

The Politics of Progressive Church Plants

Jacob Sutherland
Department of Political Science
University of California, Irvine
jacob.sutherland@uci.edu

Progressive church plants—new Protestant congregations oriented around progressive Christianity—are emerging across the United States. While the existence of these churches challenges traditional understandings of American Christianity as monolithically conservative, little is known about how these churches operate. Using interviews with pastors of progressive church plants, this exploratory paper seeks to address why pastors start or join these churches and how they engage with their political environments. This paper finds that a lack of LGBTQ+ affirmation, issues with prior church leadership, and personal theological development encourage leaders to start or join a progressive church plant, and that national-level politics and community needs inform the non-partisan, community-level direct action that these churches engage in.

Introduction

The rise of Protestant deconstruction (Dickieson-Léger, 2025; Manglos-Weber, 2024) and the growth of the “exvangelical” movement (Gull, 2025; Laughlin, 2022) over the past decade have coincided with a notable increase in progressive church plants (PCPs): new Protestant congregations oriented around progressive Christianity. Traditionally, church plants have been initiatives sponsored by established religious institutions seeking to expand their reach (Kewley and Östring, 2012). In contrast, many PCPs operate independently, unaligned with larger church organizations and distinct from traditional Christian frameworks (Valen and Graham, 2024). Additionally, since PCPs center progressive Christianity within their work, they challenge the traditional understanding of American Christianity as monolithically conservative (Kruse, 2015; Schwadel, 2017), particularly when it comes to the rise of the Christian Right in American politics (Wilcox, 2018; Postic, 2024).

Using interviews with pastors of PCPs, this exploratory paper seeks to address why pastors start or join PCPs and how PCPs engage within their political environments. This paper finds that leaders are drawn to start or join a PCP due to several key push and pull factors, notably a lack of LGBTQ+ affirmation and issues with leadership in their prior churches, being asked to start a church, and their personal theological journeys. Within the type of work they do, PCPs differ from Christian Right churches and other progressive Christian and social organizations in that national-level politics and community needs inform the non-partisan, community-level direct action that PCPs engage in. Taken together, PCPs demonstrate that American Christianity is not monolithically conservative, and that even small, emerging institutions challenge traditional understandings of religion and partisan alignment in the U.S.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, a definition of PCPs is provided to ground the case selection. Then, relevant literature on deconstruction, the exvangelical movement, congregation-switching, and Christian political engagement in the U.S. is presented. Next, the methods of the paper are presented and reviewed, along with an overview of the demographic characteristics of the pastors interviewed. The findings are presented in two parts, starting with the factors that encourage leaders to start or join a PCP and then how PCPs engage in their political environments. Finally, this paper concludes with a brief commentary on how PCPs challenge traditional understandings of contemporary Christianity in the U.S., along with a discussion of limitations and avenues for future research.

Defining Progressive Church Plants

As there is no agreed-upon scholarly definition of progressive church plants (PCPs), this paper introduces the following definition: new Protestant congregations oriented around progressive Christianity. This definition helps to separate non-PCPs from the case selection.

While the concept of church planting arguably dates back to the early church (Payne, 2009) and has been a process utilized by many Christian traditions (Hibbert, 2009), the modern conception of church planting in the United States is typically associated with mainline, denominational, and non-denominational Protestantism (Grach, 2025; James, 2018; Stetzer and Bird, 2008). Church plants often have a strong, growing commitment to their missions and require flexibility in their initial stages. Church plants tend to face several challenges, notably the non-communal nature of Western society, difficulties in obtaining stable financial support, and a trend towards the professionalization of ministry (Kewley and Östring, 2012).

The other key component of PCPs that separates them from other types of congregations, including other church plants, is their focus on progressive Christianity. While there is no

specific theology associated with progressive Christianity—as progressive beliefs transcend denominations—Graham and Laing (2025) broadly conceptualize churches subscribing to progressive Christianity as those that “include a commitment to the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and Indigenous peoples, and greater sensitivity to race, inclusive language, disability, and other progressive causes.”

Deconstruction, exvangelicals, and congregation switching

The establishment of PCPs coincides with recent findings on deconstruction and denominational switching. Dickieson-Léger (2025) defines deconstruction in the context of Christianity as: “a process in which beliefs previously received as unquestionable truth are re-examined and those which are ‘contradictory, harmful, or unsubstantiated by evidence’ are possibly discarded.”

