Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism and Social Action:
Lessons from the "Finding Faith Today" Project

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Introduction

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part reflects on Wesley's theological and evangelistic commitments and proposes a progressive Wesleyan theology of evangelism and social action as an alternative to prevailing Evangelical frameworks that too often undercut the importance and relevance of social action for evangelism. The second part summarizes findings from the *Finding Faith Today* project, a multi-year (2012–2017), U.S. based study that attempted to understand the experiences of adults (18 and older) who had recently come to faith. It explored questions such as whether coming to faith is more sudden or gradual, whether persons tend to be seekers or drawn in by others, and what (or who) are the most important factors in the process. The project also sought to learn what sorts of values, practices, lifestyles, and stances on social issues tend to change for those who newly come to faith. In this paper, I focus primarily on those findings in the study that are relevant to the question of how evangelism intersects with social action, but the full results of the project are published in *Finding Faith Today* (Stone, 2018).

Part I – Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Evangelism and Social Action

Anyone who has taught the subject of evangelism for long knows that one of the perennial questions and debates in the field is the relationship between evangelism and social action. In prevailing Evangelical frameworks (there are many varieties, of course), evangelism and social action are imagined in binary fashion and in such a way that social action is inevitably undercut and over-shadowed by evangelism. In the modern Evangelical consensus—or at least U.S. based versions with which I am most familiar—evangelism is aimed at individual conversion (even if attempted on a mass scale) and a salvation that is fundamentally private and interior, secured by the will, decision,

and belief of the individual. It is premised on an anthropological dualism in which the soul is sharply distinguished from and prioritized over the body, salvation is directed toward eternity, and life is a test to see who makes the right decision. Word is prioritized over deed and beauty in evangelism, and the importance and relevance of social action is eroded—or, at worst, eclipsed altogether. On this view, while social justice work is scarce, there is nothing wrong with feeding hungry people; indeed, one routinely finds compassionate ministries in denominations and churches that embody this consensus. We are, however, finite human beings with limited amounts of energy and resources, and evangelism must take the priority.[1] Nothing is—or could be—more important than saving souls, nurturing conversions, and making disciples who will do the same.

At its best, this binary is constructed within modern Evangelicalism in such a way as to assert the equal importance of evangelism and social action, as was the position of the late Ronald J. Sider, founder of Evangelicals for Social Action (now Christians for Social Action). Sider's life and writings were an inspiration to a whole generation of Evangelicals, with books like *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1978). Sider attempted to sandwich together Jesus's teachings on both the physical and spiritual, and he was well-known for embodying these commitments in a simple lifestyle that was devoted to evangelism, peacemaking, compassionate ministry, and social justice. For Sider, however, while both evangelism and social action are essential Christian practices, they are not the same and should not be confused. According to Sider, "I certainly believe that we should work politically to change unjust structures. *But it is confusing and misleading to call that work evangelism* (161).

Sider outlines several reasons for maintaining a sharp distinction between evangelism and social action. For Sider, "at the core of biblical faith is the radical truth that God calls each person to

[1] The Church of the Nazarene would be a good example here. There is no central funding for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, which instead relies on outside funders, grants, and local contributions, whereas the World Evangelism Fund of the Church is generated centrally through apportionments.

respond to Christ's invitation. In evangelism, we address only persons, not social structures because only persons can become disciples of Christ" (162). Corporations and governments cannot accept Jesus Christ as personal savior nor can they repent, be baptized (even by sprinkling), and convert. Likewise, evangelism and social action have different outcomes and intentions. "In evangelism the central intention is to lead non-Christians to become disciples of Jesus Christ. In social action, the central intention is to improve the socio-economic or psychological well-being of people for their life here on earth" (163).

For Sider, moreover, evangelism should be clearly distinguished from social action to protect the integrity of social action and to protect the integrity of evangelism (163). Christians are mandated by Christ to engage in social action without it having to become "pre-evangelism." On the other hand, when we start calling everything we do evangelism (as with some progressive–liberal approaches), it becomes all too easy to set aside "the special task of communicating the Gospel to non-Christians with the hope that they will accept Christ" (163). The distinctive elements here are verbal proclamation and personal decision. Social action may well be an implicit witness to Christ, but "unless somewhere the word about Christ has been communicated, your social action by itself cannot witness to anything beyond yourself and your honorable concerns" (Sider, 164).

Again, for Sider, both evangelism and social action are essential for the Christian believer, but they are not the same, and ultimately evangelism must be treated not only as primary, but of infinitely more value. The sandwich eventually falls apart. Whatever positive results social action may achieve in this world, claims Sider, those cannot compare with "knowing that your sins are forgiven, rejoicing in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and knowing that you are on the way to living forever in the presence of the risen Lord" (162). Persons might still be "in active rebellion against God" even though they now experience greater economic justice, just as a starving person or one who is marginalized and discriminated against can still experience salvation and be guaranteed eternal life.

As long as one operates within the modern Evangelical consensus with its individualism, word-centered evangelism, and conversion orientation, Sider's reasoning is unimpeachable. Indeed, few Evangelicals have done more than Sider to emphasize that all Christians should be engaged in both evangelism and social action. To Sider's credit, stuck within a paradigm that forces him into an evangelism and social action binary and the problems that flow from it, he tries hard to avoid a subordination of social action to evangelism, but ultimately he cannot avoid it. Sider acknowledges that Jesus gave significant time to social teachings and prioritized the healing of bodies that will pass away. He also recognizes, pointing us to Jesus' parable in Matthew 25, that there is "some meaningful sense in which social action has eternal consequences." On the Day of Judgment, the sheep and goats are separated to the left (hell) and right (eternal life) based on whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, invited in strangers, clothed the naked, looked after the sick, and visited those in prison. Sider attempts to reconcile this text with his more primary Evangelical commitments as follows:

> But few suppose that Jesus meant to teach a crass works-righteousness in which good social action toward the poor automatically earns eternal life. We can demonstrate our faith with our actions, but eternal life is a gift that comes as we trust in Christ, not something we earn by any amount of superb social action. (169)

In weighing the evidence, Sider finally concludes—somewhat arbitrarily—that Jesus's example "points us toward devoting approximately equal amounts to both evangelism and social action" (172).

Despite the balance for which Sider advocates, evangelism must always have primacy, if for no other reason than the fact that, logically, you can't have Christian social responsibility without first having Christians. Evangelizing persons is both logically and temporally prior to Christian social action. But, of course, the chief reason for evangelism's primacy is that ultimately there is nothing in the world as important as eternal life. Even allowing for differences in vocational calling, spiritual giftedness, and specialization, evangelism must always be primary within the modern Evangelical

consensus that generates the binary in the first place, and then finds itself needing to address the problems that come with it.

