
ACTION-RESEARCH

Growing Together: A Qualitative Investigation of Community Connection Through the Transformation of a Religious Space

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Throughout the United States, attendance at religious services is on the decline, fewer Americans identify as “very religious”, and the lack of community gathering spaces can make meaningful connection between community members difficult. The current qualitative study examined a welcoming and inclusive urban religious institution in Portland, Oregon that has created for-rent gathering spaces for individuals from the community. The primary goal of the current study was to examine the challenges and opportunities of opening the church to the community. Using a community based participatory research (CBPR) approach, the researchers collaborated with a steering committee comprised of members of the church, community, and the non-profit organization. Six focus groups were conducted (3 church groups, $n = 19$; 3 community groups, $n = 12$). The results suggest that churches and communities can respond to the changing landscape of our times by providing opportunities and physical spaces for collaboration and connection.

Keywords: church; community; resilience; non-profit; qualitative research

Introduction

Many religious institutions are grappling with remaining relevant in their communities. For instance, religious observance in the United States has been steadily declining since the 1990s, particularly among those states in the far west (e.g., Oregon and Washington), which have the lowest levels of religiosity in the nation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Although America remains a highly religious nation (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), more Americans are identifying with no formal or organized religion (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2014). Whereas most Americans indicate that they belong to a congregation where they could attend services, whether they actually attend varies greatly depending on a number of factors such as ethnicity, gender, religion, and region of the country, among others (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Fewer Americans, particularly young adults (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), see church as being important in their lives or having a major influence on American culture (Newport, 2016). Additionally, as the demographics of cities across the United States continue to shift, some church congregations no longer reflect the diversity (or lack thereof) of the communities they hope to serve (Lipka, 2015). Given the complexity of the religious landscape in America (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), it is becoming increasingly difficult for some religious institutions, formerly pillars in their communities, to remain relevant, vibrant, or even open (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Despite the changing religious landscape in America, religious institutions are uniquely positioned to support social service programs (e.g., mentoring, education, health promotion, substance treatment, housing, political activism) for the surrounding community (Chaves, 2004; Houston & Todd, 2013; Houston-Kolnik & Todd, 2016; Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013). In particular (but not limited to), Christian denominations in the United States (e.g., Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic) have a rich history of encouraging humanitarian services and community outreach (Chaves, 2004; Houston-Kolnik & Todd, 2016). According to Chaves (2004), Protestants and “liberal” congregations engage in high rates of civic activities (e.g., social services, education, and art) when compared to Catholic or conservative denominations. Chaves (2004) indicated that the goal of these civic activities is to foster trust and connection between religious

establishments and the community, benefiting both the church and the larger community. Community outreach provides an avenue to transmit religious education to a broader audience, which may increase congregation participation. In turn, the community benefits as religious institutions are able to provide resources, including physical space, to support community programs (Chaves, 2004).

Oldenburg (1997) first used the term “third spaces” to describe community gathering spaces that are public and different from both home and work. Examples of third places include religious institutions such as the ones described above, as well as parks, malls, diners, and coffee shops. Third spaces can unify neighborhoods, serve as locations for gathering directions and other information, and be places for forming and supporting special interests and friendships (Oldenburg, 1997). In other words, third spaces help to foster social capital (i.e., social networks that foster trust and reciprocity) in ways that can bolster personal and community health and well-being (Putnam, 2000). Relatedly, third spaces may help to build greater collective self-efficacy, the perceived trust that makes community members more likely to help each other in times of need (Cohen, Inagami, & Finch, 2008). Collective self-efficacy has been linked to decreased crime and obesity rates, and improvements in mental health (Bellair, 2006; Cohen, Finch, Bower, & Sastry, 2006; Xue, Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, & Earls, 2005). The disappearance of third spaces only serves to erode opportunities for the building of social capital, (Parlett & Cowen, 2010) collective self-efficacy (Cohen, Inagami, & Finch, 2008), and the multiple benefits that these incur.

Like religious settings, many communities across the nation are experiencing significant changes. For example, Portland, Oregon has experienced tremendous population growth with over 40,000 people moving to the city in 2016 alone (Beebe, 2016). As a result, Portland is among a handful of cities nationally whose development of new housing options is barely keeping up with its population growth (Beebe, 2016). To date, new housing in the city has typically favored multi-family or multi-unit housing, especially apartments, instead of more traditional, single-family homes. Many smaller buildings, including single-family homes, have been demolished in favor of these multi-family units (Francis, 2015). Further, in Portland and in many cities across the United States, urban development has been accompanied by an insufficient expansion of parks and open space systems, which has not kept pace with population growth (Banerjee, 2001). Taken together, urban development may have a profound impact on communities, including limiting opportunities for community members to interact, contributing further to the erosion of community cohesion, social capital, and collective self-efficacy.