Deconstruction has also been described as a form of “micro-politics.” Marti and Ganiel (2014) argue that deconstruction is a form of micro-politics because it is a process in which individuals respond to pressures of conformity imposed by traditional religious institutions by finding ways to resist these social pressures by examining and establishing their own set of beliefs. As Manglos-Weber et al. (2024) note: “people engaging in the micropolitics of deconstruction are usually still active in their institutional commitments, which is why they may often seek out theological education rather than avoiding institutionalized religious sites completely.”

Manglos-Weber et al. (2024) find that those engaging in deconstruction may adopt spiritual practices that are more embodied, centered around social justice, activism, and the natural world, and are syncretic.

As a process, one visible community that has emerged from deconstruction has been the exvangelical movement. The term exvangelical was originally coined in 2016 as a Twitter hashtag by podcaster Blake Chastain (Onishi, 2019) in the wake of the election of President

Donald Trump (Gull, 2022). The term refers to “a former evangelical typically associated with online dissent against evangelical cultural norms” (Laughlin, 2022). Many who identify with the exvangelical movement cite their deconstruction as rooted in their experiences with patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity that they experienced within the church (Onishi, 2019). Others cite leaving the church due to experiencing sexual and religious abuse (Long, 2023) and LGBTQ+ exclusion (O’Brien, 2023). While the exvangelical movement is predominantly an online one (Gull, 2025; O’Brien, 2023; Laughlin, 2022), some members of the movement regularly meet in person (Onishi, 2019).

Deconstruction and the rise of the exvangelical community are one part of a broader trend of denominational and congregational switching that has increased over time in the U.S (Sikkink and Emerson, 2020; Voas and Chaves, 2016). Packard and Ferguson (2018) identify factors that contribute to why individuals disengage from formal religious institutions. These include “push” factors within their churches: a lack of innovation, isomorphism, a concentration of power within one or a minority of leaders, a narrow focus on proscriptive issues, and a culture of exclusion; and “pull” factors, namely opportunities beyond their churches to engage in social justice and relationship development.

Churches where those pushed or pulled out of their previous congregations ended up may lead to different political outcomes for their congregants. Churches that include women in leadership positions, for instance, tend to have congregations that are more politically liberal than churches that exclude women from leadership (Audette et al., 2017). Moreover, churches that are affirming of the LGBTQ+ community can lead LGBTQ+ Christians to view society at large as more accepting of their identities (Strode and Tenenbaum, 2026). Given that PCPs focus on progressive Christianity, which responds to the push and pull factors identified by Packard

and Ferguson, the culture of PCPs themselves may likewise produce their own political cultures among congregants.

Research on deconstruction, the exvangelical movement, and congregational switching has largely focused on the experiences of congregants themselves. Less, however, is known about how religious deconstruction and factors that encourage disengagement from formal religious institutions may impact church leaders. Why do church leaders choose to leave their churches, and for this paper, why do some former church leaders decide to plant PCPs instead of attending a new congregation? In line with the literature on deconstruction, the exvangelical community, and congregation switching, this paper argues that church leaders who have planted PCPs will have been motivated to do so for the same push and pull factors that lead congregants to disengage from formal religious institutions, as well as their own theological and political misalignment with their previous church. They may also be likely to plant a PCP when they cannot find a church that matches their personal theological and political values.

How do progressive church plants participate in their political environments?

The nature of PCPs aligning themselves with progressive Christianity counters the development of the Christian Right. Wilcox (2018) defines the Christian Right as “a social movement that attempts to mobilize evangelical Protestants and other orthodox Christians into conservative political action.”

The development of the Christian Right began as early as the New Deal era, as business leaders sought partnership with conservative religious leaders to frame free-market economic policy as inherently aligned with Christian values (Kruse, 2015). These efforts expanded in the following decades through issues like the introduction of “under God” into the pledge of allegiance, the placement of “In God We Trust” on currency, the establishment of the presidential

prayer breakfast, and *Engel v. Vitale*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that state-sponsored, mandatory prayer in public schools violates the Constitution, among others. By the 1980s, Evangelical Christianity had become fully entrenched in the Republican Party (Schwadel, 2017). Since then, the Christian Right has been a dominant force in American politics. In its most extreme form, the Christian Right centers itself around Christian Nationalism (Postic, 2024). This has manifested as mobilization around social issues at all levels of government, from efforts to ban abortion (Swank, 2020) at the national and state levels to efforts to ban LGBTQ+ books (Sutherland, 2025) and inclusive curriculum (Deckman, 2004) at the local level.