A Wesleyan Alternative

The good news (no pun intended) for Wesleyans is that we do not have to work within this framework, however ubiquitous it is, even among Wesleyans. We have vital resources available to us that avoid (or at least mitigate) the truncated christology, dualistic anthropology, individualistic soteriology, and decisionism that buttress the conversion-focused evangelism of the Evangelical consensus. To be sure, Wesley, as an early type of Evangelical, does not avoid these problems altogether; but neither can he be placed neatly into the modern Evangelical consensus without great distortion.

Wesley's theological views are often situated within his own Anglican context, as well they should be, as a via media between Catholicism and Protestantism (or between Catholicism and Calvinism). But it is also helpful to see Wesley longitudinally as a via media between a dying Christendom and an emerging Evangelicalism that began to challenge Christendom frameworks in the 18th century, especially in the form of various free church and pietistic movements that accentuated the individual's reason, freedom, and experience over against the authority of the church. In the Christendom model, the task of the evangelist was aimed at a nominal Christianization attained by baptism and maintained by a pale thread of sacramental participation. Wesley and others like him pushed against this nominal Christianity with a salvation that was personal, communal, and experiential, that appealed to reason and freedom, that started and ended with God's grace, and that was aimed at a full-orbed holiness of life that was personal, social, ecclesial, and sacramental.

Unfortunately, the social, ecclesial, and sacramental dimensions of Wesley's understanding of holiness typically get lost in bringing Wesley's synthesis forward into our time, but keeping these together could not be more important for a Wesleyan theology of evangelism and social action. In

attempting to move toward what I might call a progressive Wesleyan theology of evangelism and social action, I would propose the following 6 axioms:

(1) when holiness is your goal, you do evangelism differently;
(2) there is no holiness but social holiness;
(3) the salvation toward which evangelism aims is ecclesial and sacramental;
(4) evangelism is a participation in responsible grace;
(5) Christ should be offered in "all his offices"; and
(6) authentic evangelism is good news for the poor.

I begin with a quotation from Richard Heitzenrater, "**When holiness is your goal, you do evangelism differently**" (quoted in Gunter, 19). While there are similarities, Wesley's approach to evangelism does not fit within the current Evangelical consensus insofar as Wesley does not orient his evangelism toward conversion, but instead held firmly to the conviction that, as Albert Outler puts it, "conversion is never more than the bare threshold of authentic and comprehensive evangelism" (21). For conversionists approaches to evangelism, the faithfulness of Christian witness and the character of the evangelist tend to be eclipsed in favor of 'what works'. For Wesley, the Christian life is offered as a life-long and disciplined spiritual journey within holy communities rather than a belief or experience that can be reduced to a single decision or experience. This focus on holiness in Wesley's evangelism led him also to have some very uncomplimentary words for those he called "gospel preachers" who held out the promises of the gospel without the commands of Jesus to a new way of life, a new discipleship, and a holy economics. On the contrary, Wesley's approach to evangelism is oriented toward a social holiness, a perfection of love in its full totality. Conversion draws any meaning and importance it has from this larger aim, and this difference makes all the difference when it comes to evangelism.

A holiness rather than conversion orientation to evangelism also connects to Wesley's more holistic anthropology, and retains the ecclesial and sacramental matrix within which Wesley's soteriology is situated given that all holiness is social (the second axiom). Holiness is as broad and all-inclusive in human life as grace is—and, indeed, as sin is. So also evangelism. If sin is personal,

original, and structural, so also is the holiness to which Christ calls us and the Holy Spirit empowers us. Evangelism is intertwined with social action and indeed impossible without it because it is whole selves, not just souls, that are being saved and transformed. We can only imagine what our churches might look like today if, for the practice of evangelism, holiness were the end to which conversion is the means rather than conversion being an end in itself.

The second axiom has already been mentioned in the previous paragraph and comes from the Preface to Wesley's volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*: "The Gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; **no holiness, but social holiness**. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection" (1743: v). Here, Wesley uses the term "social" in a broader sense than we typically do when talking about "social action" or "social justice," though it certainly includes that sense. His words come on the heels of a cautionary swipe against the individualism and quietism of the mystics who wrote some of the hymns and poems in his collection and to whom Wesley addresses his complaint that "'holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers" (v). For Wesley, holiness always issues forth in "outward works."

But Wesley is also referencing here the path by which holiness is attained, a path that is social, corporate, and ecclesial. To be saved is to be made a people, to be incorporated into a distinctive body, the body of Christ. As Wesley goes on to say, "Ye are taught of God, not to forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is; but to instruct, admonish, exhort, reprove, comfort, confirm, and every way build up one another" (vi). Evangelism is inseparable from social action for Wesley (not that the relation even arises as a question for him) precisely because the holiness from which evangelism springs is the same holiness toward which evangelism is aimed—and both are inherently social. Likewise, all evangelism must be both by word and example. Holiness is social because it is inescapably corporate, but it is also social in the sense that it does good to all and to "all" of our many human dimensions. Holiness, then, is inward and personal as well as outward and social. For Wesley, as Outler summarizes it, "The scope of evangelism was never less

than the fullness of Christian experience – 'holiness of heart, and a life conformable to the same'" (21).

This communal and social nature of holiness helps provide context for a third axiom, that the **salvation toward which evangelism aims is ecclesial and sacramental**. It's not just that we need other people to become holy, instrumentally speaking. It's that holiness has a social—and indeed ecclesial—form. To be saved, for Wesley, is to be incorporated into ecclesial communities characterized by fellowship, worship, and discipline. It is not accidental or a merely strategic coincidence that Wesley's evangelism was preoccupied with the model of societies, classes, and bands. That does not mean that Wesley could not endorse and engage in other types of evangelism, such as field preaching. But his "ecclesiolae in ecclesia" promoted fellowship both as a means to conversion and spiritual growth and as the aim of that growth. "Apart from the church there is no salvation," as Cyprian put it (Epistle 72:21), but for Wesley that is only because ecclesia is the very form that Christian salvation and holiness take (not because the church as an institution is in a position to dispense or withhold salvation). In describing the origin of his societies Wesley called them "a company of [persons] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation" (1989, 69). The shape of Wesley's evangelism is embedded in the discipline he laid out in relation to their whole lives under his well-known three general rules:

(1) "Doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind";
(2) "Doing good," such as showing mercy, caring for people's bodies and souls, feeding the hungry, providing clothing, and helping those who are sick or in prison, with particular responsibility for those who are of the household of faith; instructing, reproving, and exhorting, and exercising diligence and frugality.
(3) "Attending upon all the ordinances of God," including worship, the ministry of the Word, the Lord's supper, family and private prayer, scripture study, and fasting or abstinence. (1989, 70–73)

Fourth, **evangelism is a participation in "responsible grace."** Here I am using the words of Randy Maddox to describe the interplay of grace and human response in the dance of salvation as Wesley envisions it. Under the conditions of modernity and its particular constructions of freedom, will, reason, experience, and decision, the relation of grace to human response in evangelism tends to get situated within a model dominated by propositions, beliefs, and confessions. In this way, evangelism as a participation in the extension of God's grace to the world is fundamentally an act of proposing a set of truths to be believed, with a respondent then deciding upon it on the basis of rational 'evidence' or logical argument. But that, as my research shows, is not generally how people come to faith. Coming to faith, as Sarah Coakley suggests, is "more like the adopting of a whole new way of life, or 'picturing' differently, or making a particular narrative central to one's existence, than coolly adjudicating on their likelihood with the 'speculative intelligence'" (143).