Current study

In the current study, we sought to examine a unique partnership between a local religious institution and community that was created in response to many of the challenges we describe above. An inclusive and affirming, urban, mainline Protestant church in Portland, Oregon partnered with the community to create a nonprofit organization that houses for-rent community gathering spaces and a coffee shop within the church building. Prior to the creation of the nonprofit, the church experienced a decline in congregants' participation and an increase in expensive repairs needed to maintain the 110-year-old building. Additionally, the community lacked a central community gathering space. As a result, the pastor of the church began conversations with congregants and community members about the needs of both constituencies. As a result of those conversations, the nonprofit organization was formed. Whereas the mission and vision of the nonprofit shared some similarities to that of the church (i.e., unconditional positive regard for all people), it was created to operate independently from the church with regular feedback and input provided by the church and community. Making the nonprofit organization a separate entity allowed the nonprofit to focus solely on community building and engagement in a secular, fully inclusive manner. Thus, the intention of the partnership was to bolster the human and financial resources available to the church while simultaneously contributing to a connected and vibrant community through the provision of a community gathering space. As a result of the partnership and creation of the nonprofit, a number of groups began to meet in the church's community gathering spaces including Alcoholics Anonymous, children's dance classes, technology services, divorce support group, and a barista training program, among others.

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine what challenges or opportunities arose as a result of opening the church to the community vis-a-vis the nonprofit organization. The goal was to gather information that would help to inform the work of the church, community, and nonprofit, and provide direction for other religious institutions and communities in need of a model for collaboration and engagement. In the current study, we utilized a fully-infused community based participatory research (CBPR) approach (O'Fallon & Dearth, 2002), in which the church, community, and nonprofit were full partners in the project during the 4 years of collaboration (i.e., project conceptualization-dissemination).

Method

Description of research-religious institution-nonprofit partnership

The collaboration between the mainline Protestant church, the community, the nonprofit organization, and the academic institution began in Portland, OR in 2015. At that time, the community gathering space and coffeeshop had been in existence for 6 years. The pastor and a representative from the nonprofit organization approached the first author for assistance with conducting focus groups with congregants and community members. Given the first author's expertise in qualitative research methods and CBPR, she readily agreed. As this project utilized a CBPR approach, our research partners (i.e., church and nonprofit) identified the research problem and goals of the current study. A steering committee (n = 8) was created, comprised of the church pastor, director of the nonprofit, and representatives from the church and the community. The steering committee provided valuable and needed input during each stage of the research process.

In 2015, during the *project conceptualization and research development phases*, the academic partners met with the steering committee to design the research project. The steering committee also assisted with developing the various study announcements (i.e., flyer, script for verbal announcement, and email) and focus group questions. In consultation with the steering committee, the academic partners drafted the IRB proposal and submitted it for approval. IRB approval was granted in Spring 2016.

The steering committee took full responsibility for participant recruitment (e.g., posting flyers, making announcements, sending emails) while the academic partners conducted the focus groups during the *data collection phase*, which took place January 2017-June 2017. The academic partners took the lead in examining the data during the *data analysis phase* with support from the steering committee. After analyzing the data, the academic partners presented the results to the steering committee who provided feedback on the themes, which included creating new categories and merging or eliminating others. During the *dissemination phase*, the dissemination plan was agreed upon by the steering committee and academic partners with opportunities for feedback and revision throughout this phase. A presentation of the results was made by the academic partners to the steering committee, and an executive summary outlining the results in brief form was shared. Finally, the academic partners presented the results at a national psychology conference and submitted the manuscript for publication.

Description of religious institution-nonprofit partnership

The partnership between the Protestant institution, and the nonprofit began 11 years ago in reaction to a decline in membership along with a desire to better connect with the surrounding community. On the side of the community, there was an expressed need in the community for a community gathering space. The nonprofit organization was developed to cultivate "connected community" in partnership with the nonprofit organization, with an expressed mission of developing welcoming and nurturing spaces within the church building for community members to gather and meet.

