

GRIEVING FOR THE CHURCH

GRIEVING FOR THE CHURCH: THE SENSEMAKING PROCESS AFTER  
EXPERIENCING TRANSGRESSIONS IN CHURCHES

by

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# GRIEVING FOR THE CHURCH

## Abstract

### GRIEVING FOR THE CHURCH: THE SENSEMAKING PROCESS AFTER EXPERIENCING TRANSGRESSIONS IN CHURCHES

by

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This qualitative study examined the sensemaking process of people experiencing a “church transgression” during their time as a member and/or visitor of a Christian church. Participant interviews led to the emergence of five total themes regarding their sensemaking and response behaviors. Three ways in which participants make sense of church transgressions were organization exit, forgiveness, and communal coping. Another theme revealed participants’ adoption of a critical lens as result of the transgression, and the final theme surrounded the revealed redemptive stories of said individuals. Discussion focused on the influence of communal coping on sensemaking and response, the ability for forgiveness to be a means for sensemaking, and the redemption of individuals who experienced church transgressions.

**Key Terms:** *organizational communication, churches, church transgressions, sensemaking, organizational exit, forgiveness, communal coping*

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## Introduction

Churches are arguably some of the most intriguing organizations, balancing the nature of a corporation and the divinity of a religious entity. For many, it may be easy to recall experiencing both positive and negative interactions with an organization: maybe even churches. That is, whereas churches *do* have a divine nature, they are still organizations, and there *are* organizations where not everyone has good intentions and high moral values. These experiences within a church, both positive and negative, leave an impact on the ways that their members subsequently see themselves, others, and the world.

It is undeniably important to examine the negative outcomes that can result from experiences within churches. Churches, given their imperfect nature, are able to cause hurt and harm just as much as any other organization. When trouble ensues, however, churches cannot simply fire or layoff their members: the process is much more difficult. As a member or visitor of a church, making sense of church hurt can be immensely challenging. Although they may believe in a perfect God, churches themselves are not perfect. Thus, how do those members/visitors make sense of and respond to this hurt?

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of people who have lived through a “church transgression,” an action caused by a church member, leader or church as a whole that caused an individual to be upset, displeased or hurt to the point where they re-considered the further continuation within said church or religion as a whole. Further, this study worked to understand the sensemaking behaviors following church transgressions, as well as a person’s ultimate response to the transgression. Given the potential for a church to hold part of a person’s identity (Hoop, 2012), the sensemaking process of a church transgression is a crucial component in understanding response methods.

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### **Theoretical perspective**

The following literature review examines these specific topics: churches as organizations, church transgressions, religious sensemaking and modes of sensemaking. Each section looks directly at the research that has already been done within the context of each field.

#### **Churches as Organizations**

The primary focus of most organizational communication scholars is, arguably, the organizations in corporate America. Despite how intriguing the study of those organizations may be, there are some that don't fit that traditional mold. One of those nontraditional organizations is the Christian church. Like corporations, churches have hierarchical structures, policies, etc. (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). However, the primary concern of churches is not to turn profit, but rather to turn people to the faith (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Churches are voluntary organizations, given that "faith organizations represent unpaid value-based memberships" (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015, p. 510). Churchgoers are not paid to be in churches, and they are not paying to come to services (apart from a tithing). Rather, they *make* the choice to be in support of the organization. Churches are unique given the combination of sacred and secular influences (McNamee, 2011), and voluntary rather than paid membership (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). The combination of sacred and secular is what makes the decision-making process of churches so intriguing (Garner, 2016; McNamee, 2011).

Churches, and subsequently their ideals, are an essential part of the infrastructure of the nation (Garner, 2017). "According to the National Congregational Study Survey, there are an estimated 380,000 churches in the U.S." (Akron Beacon Journal, 2020), making the impact they have on society substantial (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008; Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). Whether it be Christianity or not, religion is at the core of the world we live in (Garner,

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2017). According to a Pew Research study, over 75% of Americans identify themselves with some sort of religion (Pew Forum, 2017). However, religious organizations often provide more than just a message on Sunday. Many churches also continually fund and support non-profits. The Independent Sector reported that “there are 1.6 million tax-exempt organizations in the United States”, many of those organization being religious non-profits (Independent Sector, 2021). Churches may also serve as “family” for those within them (Farr, 2019). For some, churches are a place where those in attendance are unified by something higher than themselves (Farr, 2019). Like in actual families, the Bible goes so far to label followers as brothers and sisters in Christ (ESV Bible). Families, whether it be church or nuclear, provide emotional support and encouragement to their members, making their bonds strong and their roots deep. Religion, overall, influences and creates much of the world in which we live in through organizations and ideals.

### *Church Transgressions*

Church members may experience a transgression with each other, with church leaders, or with the organizational structure itself during their time within a church. These transgressions are what this study would identify as a “church transgression”. For the purpose of this study, a church transgression is an action by a church member, leader or organization as a whole that caused an individual to be upset, displeased or hurt to the point where they re-considered the further continuation within said church or religion as a whole. In this study, a church transgression must have occurred within or by a member of a *church*, rather than a parachurch. It is important to emphasize that a church transgression can vary in its severity. An individual may identify a church transgression as one that includes disagreements surrounding church politics, specific actions from church members or leaders, or doctrinal issues such as anti-LGBTQ+

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teachings and the ordaining of women (potentially low in severity). However, someone may identify a church offense as abuse of power, sexual abuse, and adultery (potentially high in severity) These church transgressions may occur as the result of the abuse of power, coercion of power, deception, manipulation or malice (Langberg, 2015). Transgressions can also come in the form of manipulation of the truth and an individual's intellect; a member or leader of the church may manipulate the truth in attempt to gain "theological power" (p. 196, Langberg, 2015). These church transgressions, no matter the severity, take shape either verbally, nonverbally, or both, through words and actions (Langberg, 2015).

