliefs As Communal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Newcomer importance</td>
<td>Openness is best</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Fundamentalism is negative</td>
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<td>Belief sharing</td>
<td>LGBT individuals should be included</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community development</td>
<td>Membership is superior</td>
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Information Categories and Underlying Concepts*

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<th>Information Type</th>
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<td>Bible supplements</td>
<td>Worship service</td>
<td>Feeling</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Degrees of information need</td>
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*Note: Each main category was abstracted from concepts derived inductively from analysis of FG transcripts. The arrow indicates that each concept was abstracted and grouped together to create each category. The concepts are listed in no particular order.*
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