A number of changes occurred within the building of the church to accommodate this collaboration. For one, a historic bell tower was converted into a coffeehouse. Additionally, a converted chapel became a large common space for meeting and gathering. Finally, some of the historic rooms in the church were converted into meeting spaces that were made available for rent for a modest price. As a result of these changes, over 3000 guests visit the building each week for a variety of activities and social services (e.g., mentoring, music education, substance use support), with a small percentage of these persons (less than 5%) attending religious services. The establishment of the nonprofit was important in ensuring that community activities would occur in a secular, fully inclusive manner. The role of the nonprofit was to staff the coffeehouse, provide administration for the rental spaces, and manage the individuals and groups that utilize the community gathering spaces. The nonprofit operated independently from the church but regular communication and sharing of resources (e.g., finances) occurs. Unlike other religious institutions that might choose to manage community partnerships on their own, the creation of the nonprofit allowed for independence between these constituencies (i.e., religious institution and community) while liaising between these two.

Participants

Participants were assigned to one of six focus groups depending on whether they were a church congregant (three focus groups, n = 19) or a community resident (three focus groups, n = 12). The steering committee, in consultation with the academic partners, determined the composition of the focus groups (i.e., church congregants vs. community residents). Since church and community members represented two different constituencies likely utilizing the church building and programming for different reasons,

we decided to create separate focus groups. Further, separate focus groups were warranted since we wanted to provide an opportunity for both groups to express their honest reflections on the use of the community gathering spaces.

The most common age range for individuals in the church group (71–80 years) was older than the most common range for those in the community group (41–50 years). Church group members also identified more as retired than community members (63.2% vs. 25%). Those in the community group were more likely to have children under the age of 18 in the home (58%) compared to the church group (none reported). The two groups were similar with respect to sex, race, and country of origin (i.e., female, White, and from the United States). For detailed information regarding the demographic variables of the individuals in each group see **Table 1**.

Measures

Demographic form

De-identified demographic information was collected in the form of age, gender, ethnic identity, country of origin and citizenry, level of education, religious or spiritual affiliation, church membership, and socioeconomic status (**Table 1**).

Study questions

A total of 15 questions were developed for both the church and community focus groups. These questions made up four broad domains: *community* (e.g., “What do you think the church’s role should be in the community?”), *church, community, and nonprofit partnership* (e.g., “What are your thoughts about a community space and a sacred space overlapping?”), *programming* (e.g., “What programming/events have you participated in?”), *looking forward* (e.g., “In what ways could this church, community, nonprofit partnership serve as a potential model for other churches and communities?”).

Procedures

We utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach since we wished to deeply understand the experiences of our participants from their personal point of view (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The phenomenological approach emphasizes understanding the lived experience of individuals from their perspective. The objective of this approach is to summarize and condense individual experiences of a particular phenomenon in a way that helps to capture that which is generalizable or universal to all individuals experiencing that particular phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Since the primary aim of the current study was to evaluate a community gathering space, we selected focus groups for our methodology. In keeping with the theme of the research, focus groups allow for the sharing of experiences among collections of individuals, they were selected as our interview method (Liamputtong, 2011; Wilkinson, 2015).

Recruitment for the church focus groups occurred via announcement posted in the church bulletin; verbal announcements made by the pastor during Sunday church services, monthly church business meetings, weekly bible study, and emails sent to the church contact list. Personal invitations were also extended. Potential participants for the community focus groups were recruited via a flyer placed in mailboxes and posted in the church building and local businesses (e.g., coffee shops, grocery stores). Announcements were also posted in the nonprofit’s newsletter, Facebook, and website, and personal invitations were also extended. Interested participants were asked to contact the academic partners via email or phone, and were verbally assessed for their eligibility and availability for the focus groups.

The eligibility criteria were set by the steering committee in consultation with the academic partners. To be eligible to participate in the study, community participants had to live or work in the designated Portland neighborhood, the boundaries of which were set by the local neighborhood association. Church attendance within the last 7 days was required for church participants. Additionally, participants had to be at least 18 years of age, either a current church participant (as verified by the church mailing list) or a resident of the local neighborhood (as defined by local neighborhood association), and able to speak, read, and comprehend English. Eligible participants who were members of both the church and the community were assigned to the church focus groups. This decision was made because we wished to understand the experiences of the individuals that made use of community gathering space but did not attend religious services. Recruitment continued until six focus groups occurred and saturation (i.e., focus groups continued until the information provided was similar to or repeated by previous focus group participants) was reached (Charmaz, 2015).