When church transgressions occur, there are many ways in which people may make sense of the transgressions. Whether that be through talking to others or internalizing the transgression, sensemaking is a crucial aspect in understanding what occurred. This connection between churches and sensemaking is something that is seldom studied in organizational communication and could further research around communication within nontraditional organizations. The following section reviews the ways in which sensemaking occurs following hurt and trauma, specifically in connection to the churches.

### **Sensemaking**

When individuals go through a traumatic or challenging experience, they often spend time after the experience making sense of what occurred, how it impacted them, and how it may continue to impact their future. This is what scholars refer to as sensemaking. Sensemaking "involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005). Although individuals make sense of both positive and negative events, sensemaking is "tested to the extreme" when traumatic events disrupt a person's normal life, and the person is forced to handle the situation (Weick, 1995). This is due to the

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disruption of a person's normalcy, and human need to make sense of the situation amongst having to live in the trauma. In an attempt to create an image to help in the rationalizing process of such a disruption, people pull from past experiences and environments to reference (Weick et al., 2005). This allows them to remember how they felt, acted, and/or related when an event of a similar kind occurred previously.

Weick (1995) described several steps in sensemaking. First, a person must recognize a disturbance as a disturbance, or what some call a disruption of the "ongoing flow of events" (Weick, 1995). Although there is a large scale of challenging experiences or disturbances, one of those may be church transgressions. Many refer to a disruption as a "shock", given that this disruption may shock and further disturb the homeostasis of an individual (Kaylor, 2008). The initial shock serves as the catalyst for a process known as sensemaking.

The second step in the sensemaking process is the actual act of sensemaking: taking the time to reflect on the disturbance and how it has impacted a person's life, positively or negatively (Kaylor, 2008). One of the unique aspects of the sensemaking process is that the process takes place in "the reverse" order: the situation comes before the thought (Weick, 1995). Thus, usually a disturbance occurs without the ability for a person to process the occurrence, and only *later* must they work through the occurrence. Sensemaking can be a combination of "comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning" and much more for an individual (Weick, 1995). During this time people begin to form "unconscious and conscious" assumptions about the disturbance, why it was caused, and who caused it (Weick, 1995). They also may face cognitive dissonance as they process through many emotions and current realizations (Weick, 1995). These unconscious and conscious assumptions further help the person predict for the future, serving as a form of self-defense. This is also why within the act of sensemaking there is

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the need to find balance between *both* the “necessity for reflection” and the “desire for restoration” (Kaylor, 2008). During this phase people are constantly battling the need to reflect on what occurred in the situation, with the desire to move past the occurrence and predict for the future (Kaylor, 2008). Sensemaking allows individuals to learn from the experience and prepare to protect themselves in the future. Thus, sensemaking both organizes information *and* taps into human instinct.

From the lens of a church transgression, sensemaking can be especially challenging for an individual given the nature of the organization. As stated above, churches are non-traditional organizations, and their religious component makes them even more unique (Sheldon et al., 2021). Parishioners expect churches to be places of love and unity. When someone gets hurt within the church, a person now is dealing with the juxtaposition of a supposed “loving” church organization and a newly experienced “unloving” transgression. Given that sensemaking may involve the reconstruction of a worldview (Weick, 1995), this can be challenging following a church transgression because of the impact that religion may have on one’s outlook on life (Farr, 2019). Ultimately, however hard the process of sensemaking may be following something as hurtful as a church transgression, it is crucial in the quest to find “restoration” (Kaylor, 2008).

Thus, the first research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** How do people who have experienced a church transgression-make sense of that transgression?

The next step in the sensemaking process comes after individuals have worked through the sensemaking of disturbances that were potentially “puzzling, troubling and uncertain”, and hopefully reached a point where “the interpretation makes good sense” (Weick, 1995). It is usually then when they take some level of action (Weick, 1995). The process of sensemaking

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ultimately sets up the response that an individual will give to a challenging experience. When talking about church transgressions, a person's sensemaking will determine whether that person stays within the church, forgives the offender(s), leaves the church and/or retaliates, or does nothing at all. The following section examines the ways in which researchers have studied modes of sensemaking in organizations.

### **Sensemaking Responses**

Once the sensemaking process has occurred, it is then when individuals take action. Organizational exit and forgiveness are two ways in which a person may take action after sensemaking through a church transgression. These two types of responses are particularly important for many reasons. First, churches are voluntary, so exit may be a viable option. Secondly, forgiveness may be the expectation given the Christian Church's stance in their doctrine on the subject. Both organizational exit and forgiveness are highly studied fields in the study of communication.

#### *Organizational Exit*

Organizational exit originated as a part of Jablin's (1997) model of assimilation. His model consists of organizational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit, but he argues that exit is the most understudied step. (Jablin, 2001). The final stage of the model states that "organizational exit is an inevitable conclusion of the assimilation process as individuals leave all the organizations they join at some point" (Kramer, 2011, p. 186; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), which is how scholars have been defining the idea since.