The alignment of Evangelical and many non-denominational Christian groups with the Republican Party has an important impact on one's personal religiosity. As Margolis (2018) argues, one's political identity can shape one's religious identity, just as one's religious identity can likewise shape one's political identity. This partisan sorting of religion helps explain why devout Evangelicals coalesced around President Trump in the 2016 general election: negative partisanship towards the Democratic Party led them to overlook Trump's lack of Evangelical moral purity (Margolis, 2020).

This partisan sorting of religion may also apply to PCPs. National-level political polarization and the modern alignment of Evangelical and many non-denominational Christian groups with Trumpism, beginning in the 2010s, may lead to those within churches that have since aligned themselves with the Christian Right leaving when their church no longer matches their political beliefs. Subsequently, they may seek out new religious institutions that better align with their political beliefs. For this paper, the process of the partisan sorting of religion may, in part, lead church leaders to start PCPs when their previous churches no longer align with their political beliefs and when they cannot find another church within their communities that shares

their political values. Once planted, this same national-level political polarization may motivate the types of social and political activities that pastors choose to pursue within PCPs.

From a substantive perspective, PCP political engagement is likely to mirror that of the Christian Right in the way that they entangle religion and politics. For PCPs, this would mean that liberal political beliefs inform how they carry out progressive Christianity, and that progressive Christian values inform political activities, something which challenges contemporary understandings of conservative religion and progressive politics (Braunstein et al., 2019). Given the hostility of the Christian Right towards the LGBTQ+ community at the national level (Cravens, 2023; Castle, 2019), PCPs are likely to center the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community within their ministry and activities. Likewise, given how racial resentment has a strong conservatizing effect on white Evangelicals (Allen and Olson, 2022), PCPs will likely center racial justice within their ministry and activities.

While national-level political issues are likely to inform PCP ministry and activities in the same ways that they do for the Christian Right, the structural constraints that PCPs face as newly created religious institutions are likely to affect the specific types of activities they engage in. The Christian Right can mobilize around sociopolitical issues at all levels of government, in part due to the networks, people, and resources (Brady et al., 1995) available to them. As newly created religious institutions, PCPs are limited in their access to inter-congregational networks, the number of people who are a part of their congregations, and the amount of financial resources they have available to them. While motivated by national-level political issues, it is expected that PCPs will focus their political activities within their communities. As a result, PCPs may contrast with the Christian Right in that the outcomes of their work may be political

but non-partisan, largely due to the church's authority being independent from power structures instead of in alignment with them (Williams, 2021).

Methods

This paper employs a qualitative and interpretive approach, using a demographic survey and semistructured interviews (Cramer, 2024). The interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded. The interview questions were informed by both the literature review and the researcher's own experiences participating in a PCP.

The interviews for this paper focus exclusively on pastors of PCPs. Focusing analysis on pastors, rather than congregants, is relevant for the study of new religious institutions like PCPs due to the nature of their roles. In addition to the literature gap on the factors that encourage church leaders to start PCPs, pastors play a leading role in shaping the theological and political cultures of their churches and in making theological and political decisions that impact the day-to-day operations of their churches, something which congregants do not do to the same degree. While congregant perspectives are meaningful to understanding church culture and are an important subject for future research, given the leading role pastors play, a focus on the motivations and experiences of pastors is informative in understanding why church leaders start PCPs and how they engage in their political environments.

11 interviews were conducted with pastors of 10 progressive church plants founded between 2012 and 2025. The interviews were conducted online using Google Meet from August 2025 to April 2026. The interviews on average lasted 40 minutes. Before the interviews, the interviewees completed a pre-interview survey that covered their demographics, religious affiliation, and brief background information about their progressive church plant. Upon completion of the survey and interview, all interviewees were compensated.

Interview recordings were transcribed using the transcription software Otter, and the transcripts were verified for accuracy by the researcher. Subsequent coding was conducted by the researcher, along with note-taking and analysis throughout the interview period, to further guide case selection and interview approach. A full analysis of the interviews was completed after all interviews had been completed. In presenting the findings of the interviews, the following narrative frequency qualifiers (Daiute, 2013) are used: “all,” “most,” signifying 75% or greater, “many,” signifying 50% or greater, “some,” signifying 25% or greater, “few,” signifying less than 25%, “one,” and “none.” All interviewees have been provided pseudonyms in this paper to protect their anonymity.