Each focus group lasted for approximately 1.5 hours. All focus groups took place in the church/nonprofit. Upon arrival to the study location, two academic partners provided introductions and reviewed the informed

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Church and Community Groups.

Demographic	Church Group (N = 19)	Community Group (N = 12)
Age	Average 71–80 years Range 26–30 to 81–90	Average 41–50 years Range 18–25 to 61–70 years
Gender	Female 79% Male 15.8% Metrosexual 5.3%	Female 83.3% Male 16.7%
Marital Status	Married 53% Single, partnered, divorced, or widowed 47%	Married 58.3% Single, partnered, divorced, or widowed 41.7%
Country of Origin	United States 100%	United States 100%
US Citizen	Yes 100% No 0%	Yes 100% No 0%
Race/Ethnicity	White 89.5% Asian 5.3% N/A 5.3%	White 100%
Religion	Protestant 68.4% Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Christian Scientist, Christian-New Age Spirituality, Bible-Based Christian, Humanities Philosophy, Not religious, and Agnostic 31.6%	Other Religion (None, Spiritual, Atheist, Lutheran, Christian, Universalism, Buddhism) 75% Protestant 16.7% Decline to answer 8.3%
Religious Member	Yes 68.4% No 31.6%	Yes 16.7% No 83.3%
Attendance in last 7 days	Yes 100%	No 83.3% Yes 16.7%
Years in Neighborhood	Average 20.3 years	Average 13.5 years
Housing (own or rent)	Own 84.2% Rent 15.8%	Own 75% Rent 25%
People in house	Average 1.9 people in house Range 1–3 people	Average 3 people in house Range 1–6 people
Children <18 yrs in house	No 100%	Yes 58.3% No 41.7%
Income	Average \$40,000–\$44,999 Range \$10,000–\$150,000	Average \$50,000–\$59,999 Range <\$5,000–>\$150,000
Education	Masters degree 42.1% Bachelors 26.3% Some College 15.8% Professional 15.8%	Masters degree 16.7% Bachelors 33.3% 2-year college 16.7% Professional 16.7% High school or GED 8.3% Technical/Trade/Vocational 8.3%
Employment	Retired 63.2% Self Employed 26.3% Employed part time 5.3% Employed full time 5.3%	Retired 25% Self Employed 8.3% Employed part time 33.3% Employed full time 16.7% Not Employed 8.3% Homemaker 8.3%

consent form by reading the contents aloud and responding to any questions. Participants were provided with two copies of the informed consent form, one for the participants' records and one to be signed and returned. Next, the focus group guidelines were reviewed, which outlined some of the focus group ground rules such as privacy, confidentiality, audio recording, etc. Following a review of the focus group guidelines, the audio recording devices were turned on and the focus group questions commenced. A 10-minute break with refreshments took place at the mid-point of the focus groups. After 1.5 hours, the focus group session

ended, the audio recording devices were turned off, and participants were free to go. The data (i.e., demographic surveys and audio recordings) were securely maintained in the offices of the primary author. To maintain participants' confidentiality, only the academic partners had access to these materials.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by the academic partners simultaneous to data collection so that the point of saturation could be determined (Morrow, 2007). Prior to data analysis, the academic partners engaged in reflective journaling, a bracketing technique that is intended to help researchers become aware of any biases or pre-conceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Each member of the academic partners was assigned a focus group for which they created a verbatim transcript and independently coded for themes and served as a secondary analyst by coding one additional verbatim transcript. Following coding, the academic partners met to discuss and deliberate the themes both within and across the church and community focus groups, until consensus was reached. The results were then shared with the steering committee, who provided feedback and helped to refine the original set of codes. At this meeting, the academic partners and steering committee agreed on the revised codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Results

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine what challenges or opportunities arose as a result of an inclusive, affirming, and urban, mainline Protestant church in Portland, Oregon opening to the community vis-a-vis a nonprofit organization. The goal was to gather information that would help to inform the work of the church, community, and nonprofit, and provide direction for religious institutions and communities in need of a model for collaboration and engagement. The overarching themes were categorized for the church and community, as well as shared themes by both groups.

