

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EVANGELICALISM: THE CASE OF NAZARENE  
CLERGY (ANSR Conference Presentation, 2018)  
John W. Hawthorne<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

One of the interesting dynamics of 2016 presidential election season is that it launched something of a cottage industry of scholars, pundits, and journalists attempting to make sense of evangelicals. Hardly a week goes by without carefully written pieces crossing my social media feed raising issues about who these folks are, what they believe, and what happened to their moral core.

I have made my own small contributions to this effort. Early in the primary season, I was trying to figure out what correlates of the social environment of evangelicals were actually behind their voting preferences. One of my most popular blog posts (Hawthorne, 2016) was one I titled: “Why are Blonde Women Supporting Trump?” My facetious point was that it wasn’t really because they were blonde or women but that their legitimate political interests were expressed through their votes AND they happened to be blonde women.

In a further attempt to explain these correlates, I made a presentation at Calvin College last year exploring attitudes of Republican voters. Drawing on a method identified by a research with Gallup, I selected only identified Republicans and examined the impact of religiosity variables within that population. In short, I discovered that on traditional Republican issues (e.g., size of government, concern about welfare dependency) religious Republicans were no different than irreligious Republicans. On moral issues (e.g., same-sex marriage, abortion) religiosity had a significant impact on Republican attitudes. My big conclusion was in my title: “*Surprise! Evangelicals are Republicans.*”

Since then, I’ve pretty much abandoned the effort to make sense of rank-and-file Evangelicals. I recently argued that it’s just too confusing with all the public statements by what my friend John Fea calls “Court Evangelicals”, crises involving church leaders, protest revivals in Lynchburg, and blog posts too numerous to count. And this is just from those on the inside of the evangelical camp.

*A History of Evangelical Sociology*

I’ve found myself returning to how sociologists have examined evangelicals over the course of my career. About the time I started hanging out at ANSR meetings, James Davison Hunter wrote *American Evangelicalism* (Hunter, 1983). This was one of the first comprehensive treatments I had read from a sociological viewpoint. While Hunter made the mistake of confounding fundamentalists and evangelicals, he still did an excellent job of identifying the ways in which modernity presented challenges for evangelicals. They wanted legitimacy in their arguments so as to throw off the worst accusations on anti-intellectualism that haunted fundamentalism of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the late 1990s, shortly after I moved to Oregon as an academic administrator, Christian Smith (Smith, 1998) argued that evangelicals were best identified as “embattled and thriving”.

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Sociology at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. Contact [john.hawthorne@arbor.edu](mailto:john.hawthorne@arbor.edu).

His argument was that opposition to the cultural dynamics of the larger society gave meaning and purpose to the evangelical voice. This argument fit nicely with Christian concerns about the changes in the broader society.

A little over a decade later, Robert Putnam and David Campbell (Putnam & Campbell, 2010) suggested that a change was afoot. In *American Grace*, they argued that conservative evangelical religion had thrived during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to a reaction against changes brought about by earthquake that was “the sixties”. But they also observed that there was an aftershock to that earthquake as young people rebelled against what they saw as an overly politicized church.

That theme was reflected as well in Hunter’s *To Change The World* (Hunter, 2010). He identified the natural limitations of the cultural warrior stance, the accommodationist stance, and the separatist stance. These were ineffective because they were fundamentally ignorant about power dynamics. What he argued for in their place was a strategy he called Faithful Presence (which he unfortunately didn’t develop well).

Christian Smith reported out on the National Survey of Youth and Religion surveys in 2011’s *Lost in Transition* (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). Building on the Moral Therapeutic Deism his team had uncovered in earlier NSYR waves, he explored the changes in lifestyle and moral formation of millennial adults. Too many of these, he argued, were severely limited in the religious commitments and broader social engagements. This is very similar to the patterns we find with rank-and-file evangelicals today.

There are exceptions, however. Tom Krattenmaker wrote a challenging book titled *The Evangelicals You Don’t Know* (Krattenmaker, 2013). In the book, Krattenmaker tells the stories of young evangelicals who combine theological orthodoxy with social engagement. As an outsider to the evangelical camp, he tells a remarkably commendable story of serious faith.