The researcher’s own experiences participating in a progressive church plant were informative for the study. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) note, a researcher’s prior knowledge of and experiences with their research topic “can potentially [play] a key role in the conduct of that research ... sometimes such experiential or other background knowledge can later be key to such conduct—e.g., to obtaining access to a community...” This prior experience was particularly informative for the approach to finding interviewees and analyzing the interviews. PCPs do not refer to themselves using this terminology; on the surface, the names of these congregations may evoke the image of a standard non-denominational or evangelical church. Having been part of a PCP for three years by the start of the study, the researcher had intimate experience with recognizing the language used by PCPs in comparison to other types of congregations. In particular, this helped with validating the suggested interviewees that arose through snowball sampling (Robinson, 2013).

Likewise, given that many progressive church plants work with vulnerable communities, there may be a concern amongst founders and pastors about participating in a research interview

because the researcher may come across as not having their communities' best interests in mind. The researcher's experience in a PCP helps to overcome this concern because it allows the researcher to signal their personal background and connection to the subject matter in interview outreach. As such, all interview outreach included an introductory paragraph in which the researcher shared their personal experience with a progressive church plant.

The majority of PCPs included in this study are located in California, with six located in the state, one in Florida, one in Oregon, and two that are primarily online. The PCPs also range in size, with attendance in any capacity ranging from 20 to 375 attendees. Most interviewees are founding pastors of their PCPs, and one is a pastor who later joined their PCP. Regarding their present religious affiliations, many identified as non-denominational, with one identifying as Reformed, one Baptist, one Congregational or United Church of Christ, and one Episcopalian or Anglican. All identified as white, with one also identifying as half Jewish. All identified as cisgender, with seven identifying as women and four as men. Many identified as straight, one as gay, one as lesbian, and one as bisexual. All interviewees were between 30 and 59 years old, with a skew towards 30 to 49 years old. Regarding annual household income, seven stated their AHI was over \$150,000, two within the range of \$100,000–\$149,999, and two within the range of \$75,000–\$99,999. All interviewees had graduate degrees, with most having a Master's degree and one having a Doctorate. Regarding ideology, all identified within varying degrees of liberal: one slightly liberal, seven liberal, and three very liberal.

Starting a Progressive Church Plant

The interviews revealed significant insights into why leaders choose to start or join a PCP. Most of the reasons for starting a PCP align with the framework developed by Packard and Ferguson (2018) that identifies the push and pull factors that contribute to why individuals disengage from

formal religious institutions more generally. Regarding push factors, most highlighted their previous church's cultures of exclusion: most cited harm to the LGBTQ+ community, some sexism, and a few racism. In discussing her experiences reconciling with the fact that her congregation at her past church may not have been as supportive of the LGBTQ+ community as she had originally taken for granted, Claire, a founding pastor of a PCP in Oregon, explained:

How do I think about at the time my students who are coming out? ... I'm like, secretly, you can be gay and you can love Jesus ... I'm doing that vibe in the youth ministry, and I feel like that lines up theologically with the pastors I'm surrounded by. But I start to realize that, like, oh, wait. I don't know that this does, like I might hold different theology than the people that I'm ministering to.

Issues of leadership were also cited as push factors, with some noting patriarchal power structures in their past churches and a few noting general dissatisfaction with existing systems and structures within their churches. Before starting her PCP in California, Alex had tried joining several mainline churches before landing on a more progressive evangelical church, where she witnessed significant issues pertaining to boundaries between pastors, staff, volunteers, and congregants.

What I was noticing was not just ... in the mainline churches, noticing I didn't connect with the liturgy, I didn't connect with the faith traditions. But also, [at] evangelical churches, kind of seeing this lack of boundaries and pastors, this lack of clarity...these really unreasonable ... unreasonable expectations of [the pastors], but not being told otherwise that I should have different expectations or that I should be able to [have boundaries].