Scholars have devoted time to studying how people exit from the church (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Hinderaker & Garner, 2016; Garner & Peterson, 2018). Hinderaker and O'Connor (2015) looked at the voluntary exit from the LDS church due to a misalignment of

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values and beliefs and found that the experience of exiting was not a linear process (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). In the article, the process of exiting is described as not just the “severing of ties” but also a “series of smaller journeys” (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Hinderaker continued the conversation in another article when discussing participants’ expression of dissent during their organizational exit from the LDS church (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). She described the unique way that dissent can be expressed in a church setting, given the voluntary commitment that is often made in religion (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016). Hinderaker and Garner also discussed the process of dissenting throughout the exit, and additionally the process of being ignored following the expression of dissent and dissatisfaction (Hinderaker & Garner, 2016).

Through the Mars Hill Church, Garner and Peterson (2018) examined the ways that members that were involved in MAOs described their exiting experiences while maintaining their individuality throughout their process of exiting. Their research found the complexity of dealing with involuntary exiting and staying, and the importance of sensemaking what occurred during the members’ time in the organization (Garner & Peterson, 2018). When examining members’ identification, Peterson and Garner found that a multitude of members dealt with tethered identification; members had trouble separating themselves from their relationships and emotional investments that were still residing in the Mars Hill Church (Peterson and Garner, 2019). Their research confirmed the complexity that comes when choosing to sense make through organizational exit: separating themselves from the “very communities from which they drew their identities” (Peterson and Garner, 2019). Identities can be entangled within churches given the socialization process that occurs between the church and its members (IDSWater, 2020). Members, in their initial involvement in the church, are socialized into the church so that they can become part of the church community and act as the church does (IDSWater, 2020).

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Garner and Peterson also highlighted that “those contemplating exit from an MAO might begin the process of separating themselves from the organization as much as possible ahead of any formal exit so as to gradually untangle identities” (Garner & Peterson, 2018, p. 24).

The work done by scholars such as Jablin, as well as Peterson, Garner, Hinderaker and O’Connor have helped build a foundation of knowledge surrounding organization exit and churches. Due to the potential for individuals to build identities within the church, exiting from it may play a role in an individual’s sensemaking process. Within the process, exiting can be a form of response and action after a person has worked through their thoughts and emotions. Another form of action besides exit that may be popular amongst individuals is forgiveness.

### *Forgiveness*

Forgiveness can be defined as the “psychological process whereby an individual recognizes that a transgression has occurred and makes a conscious decision to replace hostility and other negative emotional reactions with more positive feelings toward the offender” (Fritz, 2013). It can also be defined as “the change from negative emotions about the transgression and the offending individual to more positive motivations toward the offending individual (April & Schrodt, 2019, p. 82; Metts & Cupach, 2007).

Forgiveness is a process: something that occurs over time instead of in an instance. (Fritz, 2013). People must first make sense of a situation, examine if forgiveness is the appropriate action, and then, if decided, act. Scholars may study this process by examining the severity of the offense, the act of the forgiveness itself, and the aftermath following the act (Sheldon et al., 2021). The process of forgiveness may indeed be transformative, taking one’s negative emotions about a person, group or experience and making it more positive (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

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Once sensemaking has occurred, people may decide to engage in the process of forgiveness for different reasons. Forgiveness is a necessary component in relational maintenance, as forgiveness is key in ensuring functional relationships (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, 2008; Sheldon et al., 2021). Not only is forgiveness healthy in maintaining relationships, the process of forgiveness can also have physical, emotional, and mental health benefits (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2021). Forgiveness can also “mitigate stress and discord, and promote workplace productivity” (Toussaint et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2021).

The actual expression of forgiveness, whether it be verbal and/or behavioral, is one of the most important components in the realm of forgiveness (Fritz, 2013). Forgiveness may not look the same for everyone; it can be expressed, withheld, or even forced. It can be expressed verbally with statements such as “I forgave them”, but it can also be expressed passively with statements such as “I have moved past it” (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Forgiveness can also be a non-verbal act with behaviors such as physical touch and smiling (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). People may forgive individuals but withhold that information and instead internally process it. Scholars have looked at how people choose to remain silent versus verbally forgiving the church, and why people make that decision (Esben & Pirelli, 2002). On some occasions, forgiveness may be forced. People can be coerced into forgiveness before they are emotionally ready to forgive (Fritz, 2013). This forced forgiveness is what scholars have defined as “emotional tyranny” (North, 1987).

From an organizational lens, forgiveness is influenced by the discourses of religions and cultures are the world” (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006). These things, inevitably, are markers of morality as well (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006). Forgiveness is so deeply rooted in morality that when it occurs in a typical organization,

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religion and ethical/moral standards cannot not be brought into the conversation (Fritz, 2013). It is clear that forgiveness is complicated in organizations, especially because of the dynamic of hierarchical levels (Fritz, 2013). The network of people in an organization is incredibly intertwined, and people are in different hierarchical positions within the group (priests, elders, deacons, regular churchgoers, etc.). This can make the process of forgiveness even more challenging, and forced forgiveness even more common (Fritz, 2013).