In 2014, historian Molly Worthen wrote *Apostles of Reason* (Worthen, 2014), which picks up on themes from Hunter’s earlier book. She traces the development of modern evangelicalism as being primarily focused on the institutional structures that allow for clear lines of authority. Coincidentally, she says very nice things about holiness folks in general and H. Orton Wiley in particular.

The next year, Public Religion Research Institute CEO Robert Jones released *The End of White Christian America* (Jones, 2015). Jones summarizes the demographics of religion in America and documents the rise of nones, the impact of immigration on Catholics, and the aging of both Mainline and Evangelical denominations. He argues that in the near future White Christians will be in a numerical minority and that shortly thereafter will see their political clout at the voting booth diminish.

My focus over the last four years has been on trying to make sense of how these changes will play out in the near future. During the writing of my first book (Hawthorne, 2014) on students entering Christian Colleges, I began to notice the ways in which millennial evangelicals were using very different strategies in living out their faith. They were asking questions the church hadn’t asked before. I explored the changes I saw occurring in a presentation at the Wesley Conference at NNU that same year. Something was different, and I was trying to get a handle on what that was.

This year David John Seel released *The New Copernicans* (Seel, 2018), an examination of religious thought drawing upon Thomas Kuhn's scientific revolution work. Seel argues that we are exploring a new frame, one that is more open than closed that sees engagement rather than separation as its key dynamic. He makes clear that while the new frame isn't dependent upon millennials, it's growth coincides with their arrival on the scene.

This then, is the basis for the book project that I hope will characterize the next six to nine months of my life. I plan to explore the ways in which the people operating out of this new frame orient themselves simultaneously to both orthodoxy and engagement. In short, what does evangelicalism look like if we move from Smith's embattled metaphor to Hunter's faithful presence?

### *Defining the Frames*

As part of the book project, I conducted surveys on clergy in the Church of the Nazarene. The selection of this population isn't accidental. Not only do I have a career-long history with the denomination and access to the Research office, but this is a holiness denomination that has seen separation from "the world" as a key component of its identity. If I could find a shifting frame within this denomination's leadership, it gives me confidence that it is occurring within evangelicalism in general.

The first of the two surveys was conducted in late 2017 and early 2018, gathering responses from 472 clergy under 40. While they are not all technically millennials (the oldest were born in the waning years of GenX), they are largely reflective of that generation. I presented the first wave of data at the Young Nazarene Con in Oklahoma City in early March. I ran a second wave of the survey in April focused on 347 Nazarene clergy in their 50s. Again, they are technically not all Baby Boomers as the youngest are on the leading edge of Gen X, but it provides a useful general comparison. Both surveys asked the same set of questions, with the exception of the age and years in ministry questions which were tailored to the population.

Drawing on Smith, Hunter, and Seel, I saw the distinction between separation and engagement to be key to understanding the frame shifts, which I have nicknamed Bounded Evangelicalism and Permeable Evangelicalism, respectively. The former focus on the ways in which the church separates from the society where the latter focus on how the boundaries between church and society can be bridged.

I used four questions in particular to define my two frames. The first of these provide four options on how the church should respond to changes in sexual identity within the society.

11. Today's society has seen tremendous changes in terms of acceptance of same sex marriage and transgender rights. In which of the following ways should the church best respond to these changes?

- ☐ Churches must take a clear stand in support of traditional views of sexuality
- ☐ Churches should address the complexity of sexuality while supporting traditional views
- ☐ Churches should welcome people regardless of their sexuality orientation or gender identity
- ☐ Churches should affirm people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity

Three other questions were framed in strongly-agree to strongly-disagree Likert formats. Respondents were asked if the church must maintain separation from the world, if Christians are discriminated against in the broader society, and if the church should show pride in America. Scores ranged from 1-4 on the sexuality question and 1-5 on the other three.

These four questions were combined into a scale ranging from 4-19. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .69, which is not ideal but removing any elements made it substantially weaker. I then split the scale between 12 and 13 and operationalized those 12 and under as Bounded and those 13 and over as Permeable.