For decades now, feminist and liberation theologians have rightly challenged the epistemological norms that have dominated theology within modernity based on, as Coakley describes it, the hegemony of the "recognition of hard objects at five paces model," drawing attention instead to the contextual nature of knowledge (149-50). That insight applies directly to how we think of evangelism. When your aim is holiness rather conversions, and when that holiness is social, ecclesial, and sacramental, the relationship between grace and human response can be reimagined in more vibrant and holistic, and less individualistic and transactional ways. Reducing salvation to one's sheer will or personal decision is, after all, little more than a modernized form of works-righteousness. When grace and human response are re-situated within communities of holistic love, care, and justice, the way we evangelize an individual with cognitive disabilities or someone with Alzheimer's now becomes the rule not the exception. What, after all, does it mean for someone with Alzheimer's to be evangelized? To be saved? I suggest that the answers to those questions ought to be the same for anyone who is evangelized and in the case of anyone we might deem 'saved'.

Fifth, Wesley's approach to evangelism was committed, as he said, to **offering Christ in "all his offices."** We are also to "receive" Christ in all his offices, says Wesley—a qualification that is essential for the evangelist to bear in mind (1872, II:2). Offering and receiving Christ in all his offices means offering and receiving Christ as priest, prophet, and sovereign. A Wesleyan christology understands Christ as mediator who provides a path to participation in the divine life, but also as the one who shows us the way as moral guide and as the one who is the Sovereign—the victor over principalities and powers. When we limit the offer of Christ to the priestly office, the language of atonement, guilt, forgiveness, and confession becomes primary, as is the case in the modern Evangelical consensus. But if we adopt a wider christological lens, as Wesley instructs, Christ's work and significance is far more holistic, contextual, relational, and open to an integration of evangelism and social work.

Lastly, **authentic evangelism is good news to the poor.** Theodore Jennings notes that toward the end of Wesley's life, he looked back and appraised the Methodist movement both negatively and positively. Though often critical of the movement, in his sermon "The Signs of the Times," Wesley locates Methodism firmly within God's larger designs for history and for the world: "And surely never in any age or nation, since the Apostles have those words been so eminently fulfilled, "the poor have the gospel preached unto them," as it is at this day (Wesley, 1985: 527). Jennings goes on to make two important observations in response to Wesley's statement: (1) "the mission of the people called Methodists can be accurately summarized, according to Wesley, as the preaching of good news to the poor" and (2) "this is regarded by Wesley as the fulfillment of the gospel mandate itself and as thus making Methodists a true sign of the work of God in the world accomplishing the divine purpose" (141).

Wesley himself describes his evangelistic commitments in a letter to his critics in the established church: "The honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of humanity" (1958a, 239). This kind of sentiment that saw

evangelism as irretrievably connected with downward mobility, simplicity, and solidarity with poor folks was not uncharacteristic of many of the holiness denominations that followed Wesley in the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Free Methodists, Nazarenes, Wesleyans, and the Salvation Army, however, little some of these movements have retained this Wesleyan commitment. Phineas F. Bresee, founder of the Church of the Nazarene, for example, wrote the following:

> We want places so plain that every board will say welcome to the poorest. We can get along without rich people, but not without preaching the gospel to the poor. We do not covet the fine churches of our neighbors; we only long after a richer anointing with the Holy Ghost, that we may be committed to reach the poor and the outcast, for whom some care so little but for whom our Redeemer lived and died. Let the Church of the Nazarene be true to its commission; not great and elegant buildings; but to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and wipe away the tears of the sorrowing; and gather jewels for His diadem. (6)

If we ask why it is that the litmus test for evangelism was whether good news was offered to the poor, at least one of the reasons provided by Wesley, was that "religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of [humans]" (1958b, 3:178). In Jennings's words, for Wesley, "the work of God does not proceed in accordance with the wisdom of human calculation, but rather in accordance with the folly and the impotence of the cross" (143). But the truth of the matter is that the way Wesley and others like him unite evangelism and social action is effortless, natural, and organic; and one has to ask whether the need to draw out a distinction between them could even so much as arise unless "good news to the poor" has ceased to be (or never was) the test of authentic evangelism.

Part II – The *Finding Faith Today* Project

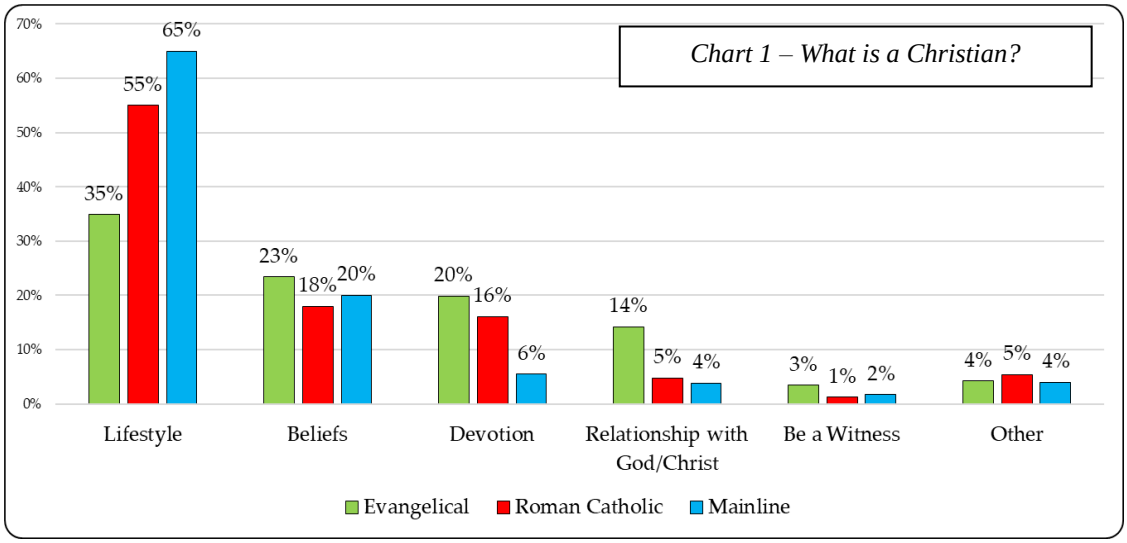
The Finding Faith Today project was inspired by a similar study conducted in England by Bishop John Finney in 1990, also called *Finding Faith Today* and published in a book with the same title. Finney had begun research into the question of how persons become Christians in the 1980s, first interviewing around 400 people and then employing a questionnaire more widely. Surprisingly, little research had been done since then on this subject. For the most part, we kept the same questions as

Finney, but expanded some of the options a respondent could select as most important factors in their coming to faith (most notably 'the congregation'), and we also asked about stances on social issues that might have changed in coming to faith.