Church Themes

Theme 1 (challenge): The decline of churches

Many participants acknowledged the modern-day challenges of maintaining a large and vibrant congregation; church members appeared to be aware of the decline of church congregations both nationally and locally. For instance, one participant from the church noted, "Churches are declining, congregations [are] dying off and [are] tombs." Many participants agreed with this statement and had the view that the nonprofit organization was heavily financing the church. As one church member noted, "[The nonprofit organization] is kind of keeping the church going financially, I think right now." This was worrisome for church members who were concerned that the nonprofit organization might not always maintain the mission and values of the church. At the same time, there was general recognition that solutions are needed to address the modern-day problems of religious institutions, such as low attendance.

"As an old timer if you just look around, the millennials are interested in spirituality deeply and profoundly, but they are currently turned off by old school and old-style organized religion."

"I think the church should be active as well and not just passive but should be active in the community as well so I think that's the other role to fill."

Theme 2 (opportunity): Recognition, connection, and safety

Church members recognized how the leadership team helped to connect the church to the community, creating both respect and visibility among community members. "Everyone in the community knows who [the pastor] is. That is unusual." Participants believed that having church leadership who are not only known by the community but also live in the community, helped to raise the profile of the church. As a result, it was the impression of many of the church members in the focus groups that the church is a comfortable and safe place for the congregation and community alike to gather. It was notable that participants frequently used the word "*safe*" to describe the gathering space and atmosphere that was being cultivated in church.

"We definitely have a place that is like a *safe* haven that people can come to feel accepted..."

"And it's just a *safe* place for the mothers to gather with their kids."

"And it's, its, um, you know like a high citadel, and that has a connotation of *safety* and security."

Theme 3 (challenge): Confusion about the role of the church and nonprofit

Whereas there was much to praise about the role the church played in the lives of community members, church participants also expressed concern about the relationship between church and community. For instance, many participants noted an increase in community members taking advantage of the programming offered by the nonprofit, and perceived that few people actually became involved in the church itself:

“With all the people that come through this building, you know with the nonprofit, more than the church...I’m surprised there isn’t more...people interested in the church itself. I’m just I’m kind of confused by that.”

Another participant, with whom there was much agreement, offered similar insight as well as frustration and disappointment about the relationship between the church and nonprofit. Rather than a shared model in which the church and community members support and participate in the activities of the nonprofit, some participants held the view that the church should take primary responsibility for any activities taking place within the church. In this model, the nonprofit would not operate independently, but rather the church would assume responsibility for the organization and any decision making.

“I thought the nonprofit was a part of the church and they were a joined thing, but now they’re going off... It’s supposed to be our organization [so] let ‘em go and we can get some other people on church staff or something like that. Church should be in charge if we can find people to do it.”

Community Member Themes

Theme 1 (opportunity): Appreciation for community connection

The community members’ appreciation for the nonprofit and the church as a valuable source of community connection was demonstrated throughout the focus groups. For example, one community member noted how the partnership between the church, the nonprofit and the community was perceived as a benefit for the neighborhood, “real enhancement to [the] neighborhood....Love that the church has opened the doors to the neighborhood.” Similarly, another community member commented on how they felt the church was striving for a thriving relationship with the larger community, “the church should be the living room of the community.” Many participants noted that the church’s physical structure provided a unique space to establish beneficial relationships within the community, “The structure I think, it feels like it grew to serve the needs that were here [the neighborhood]. Even as they have changed. It feels good.”

Additionally, participants believed that the relationship between the church, community, and nonprofit could be a model for other communities: “What is happening here in terms of this partnership between the church and the nonprofit is really amazing, it’s amazing and I think it could be a national and global model for churches everywhere.” “If the nonprofit hosted some kind of regional or national gathering of people who are interested in transforming their church spaces into community settings as well I think there would be a lot of interest.”

Theme 2 (opportunity): Sharing responsibility for the church building

Community participants emphasized a feeling of responsibility for the well-being of the church building and grounds. Concern over preservation of the physical space were inherent within this theme. One community participant noted “Is there a way the nonprofit could reach out to the community to share responsibility [financially]?” Similarly, another participant commented on feeling unsure about how to share the responsibility for the space, “I want more involvement but [I’m] unsure how. I’m even willing to work for the church.”

Overall, sharing responsibility for the conservation of the physical building proved to be a poignant concern among participants. Several participants noted the aspects of disrepair of the physical building as a cue that the church may need financial support for the building. One participant explained, “You know but one thing I do know, and I’ve been told is that the whole church and the buildings are sadly in need of repair.”