Looking at theology as a push factor, five specifically noted having left an Evangelical congregation, a few cited their previous church as having conservative theology, and one cited their previous church as having a conservative congregation. Personal relationships with the church or church leadership also arose as push factors: some interviewees cited specific instances of having a falling out with church leadership as a reason that caused them to initially leave, one

discussed how their previous church had internal conflict within their church after the head pastor left, one discussed how the evolution of their church over time led the congregation to become divided, and one cited that church leadership asked them to leave the congregation. In reflecting on leaving her formal role within a non-affirming church, Monica, a founding pastor of a PCP in Florida, reflected:

Me and one other person were working at a church that was not affirming, and we knew it was not affirming, but it had never really been an issue. It was all very much like, this is our position, but you do you kind of thing, we're not going to talk about it from the stage. We're not going to exclude anybody, and that's how it had been for a really long time. And I was affirming, but I knew...to keep my mouth shut, and then they decided to kind of just crack down and basically start making people sign statements of faith...and all kinds of things. And there's a lot of reasons that happened, but essentially, the lead pastor sat everyone down in a room and made us go in a circle and say what we believed, almost like, please don't make me because you're not going to like my answer. And they did not. And then it wasn't right away. It was probably three or four months later, we were asked to leave.

Looking at pull factors, many interviewees noted that, at some point in their journey, they had been asked to plant a church, either by the church or organization they would eventually leave, or by a friend or another community member. Lara, a pastor at an entirely online PCP, discussed how she had been asked to apply to join the PCP's pastoral team.

Yeah, so I was working [part-time] at [another church], and I had just had my baby, so I was a couple months postpartum...and I just needed income...and I was looking just for, like, stable ministry, income, and meaning. And the pastor I was working for had heard about a job opening through [the online PCP], and I met with the founding pastor. I thought he was great. I never imagined doing online ministry, so I didn't really pursue it. And then they closed the application. And I was like, I guess I didn't apply. And then the pastor reached out to me and asked me, like, oh, wow, please apply. And so I did, and I went through an interview process with the founding pastor and [grant organization] staff...they hired me.

In the discussions of their journeys to start their PCPs, many noted that, like Lara, they themselves had previous church or religious leadership experiences.

A couple of other factors came up in the interviews that led the interviewees to found or become a part of a PCP. Some noted that they had been trying to find a new church that better fit their values, preferences in structure and liturgy, and desire for community, but had been unsuccessful in finding a church that fit what they were looking for. Troy, a founding pastor of a PCP in northern California, discussed how he and his friends had had a difficult time finding a meaningful community to join.

The short story is that I'm from [the broader metropolitan area]. And there wasn't a community for my friends, a church-type community, and that might be because of their politics, [my friends] tend to lean more left, or because of something around their identity. And so that was kind of the initial, like, there isn't a space. And what would it look like to create a community that we could all be a part of, that my friends could be part of, that the community I love would find meaning in?

Personal faith journeys also play a role in some decisions to start or join a PCP, with one discussing their journey of deconstruction and one discussing their journey to LGBTQ+ acceptance.

Taken together, the interviews reveal that church leaders indeed are motivated to plant PCPs for some of the same push and pull factors that lead congregants to disengage from formal religious institutions. The focus on a lack of LGBTQ+ affirmation at their old churches was discussed in the context of isomorphism, a narrow focus on proscriptive issues, and a culture of exclusion. These push factors manifested both as internal motivations to leave their past churches, as seen with Claire, and, in some cases, as external pressures from church leadership to leave due to conflicting views on the LGBTQ+ community, as was the case with Monica. While not described by interviewees as explicitly political, a key component of the alignment of the Christian Right with the Republican Party centers around anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs. As a result, experiencing a lack of affirmation within one's previous church may signal a broader political misalignment with the previous church itself.

Issues with church leadership were also discussed in various capacities as being a factor that pushed the interviewees to start or join a PCP. However, these leadership issues differ from those identified by Packard and Ferguson (2018) in that none of the interviewees explicitly described their issues with leadership at their previous churches as having to do with a narrow concentration of power within one or a handful of church leaders. Patriarchal power structures, instead, were noted by the interviewees, ranging from women being explicitly excluded from leadership to being boxed into specific roles. And as Alex discussed in her journey of trying to find a new church before deciding to start her own, a lack of boundaries among church leadership and the setting of unreasonable expectations for pastors, staff, volunteers, and congregants, in part, was a leading factor in her decision to start a PCP.

For the most part, while social justice and relationship development are key components of PCPs, these pull factors were not explicitly mentioned in the interviewees' discussions of why they started or joined their PCP. Instead, several interviewees had been asked by someone to plant a church or join a PCP, as was the case with Lara. In some cases, a member of their previous church had asked them to plant a church, although the nature of that church plant becoming a PCP was not necessarily the intent of the person asking. As some of the interviewees noted, these "asks" served as foundational moments in their journeys to starting their PCPs, in that they provided them with a certain level of confidence that they indeed could take on such an undertaking.