Dividing the scale in this fashion yielded 72% in the Bounded frame and 28% in the Permeable frame. As Seel suggested, these are not purely defined by generational characteristics although there is an interesting interaction between the frame and generation. There are more Permeable Frames in the Millennials (38%) than there are in the Boomers (14%).

As part of the analysis, I examined the percentage of respondents I would classify as extreme version of the two frames. In other words, I examined scale scores of 8 and below and those of 15 and above. One in five people in the Bounded frame were extreme and one in twelve of the Permeable Frame were extreme. Interestingly, fully a third of Boomer Bounded respondents were in the extreme category. It is also interesting that among Millennials the extreme Permeable group is slightly larger than the extreme Bounded group.

Using the two generations and the two frames (without focusing on the extremes) gave me four conditions: Millennial Bounded, Millennial Permeable, Boomer Bounded, and Boomer Permeable. This allowed me to contrast a number of background factors to examine where the frames were significantly more or less likely to show up.

As we might expect, location matters. Respondents from small towns or rural areas were most likely to be in the Bounded frame while those from suburbs and cities were most likely in Permeable. There is something similar to Robert Merton's localism/cosmopolitanism at play here. Senior pastors were more likely to have a Bounded frame while associates were most likely as Permeable. The only time length of time (in generations) in the Church of the Nazarene shows up significant is with Boomers; multiple generations are more likely to be in the Permeable frame. I'll need to do some follow-up interviews to make sense of that one.

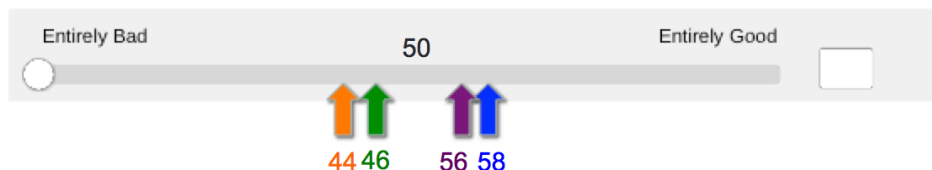
The biggest impact dividing Bounded from Permeable was graduate education. Respondents in the Permeable frame were 25% more likely to have one or more graduate degrees than those in the Bounded frame. This effect was greater among the Millennials than for Boomers (where it was barely non-significant).

There were no significant differences by region of the country served, region of the country where one grew up, or by gender.

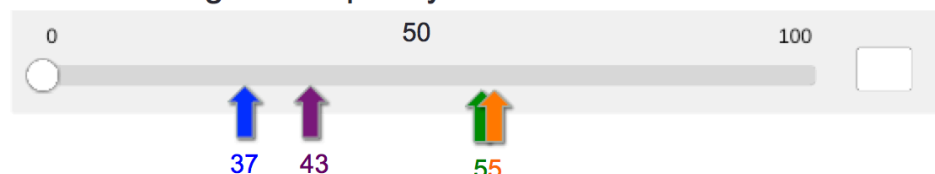
### *The Impact of the Frames*

There are several ways in which the differences between the Frames play out. In line with the focus on separation, two sliding scale questions invited respondents to reflect on the changes in society over the last 50 year and how the Church of the Nazarene has responded to those. Significant differences were evident between the frames with slight differences by generation.

Generally speaking, how do you see the changes that have occurred in society over the past fifty years?



How well do you think the Church of the Nazarene has done in addressing contemporary social issues?



On the social change question, the gap between the frames for each generation comes in at 12 points placing them either side of the midpoint. When looking at how the Church of the Nazarene responds to social issues, there was no difference between Millennial and Boomer Bounded respondents who came in slightly positive. Boomer Permeable folks were somewhat more negative and Millennial Permeable respondents another six points below that.

The other two sliding scale questions addressed a balance between evangelism and social ministry; the Permeable frame wound up above the middle and the Bounded frame below ranging 12-14 points below the Permeable respondents. Another question dealt with universalism (which seems to current in some young evangelical circles). While all respondents were on the side of the scale that deals with Christian exclusivity, there is still a sizeable gap (as much as 27 points for the Boomers).