One organization that scholars research are churches. Research has examined forgiveness as influenced by religious beliefs, but less research has explored how people forgive the church as an institution (Sheldon, 2014). When defining the aspects in a person's morality, they may often reference religious principles. These religious ideologies and codes are among the moral codebooks of many, with people holding patience, honesty and agape love to the top of their morality (Sheldon et al., 2021). One moral code that people many cherish is forgiveness, one that arguably steams straight from the heart of religion (specifically Christianity). Scholars even go argue that forgiveness is "intrinsically religious" (Sheldon et al., 2021). As a result of this, researchers have taken interest into how someone's alignment with religious beliefs may correlate with when and "how forgiveness must occur in the wake of transgressive behavior" (Sheldon et al., 2021, p.89). In fact, research has found that forgiveness is more prevalent in the lives of religious individuals than it is in the lives of secular individuals (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; McCullough et al., 2005; Mullet et al., 2003; Sheldon & Honeycutt, 2011; Sheldon et al., 2021). Other scholars examined the way that abuse in the church is forgiven after the offense, and how to resolve the hurt that may have occurred (De Wit, 2011). These studies reflect the juxtaposition of a church that may preach forgiveness as a part of their Sunday services and the hurt that may be caused within it (Sheldon, 2021).

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Despite the research done surrounding churches, sensemaking and sensemaking responses, there still remains the question of how people respond to church transgressions. Thus, the second research question is proposed:

**RQ2:** How do people who have experienced a church transgression respond?

### **Method**

#### **Research Design and Data Collection**

My own experience with a church organization completely altered the course of my young adulthood. Up to that point in time, I thought that I knew the amount of power and control organizations had over their members, but I was mistaken. My mistreatment and abuse within the church shifted my reality, and further shaped me into who I am today. Given my knowledge surrounding the potential for sensitivity around the topic of religious transgressions, I wanted participants to be comfortable sharing their stories with as much depth and detail as needed. These interviews allowed participants to convey their lived experiences in a personal way where I as a researcher could understand their decision-making process fully. This qualitative form of data collection would initiate more intimate conversations surrounding the nature of sensemaking and response than what would have occurred in a brief survey. The more that I felt like I could let participants speak to their experiences, the more there would be potential for greater understanding surrounding religious decision making. In an effort to answer each research question, interviews gave me the greatest opportunity to successfully understand and interpret stories of church offenses.

I used snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study and to create a purposeful sample. Recruitment began with social media posts, aiming to reach those in the described demographic. I placed social media posts on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Linked

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In, and shared across multiple users' profiles. Participants (N=20) included 16 women and 4 men who identified as once being a member of the Christian faith. Denominations of participants included Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, non-denominational Christian churches, etc. All participants interviews took place on Zoom. Audio recordings on Zoom as well as on a personal recorder helped me reference the interviews once I got further into the study and data collection process. The interviews lasted an average of 40-minutes. I had a series of interview questions that guided the process, asking participants about their religious experience before, during and after the perceived church transgression. Questions included: "Prior to your church transgression, how did religion look in your life?"; "Who do you hold responsible for this church transgression?"; "Can you tell me about church in your life now?". Despite directional questions, I did allow for participants to talk openly about their experience which led to the addition of follow-up questions such as "can you elaborate a little more about that?" or "what made you feel that way?" (see Appendix A). Participants were interviewed, and the interviewed process was concluded once theoretical saturation was reached within the data set. Theoretical saturation was achieved after participant interviews began to take on a reoccurring pattern, full of similar events, stories, and themes.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed interview recordings which resulted in 515 pages of single-spaced transcripts, and I used a thematic analysis to explore this data. Tracy's (2013) thematic analysis guide to coding allowed me to identify key themes over the course of the 20 participants' interviews, looking for common trends, patterns and themes that participants had experienced when dealing with their church transgressions. Thematic analysis bases itself in the shared

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experience of participants, and how, despite separate narratives, participants may share common meaning (Tracy, 2013).

During the first round of coding, I read over the transcripts for the first time and re-familiarized myself with the overall data set. I printed the transcripts and made highlights and comments on the paper of statements that were startling or questions that were address in a particularly peculiar way. This was a way for me to summarize my overall thoughts and feelings about each transcript, in accordance with Tracy's (2013) rules. Once I had read through a script, I then started to identify reoccurring words, phrases, or concepts within the responses (ex. verbal abuse, isolation, fear), highlighting each phrase or word and describing the experience in the margin.

In the next phase of the thematic analysis, I took a deeper look at the data and searched for the underlying themes in the interview transcripts. This is what Tracy described as the "so what?" question (Tracy, 2013). This led to the uncovering of an array of themes and patterns that were within the data sets. After my first round of gathering themes, I landed on roughly nine broad concepts that continually re-emerged throughout transcripts. I decided to re-examine my transcripts and field notes to see how often these nine themes occurred, and from there I was able to see how often each theme emerged. After working out the nine themes through my transcripts and notes, I narrowed the themes down to the five more prominent and emergent ones.

### **Results**

This study examined the sensemaking processes of individuals who have experienced church transgressions, and further discover the ways in which each individual responded to said transgressions. Five total themes emerged from the data as they related to sensemaking and

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response behaviors. These five themes are organizational exit, forgiveness, communal coping, critical lens, and redemptive stories.

### **Organizational Exit as Sensemaking**

In a participant's process of sensemaking, many claimed that organizational exit was one way in which they were able to make sense of the transgression that had occurred, as well as respond. Participants argued that while it may have not been their first choice to leave the church, in order to make sense of the hurt they were facing it meant removing themselves from the church entirely. Although previous research has shown that the process of exiting an organization is not linear (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), some participants reported a simple process of exit. Participant 9 stated: "I stopped going to church... it was pretty cut and dry right. I told my mom I don't want to go to church if my dad's not even going to church and it's just like okay, I'm not going to church anymore." Participant 15 said that they immediately quit going to church, and that they "haven't walked into a church [since the offense] in 2018".