Theme 3 (challenge): Communication

The community members expressed a desire to improve communication between the church and the community. They discussed the ways in which communication from the church to the community could be improved, as well as discontentment around the current method of communication. One participant

expressed that she learned about events through “the bulletin board, but that’s only if I come in. I’ve never looked at their website. If they have one, I’ve never seen it.” The community participants were eager to offer suggestions about how the church could communicate in an effective way with the larger community. One participant commented, “I just think having even a Google calendar to subscribe to, one of those feeds, just so you would know what was going on. I think that would be a really easy way for a nonprofit to operate it.” Altogether, the community focus group participants made a clear distinction that while they deeply enjoyed the events offered within the church, they would appreciate improved communication about programming and events.

Shared themes between church and community members

Theme 1 (challenge/opportunity): Sustaining the church-community relationship

Both church and community members wondered about how the collaboration might be sustained into the future. Some of the concerns centered around financial management, particularly whether there were enough funds available to support the unique partnership between the church and community. A common question that we heard was expressed by one participant: “How much of the money goes toward supporting [the church-community collaboration] and [how much for] supporting the church?” So, all the money that the nonprofit makes, is that going towards the church? Or none of it?” There was strong agreement that the financial responsibility should be shared equally by the church and community, with several participants wondering about new ways to involve community members in the financial stewardship of the partnership: “Is there a way the nonprofit could reach out to the community to share responsibility [financially]?”

Discussion

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine what challenges or opportunities arose as a result of opening an inclusive, affirming, and urban, mainline Protestant church in Portland, Oregon to the community vis-a-vis a nonprofit organization. The goal was to gather information that would help to inform the work of the church, community, and nonprofit, and provide direction for other religious settings and communities in need of a model for collaboration and engagement. The results of our study have important practical and research implications that should be considered.

Decline in religious attendance

The decline in religious attendance that has been observed nationwide (Newport, 2016), was also experienced locally by the participants in our study. Not only did congregants remark on the decline of attendance at their church, they highlighted the loss of interest of young adults in “old-style organized religion,” consistent with national trends (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). At the same time despite the noted decline in religious attendance, both congregants and community members in our study saw the church as an important venue for civic activity and engagement vis-a-vis the nonprofit. Whereas a decline in membership can have far-reaching financial and social implications (Lipka, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014), religious institutions that are willing to consider other sources for revenue and participation have the opportunity to develop new and exciting collaborations with the communities that they serve. Hence, other religious institutions facing declines in attendance that seek to replicate the church-community model that we describe here, may find wide spread support. Indeed, Putnam (2000) notes that “faith-based communities remain such a crucial reservoir of social capital in America that it is hard to see how we could redress the erosion of the last several decades without a major religious contribution (p. 408).”

Social capital, collective self-efficacy, and third spaces

Religious institutions can be places where social capital (Putnam, 2000) and collective self-efficacy (Cohen, Inagami, & Finch, 2008) are built and maintained in ways that are beneficial for both personal and community well-being (e.g., Bellair, 2006; Cohen, Finch, Bower, & Sastry, 2006). In our study, the creation of the nonprofit with the accompanying access to programming and meeting spaces, clearly helped build both social capital and collective self-efficacy among church and community members. Participants frequently used the word *safety* to describe the predominate feeling that was cultivated by this unique partnership, a place where individuals from diverse backgrounds could gather and connect. Providing a *safe*, open, and affirming space where all were welcome and included was very much in line with the mission statements of both the church and nonprofit organization.

The most prevalent themes among the two groups included an appreciation for meaningful activities offered at the nonprofit. Physically and socially supportive environments can provide an integral sense of

cohesion, wellness, and support to individuals and the larger community (Cohen et al., 2008; Oldenburg, 1997). The nonprofit was largely viewed as an enhancer of community connection by our participants. Study participants made clear that the nonprofit had succeeded in creating authentic opportunities for civic engagement (Chaves, 2004) in ways that made the church an important “third space” (Oldenburg, 1997) in the community.

Given the importance of this third space, many community members expressed a desire to become stewards of the church by contributing their time and financial resources to the maintenance of the building. This suggests that the model described here can be made sustainable if religious institutions rely on the vast resources that exist in the communities they serve (Putnam, 2000). Other religious institutions that seek to establish a partnership like the one described, should find ways to regularly involve community members.