Eighteen hundred persons participated in the study, 1200 of whom were new Christians. The other 600 were persons who had newly adopted a non-Christian faith; so there was an interfaith dimension to the study. In our study, we recognized that for some persons a new faith commitment might be more like a return to faith or an activation of the religion into which they were born. In this second part of the paper, I will lift up some of the important finding of the project and explore them in dialogue with the Wesleyan theology of evangelism and social action I have outlined in the first part.

Summary of Findings

Finding #1. As with Finney, we did not begin with a definition of "Christian" (or of "Jewish," "Buddhist," etc.), but allowed respondents to self-identify. The first and most important finding in our study is that faith identity powerfully shapes the process of coming to faith. So, for example, what it means to be a Jew powerfully shapes how one comes to faith as a Jew. That may sound obvious, but it warrants emphasis. There is no "one-size-fits-all" process of coming to faith.



Evangelicals, for example, prioritize certain aspects of what it means to be a Christian (forgiveness of sins and a personal relationship with Jesus) that are not at all the same as what Mainline Protestants prioritize (a pattern of living, character, or actions). This will, of course, powerfully shape the way evangelism and social action are understood to relate to one another.

Roman Catholics are like Mainline Protestants in identifying their faith as a matter of lifestyle and actions but are like Evangelicals in emphasizing trust, worship, and devotion. The nature of that devotion and trust, however, varies greatly from Evangelicals in that, for Catholics, it is far more likely to be communal, ecclesial, liturgical, mystical, or worked out in practices whereas Evangelicals lean toward the language of personal commitment, and accentuate trust, surrender, submission of one's will, and acceptance of Christ's sacrifice, including even a frequent protest against "works-righteousness." Because Catholicism has deep cultural and social dimensions, almost as if it were an ethnic group at times, for the most part, persons do not become Catholic solely by undergoing an experience of the heart or professing a belief, as one might within Evangelicalism. On the contrary, conversion can mean adopting a new set of cultural and social behaviors, and even a new calendar. It is no wonder that one's spouse, partner, and family are such significant factors in becoming a Catholic—largely because of the enculturation processes that are entailed in coming to faith. By contrast, we find something altogether different in Evangelicalism, where becoming a Christian can happen in a single moment in time with far less (if any) communal formation or instruction: 90% of new Catholics attended instructional classes as part of their coming to faith; 69% of Mainline Protestants; and 56% of Evangelicals.

Finding #2. A second summary observation is that for many religious traditions, people may experience themselves as members of a religious group for several years before formally affiliating, converting, or making a commitment. This is especially the case with a religion such as Christianity where, because of its long history and cultural dominance in the United States, persons might think

of themselves, at least nominally, as Christians all their lives without actually making a formal faith commitment.

Finding #3. Third, and closely connected to the previous point, it is worth emphasizing the journey-like nature of coming to faith for most persons in the U.S. (see Chart 2). Even those who are first-timers to a faith tradition are likely to take one to three years. For a significant number, the journey is even longer than that; indeed, several persons claimed the process is ongoing, if not lifelong. For faith communities interested in ministries of invitation, outreach, and inclusion, that means emphasis should be placed on accompaniment, formation, and education. In contrast to some evangelistic approaches that emphasize conversion, and make incorporation and assimilation secondary, it is abundantly clear from our study that people 'belong before they believe' rather than 'believing before they belong.'

Chart 2 – Was the New Commitment to Faith Gradual or Sudden?		
	Evangelical	Non-Evangelical
Gradual	65%	79%
Sudden	35%	21%

The stereotype of the average person becoming a Christian in a moment of sudden awakening or conversion is exaggerated. It happens, of course, but not for most adults. Without forgetting the reality that some people do make sudden and life-altering commitments and decisions (more so for those under the age of 18, though not included in our study), clearly those who want to aid others in coming to faith need to take seriously how they might come alongside those who are on a journey of faith, attending to physical, social, and spiritual needs in a holistic way that treats faith as a process of formation over time. Indeed, it is doubtful that the notion of faith as a "decision" is as accurate as it is sometimes made out to be by those who focus on securing conversions. We found that, more often than not, persons (even those who can pinpoint a date when they became a Christian) look back and

marvel at the way the path unfolded—not so much as an act of their will, decision, or understanding, but as a process of God's grace operating through a variety of means, especially through a community of Christians who have loved and influenced them over time.

Finding #4. Fourth, most persons who end up making a faith commitment are active seekers. In all of the religious traditions we studied except Islam, no less than 70% of new adherents claim to have been an active seeker either "somewhat" or "very much." There are, of course, a good number of persons who claim to have been "drawn in by others without actively seeking." But for the most part, that number is relatively low, while those who say they were not drawn in by others without actively seeking is relatively high. Despite the increase in the percentage of "nones" in the U.S., there remains a significant number of people who are actively seeking some sort of spiritual home, purpose, outlook, recovery, or healing in their lives. While it is ever important that faith communities offer warmth and hospitality, reaching out beyond their four walls to extend invitation and welcome, a good number of persons are already seeking, and they are looking for a faith community that is responsive, generous, open, and able to accompany them on their journey, even if that takes many years.