Another point of interest is examining how people see diversity of thought within a denomination. Respondents were asked what should happen to people who question a denomination's teaching. While there were four options presented, responses centered on just two: listening to the critique in an attempt to improve or explaining to the individual why they need to support the denomination. The overwhelming majority of the Permeable frame took the first option, while a slight majority of the Boomer Bounded frame people took the second.

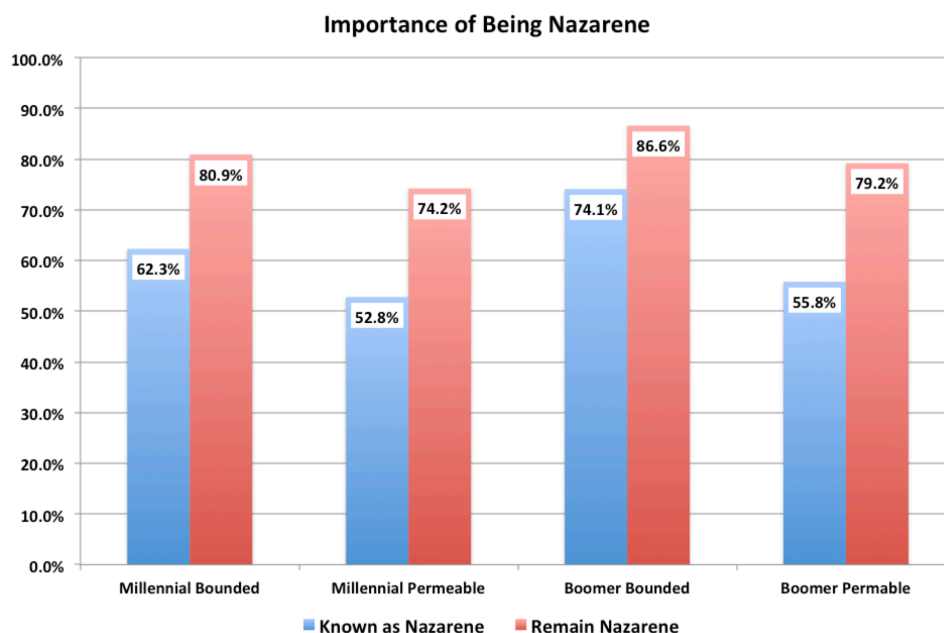
Another important distinction between the frames involves biblical hermeneutics. Rather than asking what the respondents believe about the Bible as most polls do, I asked how respondents go about interpreting scripture. The options ranged from "The Bible means what it says" to "Some issues or questions aren't anticipated by the Biblical authors and so interpretation is required." While the majority of respondents in all categories selected a sound Biblical criticism stance, nearly a quarter of Millennial Permeable respondents chose this last option. In this particular regard, the Boomer Permeable and the Millennial Bounded are almost the same, again suggesting a frame and generation interaction.

	Millennial Bounded	Millennial Permeable	Boomer Bounded	Boomer Permeable	Total
The Bible means what it says	27	1	70	6	104
	9.4%	0.6%	24.2%	12.8%	13.0%
The Bible has to be understood in the historical context in which it was written	229	125	201	36	591
	79.8%	70.6%	69.6%	76.6%	73.9%
The Bible is culturally bound and requires selective reading	2	4	1	0	7
	0.7%	2.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.9%
Some issues or questions aren't anticipated by the Biblical authors and interpretation is required	29	47	17	5	98
	10.1%	26.6%	5.9%	10.6%	12.3%
Total	287	177	289	47	800
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