Lastly, personal theology serves as both a push and a pull factor in a leader's decision to start or join a PCP. In some cases, the theological teachings and political values of their previous churches pushed the interviewees out, particularly around theological disagreement about marginalized communities. In other cases, an inability to find a new church or community that fit

the theology or liturgy that they were looking for encouraged them to start or join a PCP.

Additionally, one's personal theological journey was also a motivator for starting or joining a PCP, as one interviewee discussed their journey of deconstruction, and another their journey to LGBTQ+ acceptance.

Progressive Church Plants' Political Engagement

The theological, political, and experiential push and pull factors that motivated church leaders to start or join a PCP have likewise played an important role in guiding institutional identities and political activities of PCPs. In the discussions of their PCPs' missions, all interviewees discussed the role of inclusion, which included the use of the terms "diversity," "belonging," "welcoming," and "friendship." Heather, a founding pastor of a PCP in southern California, reflected on why she believes her PCP exists in the first place.

You know, when you start a church now, it's like, why? Like, all the content in the whole wide world lives on the internet, all the best preachers, you can get their sermons, all the best bands, you can get their albums. Like, why? And we kept coming down to friendship and collective action, like we still need friends. We are a lonelier generation than ever. We are increasingly socially disconnected, and you just need people that you see in real life, care [about], and know each other's stories. And there's still things that you can do about what's wrong in the world together that you can't do alone.

In their discussions of inclusion, some noted specific aspects of inclusion at the leadership level for members of the LGBTQ+ community and for women. One specifically cited the inclusion of people of color within the congregation. Additionally, one discussed the role of accessibility, and one the role of empowerment.

Beyond inclusion, most discussed the role of "the divine," including Jesus and God, when sharing their perspectives on their PCPs' missions. In reflecting on her PCP's mission, Alex, a founding pastor of a PCP in Southern California, said:

It's a Jesus-centered community, reimagining inclusive spaces to rest, restore, belong, and become. And that...vision leads into our mission, which is we want to provide...a more

progressive church experience for folks who come out of predominantly evangelical spaces, but have seen how things have evolved and changed in our culture, and now see how a lot of the church is behind in kind of catching up with that, and also noticing the harm that a lot of our culture has addressed, but the church has it, and being able to kind of catch up. And part of that catching up is having women leaders, for goodness sake, you know, like having people of color who are not being, like, tokenized in the church, having even just like, healthier expressions of masculinity. So it's not like, you know, having a very queer-friendly [church], but a queer-led church, and that is something that we don't really see even in mainline churches that have been doing a lot of more progressive things for a while.

Like Alex, most discussed how a component of their PCP was to provide safety for those who attend, and most discussed the role of their PCP as a space where people can question, deconstruct, and develop their faith. One specifically discussed how they view their PCP as a place where people can practice religious autonomy. Social justice was also a big component of most interviewees' perceptions of their PCPs' missions.

The discussions on the missions of their PCPs are similarly reflected in their responses to a later question on whether or not they view their PCP as having a political role to play within their communities. All interviewees said yes. In explaining why their PCP has a political role to play within their community, most tied their answer to the way they perceive God, Jesus, the Bible, or the gospels as inherently political, even when some acknowledged the reality of the limits of how political they can be due to their tax-exempt status. In reflecting on a recurring phrase spoken in her PCP, Sabrina, a founding pastor of a PCP in northern California, discussed:

There's one line [we say] in this community: 'we create equal space for rich and poor, left and right, belief and doubt,' and we wrestle right now with whether we should keep in 'left and right,' because like to be fair, I don't think anyone who is right of center is likely going to find a home at our church. And yet, we haven't taken it out, and maybe at some point we will, but I don't know. For me...I still believe that the core project we are a part of is not tied to a party or tied to...the way that our American political system is framed in this era that we happen to be doing ministry. I think our understanding of the gospel aligns much more with what you call the left, but that doesn't mean that I feel like...the left...is my primary authority, or who I should be in allegiance to. And so I guess I feel

this piece of wanting to feel the freedom to speak the truth, as I understand it, to be of God, or that we're naming it together... That has political implications, but also know that, ultimately, we answer to one who is not a Republican or a Democrat.