Finding #5. Fifth, we were impressed by the incredible importance of congregations in the process of coming to faith (see Chart #3). The congregation is a primary or supporting factor for 43% of Roman Catholics, 48% for Evangelicals, and 68% for Mainline Protestants. When we include other factors associated directly with the congregation, such as ministers, laity, worship, educational programs, social service work, and other religious or social activities, the percentages skyrocket. *People reach people*. Whatever importance we may attach to other forms of outreach (literature, media, events, campaigns, and events), it is still human relationships that are the number one factor for persons finding faith—whether by offering support, meeting social needs, answering questions and challenging assumptions, offering community, and, most importantly, providing a credible witness and example of lived faith. Moreover, as we saw repeatedly in our study, faith communities

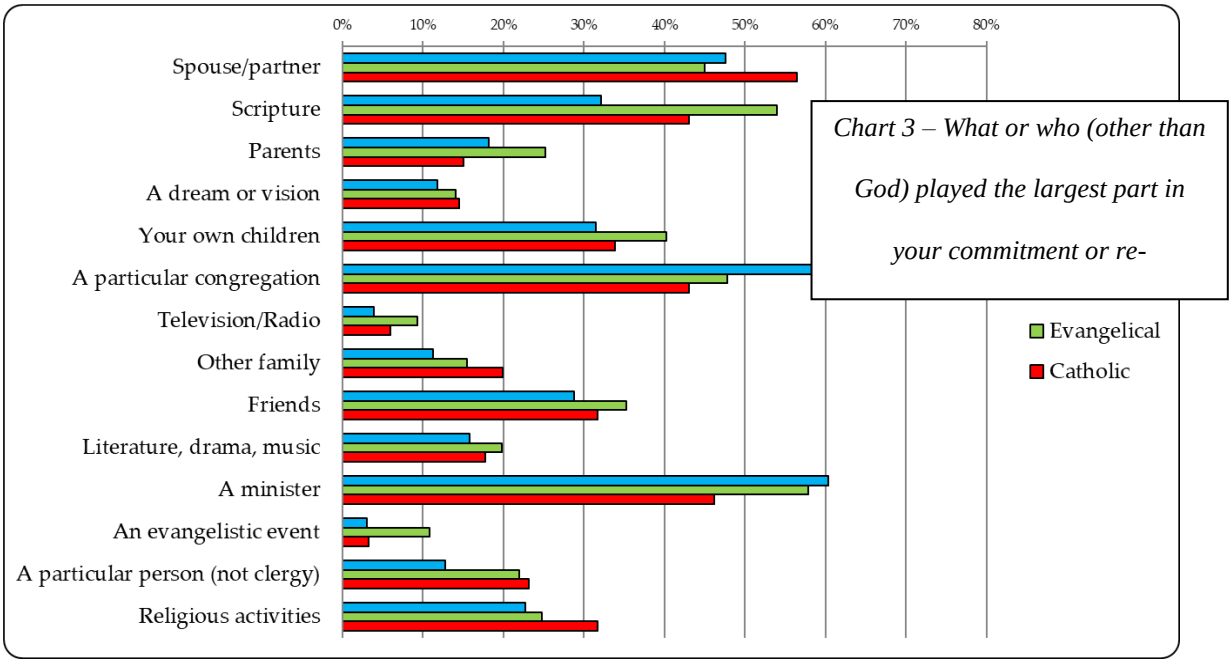


Chart 3 – What or who (other than God) played the largest part in your commitment or re-

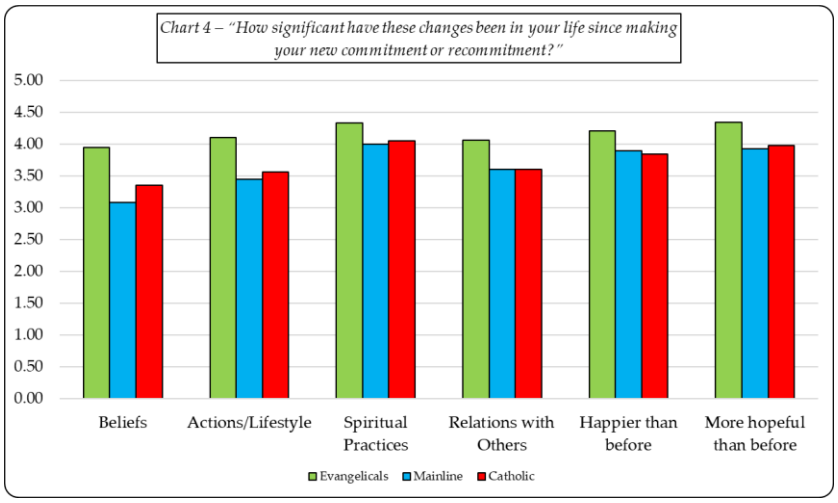
have theological and not merely strategic importance in the process of finding faith. Or to put it another way, the faith that most Christians are finding is inherently communal, even if they are likely to describe salvation in individualistic terms.

We also asked persons in our study what was *the single most important feature* of the church they ended up attending. Nine percent of new Mainline Protestants mentioned the social outreach ministries of their church, three times that of Roman Catholics (3%) and over twice that of new Evangelicals (4%). This makes sense given that, as earlier shown in Chart 1, two-thirds of new Mainline Protestant Christians define what it means to be a Christian in terms of one's lifestyle. When asked to list *all the features that were important* to them (thus, they could identify more than one), that number grew to 53% of Mainline Protestants compared to 38% of Catholics and 40% of Evangelicals. Clearly, the social outreach of churches is important to new Christians, even if Mainline Protestants value it more highly than other Christians.

Finding #6—What Changed?

Trying to determine what changes, if any, take place in the lives of persons who have recently made a faith commitment was an important, but challenging, aspect of the Finding Faith Today

study. If the journey of faith is one that takes place over time for most people, we might not expect to see immediate major shifts in attitudes, conduct, social views, or ethical commitments. On the other hand, if the commitment is more than a superficial club membership, we should expect that new Christians would report some changes in convictions and behaviors.