### *The Frames and The Church of the Nazarene*

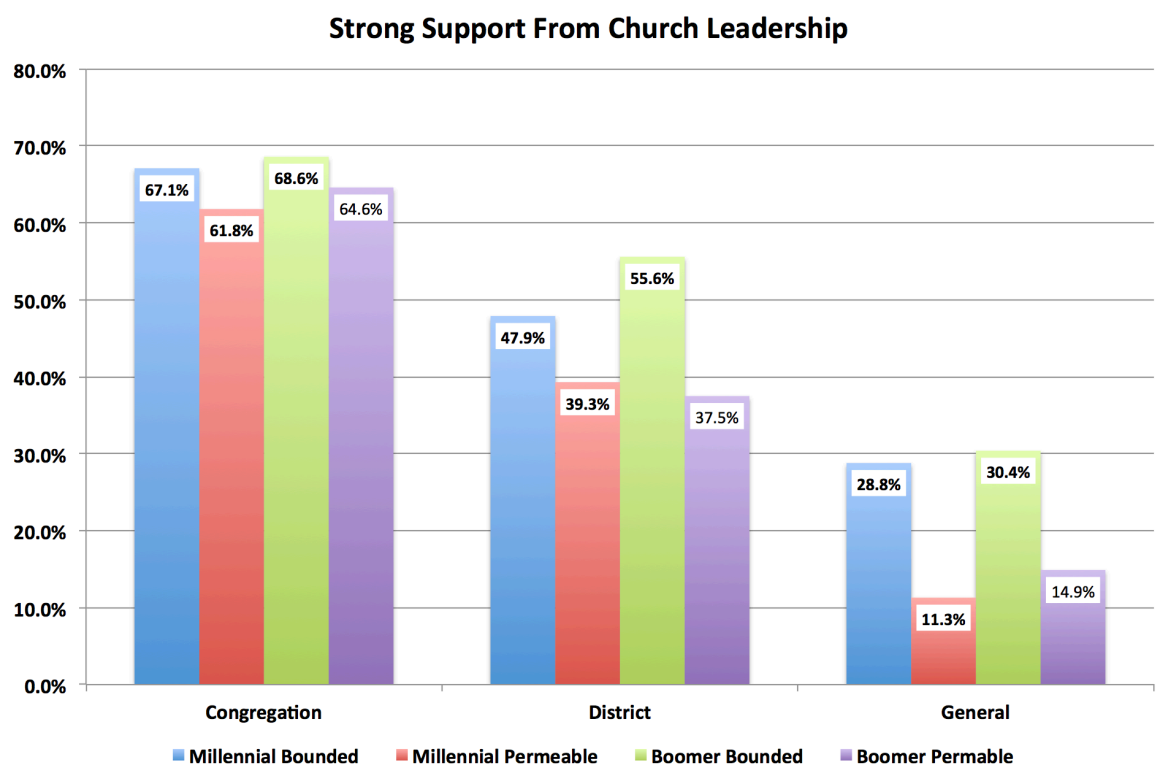
Of particular interest to the denomination is the question of what these differing frames mean for the future. One pair of question directly explored issues of identity and future. Respondents were asked how important it was for people to know that they were affiliated with the church. They were also asked how important it was for them to remain Nazarene.

The results show that all four groups (generation and frame) claim that it is important to be known as Nazarene, with just over a majority of Millennial Permeable holding that view. This may be more of a function of community-based congregations with less of a denominational label. When asked if it was important to remain Nazarene, the overwhelming majority of all four groups identified with the denomination going forward.