For others, organizational exit resembled more a slow process, often taking weeks or even months to fully remove oneself from the church. During this slow exit, participants indicated that they often wanted to find another church to attend before leaving their previous one. This would ensure that they had a community to potentially allow them to heal their faith. Participant 3 recalled this exact experience: After, "I bounced around for a while trying different churches and I've found a church that I actually really like right now." Participant 8 said that they wanted to go to a church "where you are willing to have hard discussions with people [about religion] who may not agree with you" thus, they "[left] and started going to a different church".

One participant who used organizational exit as a sensemaking mechanism reflected on why they thought people were leaving the church on a large scale. They recognized that exiting a

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place of hurt in order to seek healing felt like a common practice. Participant 3 stated the following: “I just want to say it makes a lot of sense to me why so many people are leaving the evangelical church”.

The concept of organizational exit was a theme throughout the study, and participants were quick to explain why they chose to exit during their sensemaking process. Whether their exit was linear or not, participants largely argued for the “severing of ties” between them in the church in attempt to fully comprehend the transgression they had dealt with.

### **Forgiveness**

Participants also identified forgiveness as a part of their sensemaking process. Participants reported that offering forgiveness toward an individual or an organization would allow them to work through their thoughts and emotions with a more clear understanding. Participant 3 stated the following when discussing forgiveness of an individual:

I can't do that, you know. I can't forget what has happened and [my mentor] said forgiveness isn't forgetting what happened or making light of it, she said it's just letting go and trusting that God will hold them accountable, because you will never be able to, and no one on this earth will truly be able to. We should pursue justice here on earth, so people can't continue hurting other people.

Another participant, participant 1, felt a similar way regarding forgiveness of individuals: “And I'm still really connected with people who still exclusively go to [my church]. I'm meeting one of them for dinner on Saturday night, like [that church] is still family to me.”

As mentioned above, participants also found that forgiving the church as a whole promoted healing in their sensemaking process. For one, recognizing the church's imperfections and forgiving them because of it allowed for this individual to better understand their trauma.

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Participant 8 shares the following: “I've realized you're always going to go to church and you're going to disagree with something. There's never going to be a perfect church life like there's never going to be perfect people.”

This can be considered an act of forgiveness given hostility is being replaced with understanding and acceptance; the participants recognizes that things will never be perfect and accepts that reality. Offering forgiveness proved to be a part of participant’s sensemaking processes, and so did studying forgiveness through a biblical lens. One participant also stated that conceptualizing forgiveness from a religious perspective helped them make decisions through their sensemaking process with an additional religious outlook. Participant 7 had an expectation for their mother to forgive their transgressor just how Jesus forgave his people when they said: “And I just couldn't wrap my head around why my mom wouldn't just do what Jesus would do and forgive them”. This participant did indeed conceptualize forgiveness through a biblical lens, focusing more on what the Bible says and what that should mean for those who read and study it.

In congruence with previous organizational findings, forgiveness did have an impact on individuals and their sensemaking processes. Whether it be through enacting forgiveness or studying it, participants felt that it was a key component of their sensemaking process in relation to their church transgressions. Forgiveness served as a way for individuals to make sense of their trauma, recognizing imperfections in individuals and organizations and offering forgiveness as a result. Additionally, forgiveness served as a form of healing for individuals, and a way for them to move past the trauma. As both a means of sensemaking and a mode of response, forgiveness’ impact was felt throughout the study.

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### **Communal Coping**

In an attempt to make sense of their church transgressions, participants highly relied on communal coping. As a method of sensemaking, communal coping increases the health of individuals, as well as promote healing and growth (Afifi et al, 2016). Communal coping as a way to make sense of a transgression was a prominent theme to emerge from the data.

Participants expressed a deep desire, following the transgression, to discuss their feelings with friends, family, church members, therapists, etc. Participant 3 stated that they dealt with the experience by engaging in communal coping within their church group: “What was cool but also difficult was that there were so many of us in that ministry, and so we talked a lot together” Participant 15 also chose to cope by reaching out to other parishioners, and when asked why said: “I really wanted to hear like what their thoughts were and what their explanation was”

Another participant, participant 1, following the transgression stated the desire to communal cope within their family that had no relation to the church. They recalled wanted to sense make through disclosing information about the transgression to a family member in a safe place: “And I said mom I need to tell you what happened, and I told her what happened, and she told me, ‘You have five minutes to get her out of this house or I'm going to kick her out myself’”.

Another way that participants communally coped was within therapy or therapy groups. Therapy, according to the participants, became a place where they could share their thoughts and feeling without judgment, and ask questions they sought answers too. Participant 15 did just that: “I did go to therapy. I started going to a Christian therapist that semester, and that's how I started to process through it, and I didn't go to the Christian therapist for that experience I went because I had more questions of doctrine and my beliefs”

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Participant 15 went on to explain that therapy was a place where she could cope through wisdom and logic. Thus, often times communal coping can look different depending on the person's needs, desires, and concerns. In total, participants felt the desire to cope within a community of people. Whether it was to learn more about the situation or grieve together with people, communal coping was a necessary part of their story.