The political issues discussed by the interviewees ranged, with many discussing LGBTQ+ rights and social justice generally, some discussing human rights generally and the rise of Christian nationalism, and a few discussing immigration justice, ICE, Gaza, general domestic politics, and violence. Individual interviewees also noted protesting, global conflicts generally, gender equality, Black Lives Matter, and healthcare.

Regarding how politics are practiced within the PCP, some discussed how political discussions are predominantly led and informed by their congregations, while a few discussed their role in fostering critical thinking within their congregation, partnering with external organizations, and discussing political issues in more general terms during sermons. In reflecting on how his PCP practices politics, Kevin said:

It is not to tell people how to vote. It's not to lead any particular political movement, but it is to encourage people to be involved politically... As a Christian, I want people to be involved in the creation and implementation of the rules we create as a society, and how we treat and respond to one another. But I think largely, there is no particular political party or political movement that we would say, yes, this reflects Christianity, and at the heart of Christianity is the moment Christianity grabs power. So right when you move into Christian nationalism, oh, let's just take our beliefs and let's institute that as the beliefs of this city, this precinct, [that's when] you distort Christianity past the point of recognition, and, in fact, poison the well. So fully it can no longer be Christianity. Its voice is to be a witness from the outside. And the reason for that is that it always needs to be standing with the oppressed and marginalized. So the moment you start to be within the positions of power, you have lost access largely to the people who are not there. So, yeah, I want to be careful, not just because of tax-exempt status, but it's a deeper care about that issue that has nothing to do with tax-exempt status, and I don't believe that grabbing political power is the invitation of those within the Christian tradition.

Individual interviewees also noted explicitly encouraging political involvement, although not voting, to their congregations, having a blog explicitly on the intersection of theology and politics, and providing civic goods to their communities.

The missions and theological and political values of PCPs and their leaders serve as a driving force for the types of activities they engage in. All of the PCPs offer a formal religious service, with frequency varying from weekly to monthly. In line with Evangelical and non-denominational structures, most of the PCPs also offer small groups, including those pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community, book groups, parenting, mindfulness, youth groups, hiking, social justice, podcasts, and board games.

Outside of these formal structures, much of the programming, goods, and services these PCPs provide to their internal and external communities put the political roles they view their PCPs as having into practice. Mutual aid is a significant component of PCPs, with most reporting a range of mutual aid activities, including general funds for financial hardships congregants may face, rent and housing assistance, initiatives to address food insecurity, and mental health services. In reflecting on how her PCP has been able to provide financial support to members of their congregation, Heather discussed:

We've never been in a deficit. So we never have to come in and say: 'Hey, can you help us close the budget for the year?' So we're always able to kind of look forward. And so the first year, we said that we think that if we had a care fund that could be really helpful. We don't really know what it'll mean yet, but we'd love to have that. So that has largely played out as therapy, that people in the community or friends of the community who can't afford therapy show up, and we say, great, find your practitioner. Have us give them...a rough estimate of how many sessions they think would be helpful for you, and then we'll pay it...Usually it's like, up to three, \$4,000, something like that...and [for] a lot of people, it hasn't necessarily needed to be that much. And, you know, we're like, we don't need progress reports from your therapist. We don't need it. Like, it's your time, and all your confidentiality remains intact. Just like, have them invoice us.

This type of mutual aid and community care extends beyond the congregation, with many engaging in work to support the broader communities these PCPs are a part of. This includes volunteering at LGBTQ+ Pride events, partnering financially with secular charitable organizations, working to support foster families in the community, partnering with a local elementary school and a senior center to provide financial and other types of resources, and working to help support the unhoused community. One PCP noted that they actively encourage their participants to go out and engage in protests taking place in the greater community. Community building was also a significant component of the work many PCPs do, ranging from various hangout opportunities to monthly and holiday dinners. In reflecting on the types of community partnerships his PCP engages in, Troy explained:

One thing we do that we adopted early was what we call third Sunday generosity...Early on, we would have different groups come on the third Sunday, like a different nonprofit or organization in the area, talk about what they do, and we just give them the offering from that day...And so that evolved to now, it's just like in our budget, and there's a team that oversees the different groups that come in, because essentially, [it's] like a small grant we give out monthly, and then, because of that, we form relationships with some of the organizations. They're usually not faith-based. They could be, but it's just people doing good stuff, and then people can volunteer. So that's maybe like a bridge to the outside...And whether or not you're Christian or non-Christian, we're just trying to be good neighbors. It's been...one of the special things about the community over the years.