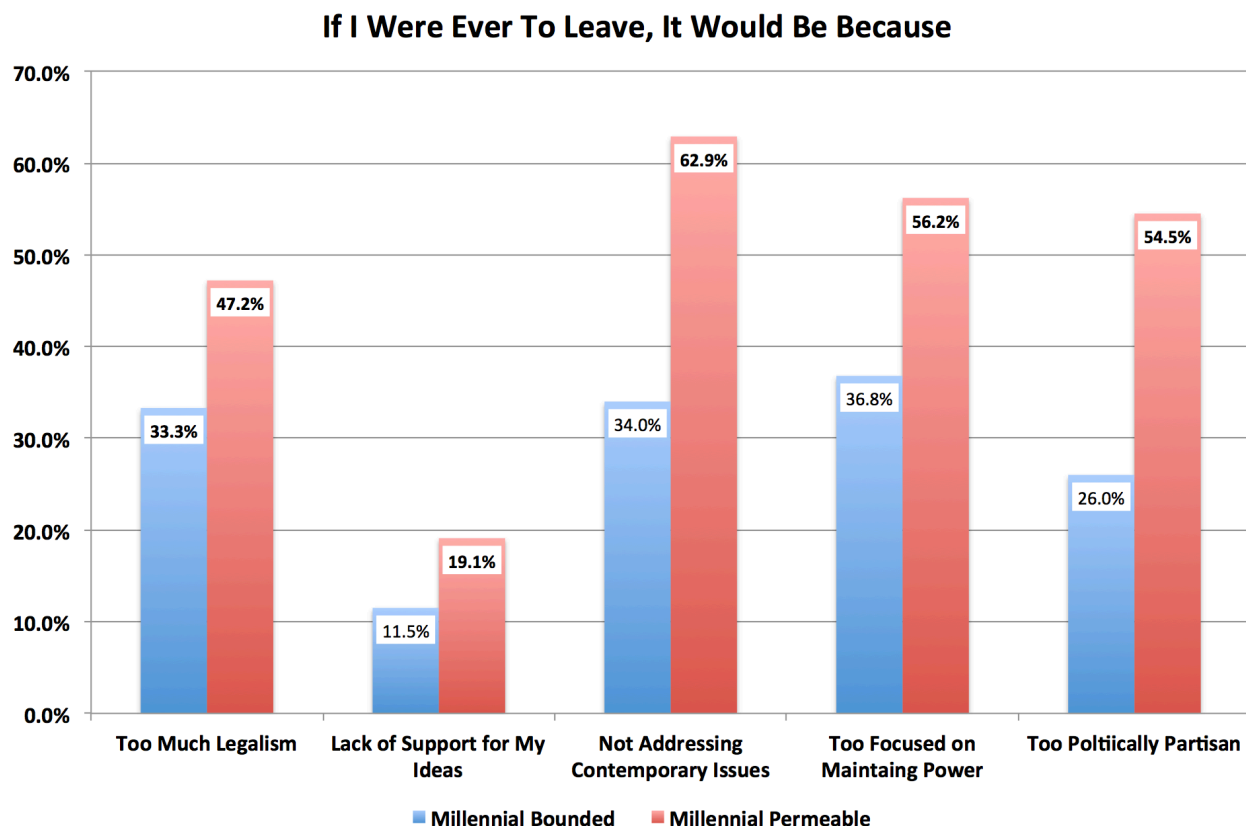


Respondents were asked to gauge their perception of support the Church of the Nazarene provides to them. Support was evaluated at the congregational level, the district level, and the

general church level. All four groups show substantial support from their local congregation. At the district level, the perception of support falls markedly for both Permeable groups. The support for Boomer Bounded respondents is strongest, which makes sense both in terms of their longevity and structural commitments. When it comes to support from the general church leadership, this fall off yet again. This is not surprising, as individual clergy may feel somewhat far removed from the Global Ministries Center. The two Permeable groups perceive less support but further interviews would be necessary to determine if that were based on the assumption of difference of perspective than actual isolation.



Even though the vast majority of respondents wished to remain Nazarene over the long haul, they were given the option to identify factors that might cause them to leave. Since Boomers are likely not going anywhere soon, this particular analysis only focused on the Millennials. Very few of them felt that they would leave because they lacked voice. Much more important, especially for the Millennial Permeable frame, were the earlier issue of responding to social issues (which were undefined), a concern about power structures in the denomination, and the ongoing partisanship issue mentioned at the outset of this paper. While the respondents aren't looking to go anywhere, it's worth noting that they can be pushed.



### *Implications and Actions*

I set out on this project to determine if I could demonstrate the existence of my two frames of evangelicalism even in a conservative denomination like the Church of the Nazarene. While the data certainly bears the limitations that go along with an online survey, there is still sufficient evidence that the two frames exist and furthermore, reflect some very different ways of seeing ministry and cultural engagement. At the very least, what we think of as “evangelical” is not as monolithic as pollsters and researchers tend to assume. As Seel suggested, there is evidence that the Permeable frame has always been around but may be more coincident with the millennial population.