### **Critical Lens**

Another theme that emerged from the data was the idea of participants adopting a critical lens. Following a church transgression, participants explained that they examined church life with a more critical lens, thinking more carefully before consuming religious content or building relationships. Participant 6 said the following: "I think it's made me more critical of the learnings and the teachings of the church like when I go to a church service, I'm extremely critical of what I'm hearing and what I'm learning"

Through participants stating that their critical edge centered around the church but also around those within the church, I examined this theme. Participants felt that they were more evaluative of leaders and members. Participant 3 stated the following when asked how their view of the church had changed following an offense: "(Lots), like how critically I look at churches when I come in. I know that a church will never be perfect, but I think I'm much more critical about lead pastors now and there's things I notice, and I think I'm much more hypersensitive to." Participants were also eager to note that although experiencing this transgression had provided them with a critical lens, there were churchgoers within their organizations who were still without a similar critical edge. Participant 8 said the following: "Some people are lacking, I don't know, maybe a critical view that they haven't really been thought to shake their view up a little bit." In addition, participants identified not only a lack of a critical edge within their own church,

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but also that there is a lack of critical thinking surrounding the Christian religion entirely.

Participant 15 said: “No one thinks critically about what they are being told”

Overall, participants found that experiencing a church transgression made them think harder about the church, the church’s teachings, and the people within it.

### **Redemptive Stories**

Finally, redemption emerged as an overarching theme in many participants’ stories. Despite the hurt and pain that the church and/or its members had caused participants, these participants still found good within the church and the world. Participants also found that the transgressions made them stronger and more resilient, and they largely do not regret that time in their life. Participant 3 said both of the following:

And so, I think there's something really hopeful to me like knowing that there is something that is outside of all this, I think, for me, I need that because... life is still beautiful and wonderful.

It sounds really dark, but I think that actually gives me a lot of comfort that like there is a God of love that I worship, there's a God of love and mercy and grace. For those that know they need it, but also too He's just and like this stuff angers him.

One participant eagerly shared their continuous involvement in the faith, despite being hurt by its institution. Participant 2 stated:

I am very much a believer of religion, which is surprising because I always kind of just going through the motions growing up, I just went through the motions and crap. But I pray like I pray every night it's like it's my things. I can't fall asleep without doing it, I truly believe that my life has been better, since I started praying.

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Lastly, participants told me the story of their redemption in the church, and their continued belief that while the church may not always be good, God always will be one of goodness. Participant 1 said it perfectly:

Religion to me... it's connection and communion with the Lord I think I'm on a table right now, I think Christianity is a table where I'm on one side Jesus is on the other side and we're just in communion with each other, like no matter what's happening around us like I could be confident that I can feast with the king.

Overall, despite vast levels of church hurt, participants felt a sense of redemption when they made it through the church transgressions and came out the other side “better”. Scholars define redemptive stories as “one that progresses from negative affect to positive affect” (McAdams, 1999, 2006). Additionally, they were able to look back on their transgression and reflect on their life going from hurt to healing. Both the story of their life, and their faith, were defined by redemption.

### **Discussion**

The primary goal of this study was to examine how participants made sense of and responded to church transgressions through the lens of previous sensemaking and church organization literature. This study used Tracy’s (2013) guide to conducting a thematic analysis in order to examine the key themes of participant stories. Participants shared their stories of church transgressions through a series of interviews. Throughout participants’ stories, patterns of sensemaking emerged from the data as they explained their journey following a church transgression as well as their response process.

The findings of this study offered three important theoretical implications to the overall field of communication. First, the study revealed communal coping as a way of sensemaking and

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decision-making following a church transgression. Secondly, participants demonstrated how forgiveness following a church transgression helped them make sense of said transgression. Third and finally, findings revealed the ways in which participants redeemed their church experiences following a transgression.

### **Communal Coping Shapes Sensemaking and Response Processes**

Previous research surrounding the effects of communal coping have found that actively engaging in communal coping “can enhance health, as well as strengthen entire communities, under stressful circumstances” (Afifi et al., 2020, p. 424). Studies have also revealed how communal coping can be an effective coping mechanism when dealing with turbulence (Afifi et al, 2016). The results of this research study are congruent with previous research as they illustrate how communal coping can shape the way that people both make sense of and respond to church transgressions. This comes as a result of communal coping’s ability to help in the healing process that occurs from sensemaking.

Communal coping can take form in two different functions whether it be simply interacting with someone else about the stress/trauma or actively seeking meaning from the stress/trauma (Afifi et al., 2020). Regardless of the function, the findings of this study suggested that the communal coping process itself was part of the way in which participants made sense of the trauma that had occurred, and what course of action they were going to engage in following it. Ultimately, the findings of this study suggested that communal coping may bring healing and restoration to participants following church transgressions. This healing may come from the supportive conversations and relational support that participants received when they were communally coping. Healing may also come from participant’s experience of sharing the stories that they shared with others; thus, the healing comes from the communication.