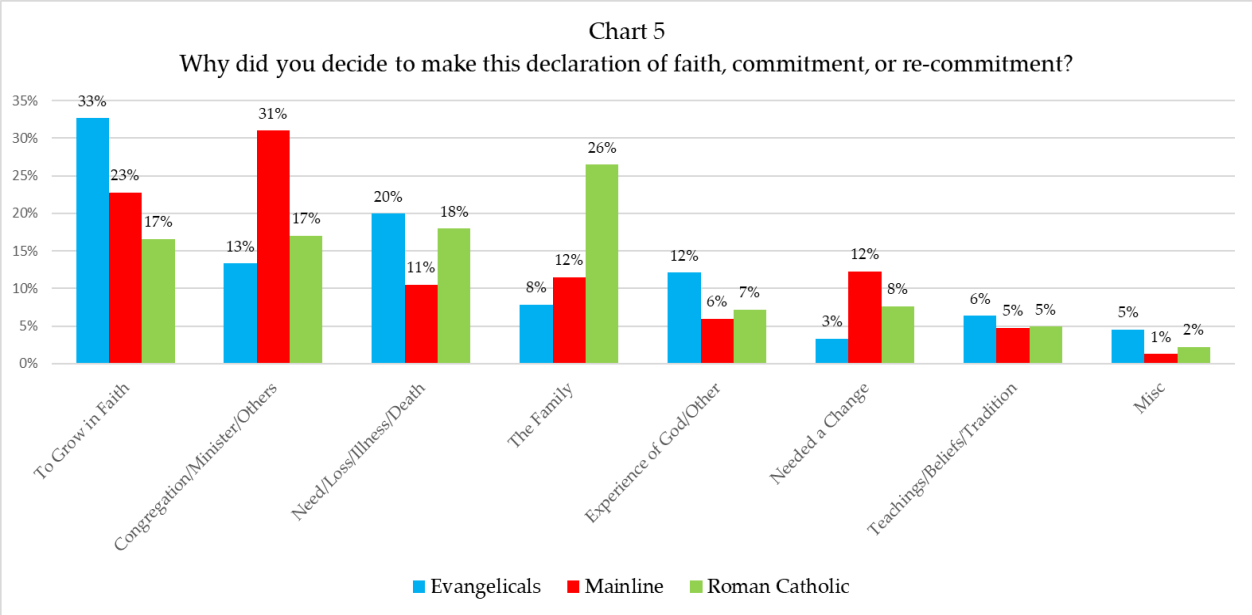


The changes we looked at rely on self-reporting, of course, but we can at least gauge how those persons understood what this commitment means in their lives. Our study inquired about those changes from a variety of perspectives—including spirituality and self-perception; religious behavior such as prayer, scripture reading, and church attendance; personal moral behavior; and stances on important social issues. Is a new commitment to faith life-changing and, if so, how?

In an Addendum to this paper, I provide findings related to changes in social stances for those who are interested in reading it, though there is insufficient space to spend time on that here. But I do want to draw attention to three areas of the research project that demonstrate the intersection of evangelism with social action: (1) the particular shape of need in the lives of those who newly came to faith—and the corresponding ways that need shaped the faith they found, (2) particular incidents going on in their lives at the time or during the process of coming to faith, which shaped the way evangelism took place in their lives, and (3) obstacles or encouragements largely related to a church's social stances that either made it difficult to come to faith or, by contrast, provided an encouragement and attraction that led to a new faith commitment.

Adversity, Loss, and Social Need. Chart 5 illustrates answers to the question of why these new Christians decided to make a new commitment. There are significant differences among the Christian

traditions, but about 16% of all new Christians on average attribute the reason they came to faith to a time they were facing adversity, loss, or need. For many in this group, that adversity was described in more spiritual terms as something missing or empty in their lives using language related to purpose, meaning, and hope. But at least half of that group talked about coming to faith in relation to a crisis, trauma, illness, accident, unemployment, divorce, addiction, death, or other such loss in their lives. Written comments in answer to other questions in the survey, moreover, lead us to believe the number is much larger. It is here especially that new Christians pointed to a socially engaged



evangelism equipped to assist with alcohol and substance abuse, marriage and divorce problems, unemployment, illness, bereavement, and trauma. I recommend the recent book *Trauma-Informed Evangelism* by Charles Kiser and Elaine Heath as helpful in forming congregations and leaders with capacity for ministering to an even larger population of those who are exploring faith but deeply wounded, often by the church itself.

We also asked if there were any important incidents during the process (for the large number of persons coming to faith gradually) or at the time they made their decision (for the 20 to 33% coming to faith more suddenly). The influence of a congregation got a significant number of responses (about one in five), but here again, a significant number of new Christians (about one-fourth) spoke of

bereavement, divorce and marriage problems, health-related problems and addictions, and situations of despair or life feeling out of control. The support and care they received from a congregation, minister, or other friend, relative, partner, or loved one made all the difference in the process of coming to faith. People often talk initially about coming to faith in spiritual terms, but when it comes to describing the actual process, the most important factors, and what was happening in their lives then as well as what is happening now, it is hard not to be impressed by the holistic nature of evangelism and faith for a great many new Christians.

Obstacles and Encouragements. One of the interesting findings of the Finding Faith Today study is the way a particular Christian tradition's teachings, practices, persons, or institutions are either an obstacle or encouragement in making a new commitment. A little over half of all Roman Catholic respondents claimed there were indeed obstacles, while 39 percent of Mainline Protestants and 32 percent of Evangelicals said there were. We should not think of these as abstract principles; they are instead faith-based commitments such as those having to do, for example, with homosexuality, the status of women in the church, and marriage and divorce that make it difficult to come to faith or, in other cases, that making coming to faith possible and attractive.

Evangelicals. Just over a third of Evangelicals who encountered obstacles mentioned specific theological or ethical questions. The most common were (1) the challenge of reconciling science with faith, or evolution with creation; their church's negative position on homosexuality or marriage equality; and difficulties with the Bible or with an exalted view of the authority of Scripture they had encountered. For several Evangelicals, the challenge had to do with their early experiences, training, or teaching (Catholicism was frequently singled out for criticism), or with the inflexibility or irrelevance of the faith they had encountered. They listed questions about beliefs pertaining to hell and the devil, the doctrines of predestination and total depravity, the exclusivism of Christianity, the trinity, tithing, rebaptism, and some of the places in Hebrew and Christian Scripture where God is portrayed as not especially loving or compassionate. Another third of Evangelicals said they

experienced Christians as inconsistent, hypocritical, overly judgmental, or holding them back in some way. Ministers and family members were singled out most often in this regard. At times these obstacles pertained to ordinary human imperfections that persons coming to faith simply had to learn to accept so that they could move forward. More often, however, the obstacles were irreconcilable (and continued to be irreconcilable) with what they had now come to understand as authentic Christian faith.

One out of five Evangelicals spoke about the appeal of Christ as their savior and about their relationship with Christ. While some expressed this in the devotional language of love for Christ (and Christ's love for them), others emphasized the importance of Christ's teachings as appealing. Another one-fifth of the responses focused on salvation, forgiveness, or grace. One out of five Evangelicals lifted up Scripture as appealing. They love studying the Bible and meditating upon it. They are passionate about preaching that is biblical. They are also drawn to ministers and churches that are biblically grounded. Yet another fifth of Evangelicals focused on their congregation or community, and the fellowship and acceptance they have found there. This response overlaps with a sizeable group of responses that highlighted the pastor or pastoral staff.

Mainline Protestants. Like Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants also mentioned particular theological or ethical questions and challenges. But whereas only about a third of Evangelicals cited problems here, just over half of Mainline Protestants did, and a much greater number mentioned disagreements with traditional Christian stances on homosexuality or gay marriage. In most cases, they found those obstacles in other Christian groups, which is precisely why they ended up turning to one of the Mainline denominations. Mainline Christians frequently cited obstacles they found in their previous experiences with Catholicism and Evangelicalism, and in about equal numbers. While they cited problematic attitudes related to homosexuality in both of those traditions, they also identified obstacles related to the treatment of women.