The presence of some interaction effects between generation and frame may provide some insight into how social change happens within denominational groups. Robert Jones of PRRI argues that millennials leaving evangelicalism has stunted what has historically been the moderating impact of youth on denominational groups.

Another benefit of the Permeable frame is that it begins to hint at how Hunter’s Faithful Presence can be operationalized in practice. When I was at the Young Clergy Con in March, I saw many instances of new forms of congregational engagement with the culture. While ministry efforts like the Bay Area’s Possibility Project look very different in structure and mission than more traditional efforts, they may provide solid models for how the church addresses contemporary culture.



Recognizing the diverse frames raises significant challenge for denominational groups. How does a group provide space for both frames to exist simultaneously without either declaring winners and losers or forcing one party out of fellowship? This is the key question facing the United Methodist Church over the next year and I'm trying to be optimistic about what will happen but it's hard. My commitment to fellowship and how the Spirit has led his people to Truth since the Galatian conference gives me hope. On the other hand, when we simply fight on social media, make threats, and rely on political machinations, that hope begins to waver.

To put it another way, what does it mean for a denomination to allow space for diversity of thought and process and still claim that people are all part of the same religious family? As I've been an on-again off-again part of ANSR for over three decades, it seems that every few years we had a conference titled "what is our core identity"? It's telling that a group that is over a century old would ask that question so often. But when I think of that question in light of my current work, I think it's more important than ever. What is our core identity if we allow disagreement on a number of issues? Do we have the sociological, moral, and theological strength to truly wrestle with the answer?

I close with some practical suggestions for the denomination in light of the frames I believe are emerging in American evangelicalism. First, the Church of the Nazarene could be more visible in wrestling over key injustice issues. Recent weeks have shown that Willow Creek and the Southern Baptist Convention have been remarkably slow to deal with harassment issues, preferring to put on a happy face rather than engage in real repentance. The same is true for issues of criminal justice reform, for poverty concerns, and for support of moral leadership in our elected officials. We can't care about these things only when there is a crisis but we need leadership and periodicals to address them regularly.

We need to assist our educational institutions in helping our students address the social and moral complexity of the world they will enter after graduation. Christian universities have been far more concerned about protecting ourselves from government interference or bad press. But protecting the institution as a first principle does not serve our students. Too many of them are seriously wrestling with issues of injustice and inclusion and we are telling them that they aren't as important as our reputation and donors.

Clergy gatherings need to pay attention to who is on the platform and who is given a microphone. Yes, it's important for women and people of color to have real access. But there is also an opportunity to hear from a Millennial Permeable voice speaking at pastor's meetings, Palcons, or even General Assembly. If these changes I've described are real, then giving voice to the new frame will be important in helping leaders know how to deal with what is coming down the pike.

I was very impressed with the people I met in Oklahoma City at Young Clergy Con. They are talented. They are committed to Jesus. They want others to know Him. They don't want to play church. They want to be the Body of Christ. If we can make room for them and listen to their voice, even if we don't agree, they will be pursuing all of those things from within the Church of the Nazarene: which will be good for the denomination as well as for Christ's kingdom.

Thank you so much for the recognition I've receive from ANSR over the years and for listening to me rattle some cages. Maybe I'll do this again in another thirty-five years!

### References

- Hawthorne, J. (2014). *A First Step Into A Much Larger World: The Christian Univeristy and Beyond*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.
- Hawthorne, J. (2016). Why Are Blonde Women Supporting Trump? Retrieved from <https://johnwhawthorne.com/2016/02/25/why-are-blonde-women-supporting-trump/>
- Hunter, J. D. (1983). *American evangelicalism : conservative religion and the quandary of modernity*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Hunter, J. D. (2010). *To change the world : the irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, R. P. (2015). *The End of White Christian America*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Krattenmaker, T. (2013). *The Evangelicals You Don't Know: Introducing the Next Generation of Christians*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Seel, D. J. (2018). *The New Copernicans*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Smith, C. (1998). *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, C., Christoffersen, K. M., Davidson, H., & Herzog, P. S. (2011). *Lost in transition : the dark side of emerging adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Worthen, M. (2014). *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.