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First, communal coping influenced not just the ways in which individuals coped, but more so the ways in which they engaged in the process of sensemaking. Participants often discussed their experience with friends, family, therapists, and church groups. One person's process may have been a simple conversation, while others may have needed weekly or even monthly discussions to work through what had occurred. This complimented Weick et al.'s (2005) definition of sensemaking when he described it as the "ongoing retrospective development... that rationalize what people are doing". While participants' experiences with communal coping may not have been identical, they all reported experiencing the effects of sensemaking through their engagement with this form of coping. Those who went to therapy found that the addition of time and the reoccurring meetings were a way for them to make sense of their church transgression without force and with ease. On the other hand, those who communally coped within their church following the transgression sense-made through the lens of religion and what God believes about hurt, sin and evil. These conversations shaped participants' beliefs about the transgression and how to respond to it. For example, participants who communally coped within their church groups examined the transgression from a religious lens through bible verses and prayer, and specifically connected biblical teachings to their transgression. Ultimately, previous studies have argued that engaging in communal coping and taking advantage of friendships, such as participants did in this study, can result in sensemaking that fosters resilience overtime (Afifi et al., 2020). Thus, participants might be more resilience because of their involvement in communal coping, whether that be because of the social support they experienced, the problem solving that occurred, or the sheer encouragement that was provided.

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Moreover, this study revealed how communal coping can also influence a person's sensemaking on how to *respond* to the transgression. This study previously mentioned how organizational exit and forgiveness are common ways in which people respond to transgressions, and those two responses were prevalent in these findings. Communal coping, and the process of sensemaking within it, was also part of how people responded to transgressions. Conversations with others helped make sense of individuals "next step", and what they felt was the most effective way to go about dealing with the transgression moving forward in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). While some people on the receiving end of the conversation gave direct, verbal advice on what they thought a participant's response should be, others only influenced through the ways and style of conversation. Nevertheless, communal coping was a style of sensemaking response that participants chose to engage in.

Overall, communal coping was pivotal in the ways in which people made sense of and responded to transgressions, specifically church transgressions.

### **Forgiveness as a Sensemaking Response and Religious Ideal**

Results of this study show that forgiveness was a way in which individuals both made sense of and responded to church related transgressions. These results are congruent with previous studies, where scholars found that "forgiveness,... as well as choosing to develop a compassionate or benevolent attitude toward an offender, are ways of responding to transgressions" (Akhtar, 2018, p.1). However, findings also suggested that forgiveness, as well as the decision to forgive, may depend on a person's understanding of forgiveness as a moral and spiritual ideal. For those who forgave their offender, participants tied their notion of forgiveness to their decision-making process.

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Forgiveness served as a way in which individuals made sense of their church transgression. As previously mentioned, scholars have found that forgiveness may be a transformative process for individuals who engage in it (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This may be the result of the transfer of negative emotions, such as anger and rage, to a more positive set of emotions (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Metts and Cupach (2007) states that “forgiveness of the transgressor allows the victim to treat the transgressor with more positive regard and move forward with greater comfort” (p.243). Participants who described forgiving their transgressor may have engaged in this behavior for many reasons. Forgiveness implicitly may have made people feel like they are on the right path to healing. This act allowed them to sense-make from a place of healing rather than anger. In addition, some participants who felt like there was a morality component to forgiveness may have added it to their sensemaking process because of their connection to religion.

Previous communication scholars have identified forgiveness as an act or belief that is “intrinsically religious” (Sheldon et al. 2021). For those participants who grew up in the church, participants mentioned their familiarity with forgiveness and how it related to the Christian faith specifically. Thus, participants provided evidence that they constantly considered engaging in forgiveness as a response, due to their religious background. Those who did offer forgiveness described the imperfect nature of humans and the divine nature of God as they recounted forgiveness, and many related their decision to forgiveness back to Jesus’ decision to forgive those of their sins during their time on earth. Even for those who did not grow up with in the church, many connected forgiveness to good morals and values. Forgiveness is something highly valued in American society, and often believed as the right thing to do.

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Something else that was observed within the findings of the study was the cognitive dissonance that occurred with feeling the need to “forgive the church”. The church, as a highly divine place, is often an area in which forgiveness is preached in Sunday services to its members. In the Bible, the word “forgive” appears many times, as the Lord instructed His followers in Ecclesiasticus 28:2 to “forgive thy neighbor the hurt that he hath done unto thee” (The Bible KJV, 2016). This dissonance occurred given that some participants never held the assumption that “thy neighbor” would be the church, or people within it. Forgiveness, while it did have such a moral and religious importance, was also difficult for some to extend because of who was on the receiving end of it: the divine.

Thus, forgiveness as a response to church transgressions may be heavily influenced by the church itself, and how much a person aligns his or her beliefs with it. This study can add knowledge to the previous body of research surrounding forgiveness, and how forgiveness in a religious regard may be both a means of sensemaking and a process highly influenced by a person’s relationship to religion in the past, as well as their perspective of the church.

### **Redeeming Church Transgressions**

Lastly, the findings of this research study revealed the idea of redemption and how a person can overcome a potentially devastating experience such as a church transgression. Given the potential for churches to shape and mold the identity of their members (Hoop, 2012), experiencing a church transgression may be devastating for those experiencing them. Whether a person decided to exit the church, forgive, or communally cope with the hurt, a religious transgression can cause serious hurt and sadness. However, despite the hurt and disruptiveness that a church transgression may cause, participants in the present study indicated that they experienced the feeling of overcoming the hurt they had experienced. Thus, this allowed

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participants to become mentally and spiritually stronger as they navigated through bad to reach the good. This can be interpreted as participants finding redemption during the sensemaking process. Therefore, experiencing a church transgression may have the potential to create redemption. Some participants described their faith as being sharpened by the pain of the transgression. It may also lead to positive change in an individual that would have not occurred without the existence of a trauma such as a church transgression (Brooks et al., 2021).