They pointed to problems with Catholic stances on human sexuality, marriage, and divorce and with Evangelical views on the Bible, salvation, guilt, hell, and the exclusiveness of Christ. To be sure, not all Mainline Protestants found it easy to adjust to the open or progressive theologies of the tradition within which they were making their new commitment. As one new Episcopalian put it, "I find it frustrating that they have virtually no doctrinal statements and try to see all sides and both sides forever, never arriving at any conclusion." Some cited other Christians and clergy as an obstacle because of their hypocrisy and inconsistency, but fewer Mainline Protestants (10 percent) fell in this category than Evangelicals (33 percent). Most of the other 40 percent of Mainline Protestants listed a range of obstacles associated with the churches they had experienced in the past, especially with a perceived lack of inclusion and acceptance (which was mentioned most frequently). A good number also mentioned institutional politics or a preoccupation with institutional maintenance and an off-putting level of commitment that was expected of them (including financial commitment). A few also mentioned challenges with the boring or irrelevant character of Mainline worship.

Just under a third of Mainline Protestants found the inclusiveness, welcome, and acceptance of their congregations to be most appealing. Another quarter of Mainline Protestants focused on the congregation's worship format or liturgy, the preaching style, the music, and the support and care of the clergy. Fifteen percent talked about forgiveness, salvation, or Christian teachings (often the freedom found in the Mainline approach to Christian teachings).

Catholics. Like many Christians, some Catholics reported challenges with traditional Christian beliefs such as the trinity or the fate of non-Christians. But those did not surface much in their answers to this question. Yet Catholics outnumbered Protestants in identifying obstacles. Far more often than Protestants, Roman Catholics cited a litany of church practices and ethical positions they experienced as roadblocks. Many of these remain problematic, even after their new faith commitment. But while some said they have reconciled themselves to those teachings and practices,

most said they simply disregard or continue to oppose them. Several described themselves as not feeling the need to agree with all Catholic teachings in order to remain Catholic. By far, the most difficult teaching of the church for those becoming Catholic pertains to homosexuality and gay marriage. After that, the church's positions most frequently mentioned as obstacles (in order of frequency) are birth control, gender roles and women's ordination, marriage and divorce, abortion, the hierarchical organization of the church and clergy, veneration of Mary and the saints, closed communion to non-Catholics, and recent sex scandals along with their cover-up.

Catholics spoke most frequently of loving Catholicism itself—the long history of the church, its traditions, worship, and teachings, and the experience of being part of a truly global family and community. As one man answered, "The consistency of the Catholic Liturgy, I find beautiful and it gives me a sense of peace and safety." Indeed, several persons used the word "consistency" to emphasize the commonality of faith, practice, and liturgy shared by Catholics from parish to parish and nation to nation. The celebration of Eucharist, or Mass, was frequently mentioned appreciatively. Another feature of Catholicism lifted up with regularity was the church's emphasis on social justice, good works, mercy, and the importance of loving and serving others. Pope Francis was singled out by several new Catholics as an inspiration that drew them to the church, and others expressed appreciation for opportunities to volunteer in their parishes.

III. Concluding Thoughts

Several Wesleyan theological coordinates make it possible to work outside the modern Evangelical consensus while practicing a robust evangelism that need not be sharply distinguished from social action but instead deeply interwoven with it. Of course, it is possible for persons to practice social action without an evangelizing intent or aim. But for an evangelism oriented toward social holiness that takes good news to the poor as a criteria of authenticity, it is hard to imagine evangelism without it. Not every person coming to faith has great social need, but for a good number

of new Christians, coming to faith is more than a spiritual experience or a mere assent to a checklist of beliefs. It is instead a holistic transformation of every aspect of life by God's grace through the welcome, hospitality, and service of a Spirit-filled community devoted to love, care, worship, and justice who "watch over one another in love, that we may help each other to work out our salvation."

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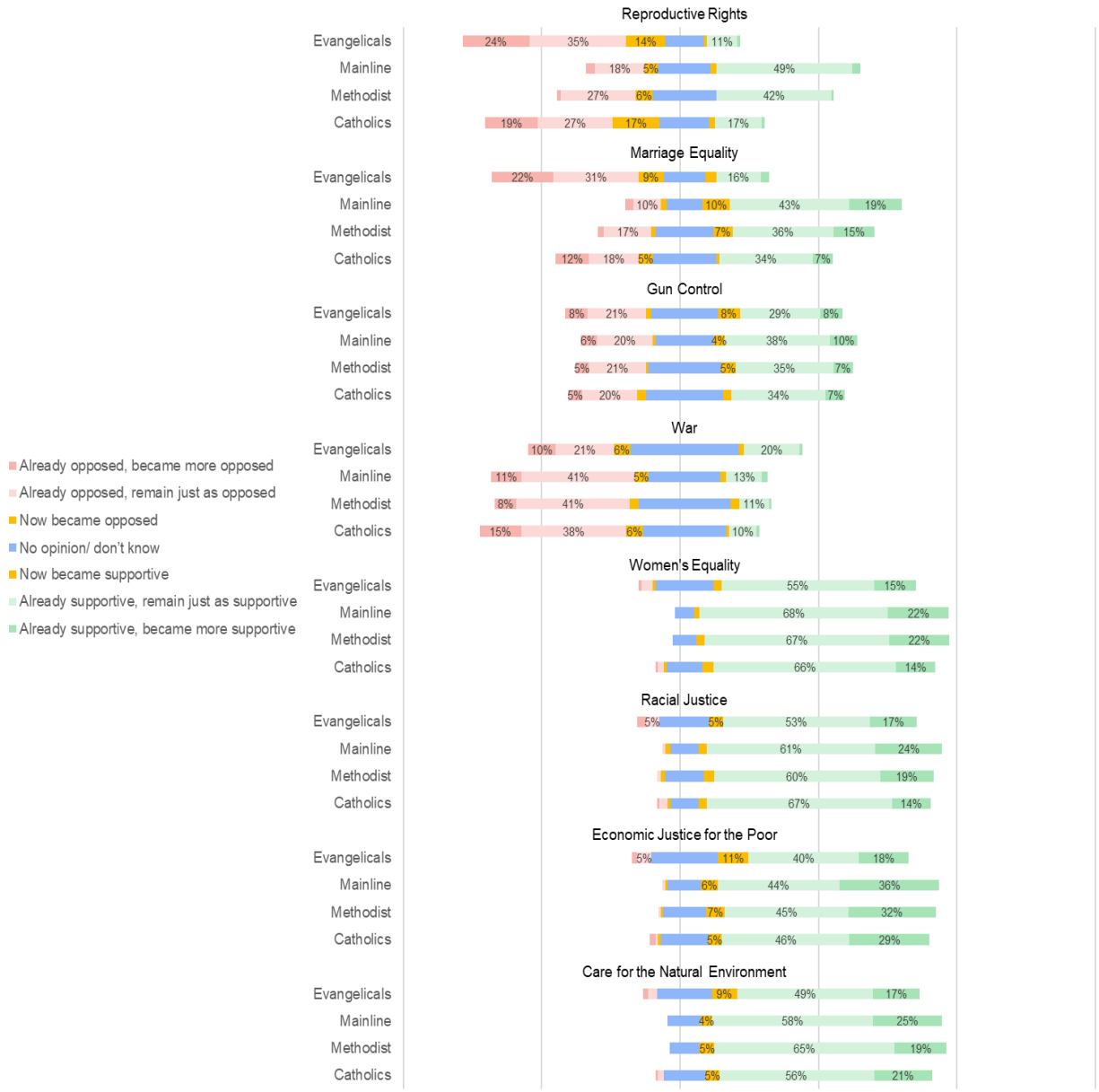
Addendum—Changes in Social Stances

Chart 5 - How have your attitudes and positions on the following social issues changed, if at all, since making your new commitment or recommitment?"