A through line through many of the interviews is that the local-level work that PCPs engage in is informed by both national politics and community needs. National—and in some cases, international—political issues are a motivator for many of the pastors interviewed, ranging from Christian nationalism to LGBTQ+ rights to the rise of Trump to immigration justice. These same political issues are also a driving force for some of the conversations that PCPs have within their congregations, often led by members of the congregation rather than by the pastors themselves.

As Kevin discussed, the work of pastors in PCPs... “is to encourage people to be involved politically...As a Christian, I want people to be involved in the creation and implementation of the rules we create as a society...But when you move into Christian nationalism...[that’s when] you distort Christianity past the point of recognition... [Christianity’s] voice is to be a witness from the outside. And the reason for that is that it always needs to be standing with the oppressed and marginalized.” For PCP pastors like Kevin, PCPs reject the model of the Christian Right that seeks to align itself with a political party in an effort to manipulate power and change governmental institutions. Instead, while PCPs are motivated by national-level concerns just as the Christian Right is, PCPs translate these national concerns into developing community-level infrastructure that seeks to support and uplift marginalized communities. In other words, PCPs redirect their political energy towards community presence instead of electoral influence.

A result of this relationship between national politics and community action is that, while many PCP pastors themselves are politically progressive, they are intentionally non-partisan when it comes to the way they engage in ministry. The motivation for this non-partisanship is not simply due to PCPs’ tax-exempt status, as some interviewees joked about how tax-exempt status does not seem to hinder the political efforts of the Christian Right. The motivation for non-partisanship is more akin to the independent nature of PCPs (Williams, 2021). Indeed, most PCPs at their core derive their authority from their congregations, rather than from broader denominational or non-denominational organizations.

This non-partisanship can be seen in the direct action that PCPs engage in. A focus on mutual aid, community care, and community partnerships largely seeks to address the lived experiences of congregants and the broader community that are the result of failures of political

institutions without being explicitly partisan. As discussed, this manifests itself in the form of efforts to address housing and food insecurity, a lack of mental health resources, and working to support communities that have historically been marginalized by political institutions. This work is inherently local and often neighborhood-focused, which distinguishes PCPs from other progressive Christian and social organizations that tend to focus their efforts on a regional or national level.

Conclusion

This paper interviewed pastors of progressive church plants—new Protestant congregations oriented around progressive Christianity—to reveal why leaders start or join PCPs and how PCPs engage with their political environments. Leaders are drawn to start or join a PCP due to several key push and pull factors, notably a lack of LGBTQ+ affirmation and issues with leadership in their prior churches, being asked to start a church, and their personal theological journeys. Within the type of work they do, PCPs differ from Christian Right churches and other progressive Christian and social organizations in that national-level politics and community needs inform the non-partisan, community-level direct action that PCPs engage in.

While much work on new Christian institutions and the rise of Evangelicalism and non-denominationalism has focused on the Christian Right as a monolithic force in American politics, PCPs challenge this narrative through their progressively aligned, non-partisan direct action. PCPs demonstrate that American Christianity is not monolithically conservative. Even small, emerging institutions can and do challenge traditional understandings of religion and partisan alignment in the U.S.

An important limitation of this paper is the nature of the sample of pastors and PCPs included in the study. PCPs are a relatively small movement, and this is reflected in only 10

being included in the sample. Moreover, there is significant homogeneity in the pastors interviewed in this study: all identified as white, cisgender, and highly educated. Anecdotally, some interviewees discussed in their interviews how they believe church planting in general tends to be dominated by this homogeneous demographic due to various structural limitations to being able to successfully plant a church. While this limitation does not in and of itself invalidate the findings presented in this paper, it does pose a unique tension for the work and missions that many PCP pastors engage in, particularly when it comes to whiteness and leading an organization that is committed to racial justice.

Future research should continue to look at the development of and functions pertaining to new religious institutions like PCPs, particularly paying attention to the types of people who choose to attend PCPs instead of more traditional churches. In the long-term, as PCPs continue to mature, future research should document whether they continue to maintain independence or form strong inter-congregational networks, or even mini-denominations. Additionally, given the homogeneity of the sample, future research should seek to continue researching pastor diversity as it pertains to progressive Christianity. Lastly, future research should also seek to identify whether similar types of institutions that bridge the religious and secular worlds are developing in non-Christian religious traditions.

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