Communication

One tension point that was frequently mentioned by participants in our study was communication. Members of the congregation seemed to not have received clear communication about the role of the church and nonprofit with respect to decision making, leadership, and finances. Hence, an alternative model might involve a religious institution being completely responsible for all the activities of the collaboration, such as providing the staffing or managing room assignments. In the current study, some church participants expressed a desire to pursue this model, particularly due to the challenge of maintaining transparency (e.g., financial resources) when multiple partners are involved. Indeed, Banerjee (2001) has suggested that community gathering spaces in privately owned places can foster a sense of exclusion and social disconnection due to tension over financial priorities. Our recommendation is that religious institutions-community partnerships make explicit expectations regarding leadership, finances, decision making, and other matters, and make use of open and transparent communication (Rawlins, 2008). As in the current study, this could be done by establishing steering committees or executive boards consisting of members of the community and members of the religious institution. In fact, after the conclusion of our project, the steering committee continued to meet to ensure the well-being of the partnership.

Community members that participated in our study also desired greater communication regarding activities and programming through the nonprofit. Our participants had lots of ideas for how to make these events known some of which involved the use of mass media and the internet (Putnam, 2000). Examples for communication that were offered in our study included: updating the website, online calendars, flyers or mailings distributed to participants' homes or made available in public spaces (e.g., coffeeshops), and using the signage located outside of the local religious institution.

Research and policy implications

As communities continue to grapple with the erosion of third spaces (Banerjee, 2001), new opportunities for partnerships between religious institutions and communities may arise. To help ease the development of these sorts of collaborations, public policies should be put into place including increasing the availability of governmental resources (e.g., grants, funding) and relinquishing decision making and authority to neighborhood councils (Putnam, 2000). As researchers continue to track the decline in religious attendance across the nation (Pew Research Center, 2014), research should also focus on examining innovative community driven initiatives to create civic engagement and social capital. By studying these initiatives, we learn more about what models of collaboration work as well as their relative impact on the well-being of communities and the people that live in them. We suggest that as researchers continue to explore these topics, they make use of community engaged methodologies such as CBPR (McDonald, n.d.). This approach centers the voices of community members to ensure that they receive the full benefit of participating in research, such as determining the research questions and access to results (O'Fallon & Dearth, 2002) in ways that might ensure that outcomes are meaningful and sustainable.

Limitations

Whereas the current study offers several practical implications for religious institution-community partnerships, there were a few shortcomings that are worth mentioning. Participant recruitment was challenging, particularly for the community focus groups. The focus groups for church members filled quickly and were well attended, but the groups for community members were more challenging to fill. This may have been due in part to our recruitment strategies (e.g., flyers), lack of personal interest in the outcome of the project, and limited participant availability. Additionally, we acknowledge that the model we described

here involved a religious institution and community that were largely homogeneous, that is, predominately white, female, and middle class. Other locations where religious institutions and communities are dissimilar, may experience different challenges with establishing third spaces. For instance, as a result of gentrification and rising housing costs, many religious institutions no longer reflect the communities that they serve, as congregants may be forced to move away from the communities where they attend religious services (Lipka, 2015). Hence, our ability to generalize our results to communities that are experiencing these sorts of pressures may be somewhat limited. Nevertheless, we expect that the insights that we have gained through this research are likely to have value to many other religious institution-nonprofit partnerships.

We also acknowledge that the model we describe here is not the only framework for religious institutions and communities to collaborate. The model of the current study involves a religious institution creating a separate nonprofit that became the community facing organization, responsible for managing day-to-day tasks such as renting rooms, managing the facilities, and staffing a coffee shop. The pros and cons of this approach were well-articulated by participants in our study. However, an alternative model might involve a religious institution being completely responsible for all the activities of the collaboration. For instance, congregants could provide staffing or manage room assignments. In the current study, some participants expressed a desire to pursue this model, particularly due to the challenge of maintaining transparency (e.g., financial resources) when multiple partners are involved. However, we did not examine alternative models in our study, so the conclusions that we offer here may not generalize to other types of partnerships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many religious institutions are struggling to maintain membership and relevance across the country (Newport, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014). Some religious institutions across the nation are underutilized, while many community members seek opportunities for connection and engagement (Parlett & Cowen, 2010). The results of this study suggest that religious institutions in partnership with community members, can combine resources to adapt to change by creating comfortable places for individuals to meet, work and connect (Graham & Haidt, 2010).

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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