The redemption stories follow the pattern from hurt to healing and exemplify how an individual can go from dealing with their anger to achieving happiness (McAdams, 1999). In fact, there can be religious redemptions where people heal from their transgression and re-find faith in the church and religion. The majority of these participants are still believers in the Christian faith, and still attend religious services.

Another interesting component of this redemption process is that experiencing something traumatic such as a church transgression may lead to post-traumatic growth (Brooks et al., 2021). One area of post-traumatic growth is spiritual growth, with studies often arguing that experiencing a hardship can lead to an inner, more positive change (Groleau et al., 2013). This positive change may come from the reshaping of schemas, and thoughtful sensemaking of the church transgression (Groleau et al., 2013).

Lastly, in the act of finding redemptive within the healing process of a church transgression, people may also find themselves adapting to a new way of religious thinking. Witnessing the distinction between ideal religion and practical realities of transgressions seemingly opened participants to a completely new reality within faith. The findings of this study revealed that people may adopt a more critical stance toward religion and church. This lens, subsequently, made participants think more carefully about the churches they attend, the people

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they trust, and the religion they believe in. In turn, individuals made sure they were completely informed and confident with their religious decision before they made such decisions. This critical lens serves as a form of protection in some way. Therefore, thinking critically about one's faith can actually be quite important.

Overall, experiencing a church transgression may be an extremely dreadful experience. However, there is hope for people to find healing, strength, positive change, and redemption after the event.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A few limitations presented themselves throughout the process of data collection. First, I collected data on social media platforms, largely containing members in my circle of friends. Given that I am a female, the large majority of my pool of potential participants were also female. This is why my participants are largely female. If I were to conduct this research project again, I would ensure that I could get more of a male angle on church transgressions. I would be interested to see if the theme of communal coping would apply if the majority of participants were male instead of female. Another issue that I encountered as a result of my social media pool of participants is the draw to a younger age group. The majority of the participants were of a younger age, which may have made their sensemaking and response mechanism different than what they would be if they were slightly older.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are many different opportunities for future research that arose out of this research study. This study specifically looked at churches within the Christian faith, however there are many other religions that could be the basis for a similar study. I would be curious to see how the themes that came out of this study would hold up against the experiences of church

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transgressions in other religions. For example, the theme of forgiveness would provide an opportunity for future research as it relates to different faith-based practices. As mentioned in the review of literature, forgiveness can be an inherently Christian ideal (Sheldon et al., 2021), thus it may not be a component of the sensemaking process across *all* religions.

Another future direction for research may be focusing on parachurches instead of just churches. While this study focused on churches, it may be interesting to look at the sensemaking of religious transgressions when they are experienced in church organizations specifically. Given that church organizations may not be directly connected to churches themselves, complaints about the doctrine and the hurt that can come from it may not apply.

One future study that I believe would add to the existing body of knowledge surrounding sensemaking would be a study examining communal coping *within* churches. One of the themes that emerged from the data was the desire to communal cope following the experience of a church transgression. However, many participants expressed that their first instinct was to cope within the church, the *same* church that caused them hurt. This was an unexpected finding in the study, given that if this were a quantitative study, I would've hypothesized that participants strayed away from anything that had to do with the church. However, the church is often such a powerful place for community that there is a yearn to stay within the community, as well as use them as a support system when things go wrong. This relates back to the idea that the church can serve as a "family" (Farr, 2019). A future study could examine the sensemaking process surrounding a person's decision to seek support *within* the church community following a church transgression, as well as examine how it influences their decision to stay in the church or leave.

### **Conclusion**

Experiencing a church transgression is something that can be difficult to both make sense of and respond to. Due to the divine nature of the church as well as a person's potential identification within the religion, it can be a rigorous process to find healing after hurt. The stories of participants revealed how sensemaking such a transition can be anything but linear and can look different for each individual. However, this study also revealed that happiness, strength, and redemption can occur following such hurt. Even after the darkest and most cruel of events, there may still be light in the form of healing and thoughtful response.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### Background Questions

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. Race/Ethnicity?

#### Before the Church Transgression

1. Prior to your church transgression, how did religion look in your life?
  - a. How long have you attended a church?
2. Tell me a little about the church.
  - a. How long had you been attending there?
3. How would you describe your church involvement before this event happened?

#### Church Transgression

1. This study is about the times that people experienced a transgression in the church (fix and make it look nice) Can you tell me about a time when this occurred in your life?
  - a. How did you make sense of this transgression?
  - b. Who do you hold accountable for this church transgression?
  - c. Is that occurrence commonplace or was it unique to you?
  - d. When did this occur?

#### Following the Church Transgression

1. This church transgression occurred... did you respond?  
IF RESPONDED
  - a. Walk me through your decision-making process
  - b. How did other people in your church respond?
  - c. How do you feel about your decision now?IF NOT RESPONDED
  - d. What has led you to not respond?
  - e. Do you plan on responding? If so, how? If not, why?
2. Tell me about religion in your life now?
  - a. If attending a new church, how long have you been attending?

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### VITA

#### Personal Background

Lauren Marie Working  
Fort Worth, TX  
Daughter of Dave and Linda Working

#### Education

Lake Oswego High School, 2016  
  
Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies  
Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, 2020  
  
Master of Science, Communication Studies,  
Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, 2022

#### Experience

Teaching Assistantship, Texas Christian University  
2020-2022