In the Finding Faith Today study, we asked about eight pressing, contemporary social issues, and our question to study participants was, "how have your attitudes and positions on the following social issues changed, if at all, since making your new commitment or recommitment?"

Many new Christians come to faith in a tradition or church that already matches their social views, but we were especially interested in noticing where changes were occurring. Chart #5 on the next page highlights in yellow changes for more than 5 percent of all respondents. But we also have here a good indicator of Christian positions more generally on these social issues within each tradition. Methodists are already included in the Mainline Protestant category, but I have broken them out in this chart given our identity in the Institute this week. The data represented here, then, imply some level of correlation between finding faith and the change new or recommitted Christians perceived in themselves. Some of the most noticeable findings include:

- **Reproductive Rights.** With regard to women having a right to an abortion, 1 in 7 of those becoming Evangelical Christians and 1 in 6 of those becoming Roman Catholics became opposed after their new faith commitment. We did not see as much change for Mainline Protestants, half of whom were already supportive of reproductive rights. A small percentage (5 percent) became newly opposed.
- **Marriage Equality.** When it comes to the question of same-sex marriage, the situation is similar though with more complexity when it comes to Catholics. While one in ten Mainline Protestants became newly supportive of same-sex marriage since making a new faith commitment, Evangelicals are the mirror opposite with about one in ten who became newly opposed. Slightly over half of Evangelicals were already opposed to same-sex marriage, including 22 percent who became more opposed. By contrast, almost two-thirds of Mainline Protestants were already supportive, including 19 percent who strengthened their support. The situation is a bit different for Catholics than for Evangelicals or Mainline Protestants. Forty-one percent were already supportive of same-sex marriage (including 7 percent who became more supportive) as compared to only 30 percent of Catholics who were opposed (including 12 percent who became more opposed). A small percentage (5 percent) of

Catholics became newly opposed to same-sex marriage, while hardly any became newly supportive. Clearly on this social issue Catholics cannot be painted with the same brush as Protestants.

- **Gun Control.** With regard to gun control, about a quarter of all respondents have no opinion or don't know what they think about gun control. This could be because they have not formulated a position or found the issue too complex. or perhaps it was less important to them than other social issues. We saw this same level of complexity in the other religious groups we studied. Overall, we saw little change among new Christians on this issue, though most of the change moves in the direction of support for gun control. At 8 percent, Evangelicals are the largest group of those who became newly supportive. In the time since we gathered the data for this study, there have been several mass shootings in the US followed by new momentum for more robust gun control legislation, so it may be that persons would have stronger opinions on the subject than we saw in our participants at the time.
- **War.** It is hard to imagine anyone being supportive of war as a blanket assertion, and this could be why we saw such a large number of respondents reply that they don't have an opinion or don't know. At the time of the survey, a protracted "War on Terror" was still being waged mostly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Evangelicals in our study were the most supportive of war, and this parallels other studies that have shown Evangelicals (or at least white Evangelicals) more supportive than other religious groups for military action.[2] However, very few persons from any Christian tradition became even more supportive of war

[2] Gallup. "Support for War Modestly Higher Among More Religious Americans" (February 27, 2003). http://news.gallup.com/poll/7888/support-war-modestly- higher-among-more-religious-americans.aspx. Pew Research Center, "Different Faiths, Different Messages" (March 19, 2003). http://www.people- press.org/2003/03/19/different-faiths-different-messages/.

than they already were since making their new faith commitment. Just over half of all Mainline Protestants and Catholics were either already opposed to war or became even more opposed. About the same number in all three Christian traditions (5 to 6 percent) became newly opposed.

- **Women's Equality.** Only 2 percent of Evangelicals and Catholics became newly opposed or more opposed to women's equality after finding faith (though "women's equality" surely means different things to different people). Most Mainline Protestants (90 percent) were already supportive or became even more supportive of women's equality (indeed, only 2 of the 331 Mainline Protestants in the study were opposed). Eighty percent of Catholics and 70 percent of Evangelicals were also already supportive or became more supportive of women's equality. Only 7 percent of Mainline Protestants do not have an opinion on the subject, and it is clear that support for women's equality is overwhelming among that group of Christians. It is astonishing that, by contrast, 21 percent of Evangelicals have not formulated an opinion on the subject, and neither have 13 percent of Catholics.
- **Racial Justice.** The responses to the question of racial justice were almost the same as the responses to women's equality in all Christian traditions. Again, it is impossible to know from our study what exactly respondents might think racial justice entails in their context. Only a very few persons in all three traditions were not as supportive of racial justice as they were of women's equality. Indeed, only one Evangelical (out of 262) had become newly opposed to racial justice since finding faith. Five percent of Evangelicals, by contrast, became newly supportive. at the same time, we saw slightly greater opposition to racial justice (8 percent) than to women's equality (6 percent) among Evangelicals.
- **Economic Justice for the Poor.** Compared to other Christians, Evangelicals report a considerably higher percentage of those who already opposed economic justice for the poor

(5 percent) or who became more opposed (2 percent) after making a new faith commitment. But only one person reported becoming newly opposed after finding faith. In fact, a significant 11 percent of Evangelicals became newly supportive of economic justice for the poor. Mainline Protestants and Catholics were already solidly supportive of economic justice. Still, it may come as a concern to many that 24 percent of Evangelicals and 17 percent of Catholics in the study have no opinion on the matter or just don't know.

- **Care for the Natural Environment.** We found the highest levels of support among all Christians for creation care. Seventy-nine percent of Mainline Protestants were already supportive or became more supportive, and an additional 6 percent became newly supportive. For Catholics, that was 74 percent with an additional 5 percent newly supportive; and for Evangelicals, it was 59 percent with an additional 11 percent newly supportive. Though it is true that Evangelicals were less supportive overall, we also saw the largest growth in persons becoming newly supportive among Evangelicals. It is safe to say that Christians across the theological spectrum are increasingly grasping the significance of environmental concerns as an important part of what it means to be a Christian.