Episcopal Parish Network
Where the Church Gathers

Summary and Transcript
Love Thy Neighborhood: Congregational Engagement as a Path to Vitality and Relevance
Originally presented September 17, 2025

Summary

This meeting, co-hosted by the Episcopal Parish Network and Bexley Seabury Seminary, featured Dr. Rebecca Glazier. The session included a detailed discussion of her findings, Q&A on practical applications, and information about upcoming webinars and the DMIN program at Bexley Seabury.

Key takeaways:

- **Declining Attendance and Aging Congregations**: Data shows a significant drop in regular church attendance (from 17% reporting decline in 2007 to 39% in 2019) and a rise in the average age of congregants (from 50 in 2002 to 57 in 2020), with younger generations increasingly identifying as religious "nones" (46% of 20-29 year olds in 2022).
- **Polarization and Faith Crises**: 32% of clergy report that political divisions negatively impact their ability to lead, and fewer than half of Americans are certain of their belief in God, contributing to challenges in congregational life.
- **Community Engagement as a Solution**: Research from the Little Rock Congregation Study (57 congregations, 4,000+ congregants surveyed) demonstrates that community engagement leads to higher life satisfaction, closer connection to God, and improved physical and mental health by reducing loneliness.

- **Benefits for Congregations**: Increased community service correlates with higher attendance, greater congregational warmth, and increased giving. Younger members are especially eager to participate in service projects, seeking meaningful engagement beyond worship services.
- **No Trade-off Between Internal and External Service**: Data shows that increased community engagement does not reduce internal congregational service; instead, both are mutually reinforcing, creating a culture of service.
- **Societal Impact and Social Capital**: Congregations provide vital social services (average of 3.8 per congregation), build social capital, and foster political efficacy. Interfaith and multiethnic collaborations, such as Afghan resettlement efforts, enhance community bonds and break down barriers.
- **Contextual and Cultural Differences**: While engagement is consistent across diverse faith traditions, the form and focus of service may vary by geography, theology, and congregational makeup. Minority and multiethnic congregations often show higher engagement to connect with the broader community, while more insular groups excel at caring for their own members.
- **Practical Suggestions for Busy Families**: Service projects should be framed as spiritually formative and family-friendly, with input from young families to ensure relevance and accessibility.
- **DMIN Program and Future Webinars**: Bexley Seabury's DMIN program supports mid-ministry practitioners in deepening their learning and responding to ministry needs. Upcoming webinars will address topics such as experiences in Palestine and Jordan.

Transcript

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

Alright. Welcome, everyone. Glad to have you joining us. Welcome. We've got a healthy number in the room, so we're gonna get started.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

Good afternoon. My name is Joe Swimmer, and I'm the executive director of Episcopal Parish Network. We're thrilled to have you with us today, for this conversation, that, we are partnering with Bexley Seabury Seminary on, and, really excited about, what they're going to service for us, what they'll be talking about, and to have, the team that has assembled here. A couple of quick reminders. We have multiple webinars upcoming on a variety of topics.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

We look forward to welcoming you to those, webinars as you are able to join us. Also, remember that most of our webinars, almost all of them, are recorded and available in our library on our website, episcopalparishes.org. Also, we will be gathering the church together in March year, March in Charlotte. We hope that you will be able to join us for the conference, and our friends from Bexley Seabury Seminary will be with us. And a a lot of good content, very excited to bring the church together for our annual event.

Joe Swimmer (EPN)

If you do have any ideas for us as far as webinars or for other things that we can help you with, please don't hesitate to be in touch. And if your parish is not a member of Episcopal Parish Network, we invite you to consider joining us as members, and you can find out more information about that at episcopalparishes.org. All of that said, I am grateful to Jason Fout for his partnership in thinking about this series that we will be presenting, this first webinar in this series, and, to Bexley Seabury overall for, the wonderful work that they are doing and, looking forward to the conversation today. So without me saying another word, I'm handing it off to Jason Fout. Jason, thank you so much.

Jason Fout

Thank you so much, Joe. I really appreciate that, and welcome everyone to our, series of Beyond Walls webinars. And as you've heard, it's sponsored by the Episcopal

Parish Network and Buxley Seabury Seminary. This is the very first one. We're calling these works in progress because they're just opportunities for for us to hear from people doing interesting and relevant work, whether it's writing or research or whatever, and have an opportunity for them to share that with a broader audience of folks around the church, and that includes clergy or lay leaders, students, actually, just anyone interested in the topic.

Jason Fout

And I'm especially pleased to be able to introduce our very first presenter in this series, doctor Rebecca Glazier. Rebecca is an advocate for and practitioner of faith based community engagement. She works these days as a welfare and self reliance manager for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints. But previously, she spent sixteen years in academia and was a full professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and she was also director of the Little Rock congregation study. Personally, I first encountered her work when I was asked to review her book, faith in community, how engagement strengthens members, places of worship, and society for the Journal of Urban Affairs.

Jason Fout

It's from Temple University Press 02/2024. This this book really works on on two parallel tracks at once, at least two parallel tracks. First, in sociology and similar disciplines, religion's often looked at as being not particularly important on its own terms. It's not important understanding groups of people, not important understanding the larger society, not related to what we might call social effectiveness. Maybe it's a personal matter at most.

Jason Fout

In fact, some in these areas are pretty sure, actually, that religious faith is not particularly meaningful and destined to fade away. But Rebecca's work joins several other recent studies in sociology and urban affairs to show actually through

quantitative and qualitative methods that religious congregations are significant agents in the urban environment in a range of ways. So far, so interesting. But here's the thing. Alongside that, though, and probably even more interesting to most of us here today, Rebecca's study also gives us important clues and signposts for thinking about congregational vitality through community engagement and how this then has effects for the individual, for the congregation, and for the surrounding community as well.

Jason Fout

As I was reading, I couldn't help but just wanna share her findings with a wider circle of church leaders to be able to discuss this together, to hear from Rebecca, and to learn from and with her. And so that way, we could think about our own practices, our own congregations, our own contexts. And I'll also add that, this kind of research would be especially helpful for folks wanting to work on a DMIN project as well. And I'm really pleased to just sort of foreshadow that we have the director of our DMIN program, Emilyn Ott here. She'll say a couple of words at the very end about our program and how these kinds of questions that we're entertaining today can dovetail with the kind of work that we do in that program.

Jason Fout

But in the meantime, without any further ado, I'm really pleased to, turn it over to Rebecca. Thank you again for being with us today.

Rebecca Glazier

Thank you so much. It is absolutely a joy to join you. I'm gonna go ahead and share this presentation, and let me know if any slides go off the rails. But I just am excited to be able to share this research, and it's work that I've been doing and has been close to my heart for the last fourteen years. So getting to talk about it and share these findings with you is just really exciting for me.

Rebecca Glazier

So thank you so much for having me as part of this series. So the questions that I asked as part of this research really started way back when I moved to Arkansas. And what happened was that I heard a question that I hadn't heard before. Let's see. I'm trying to get my slides to advance, and they don't seem to wanna do that.

Rebecca Glazier

I'm gonna stop sharing and try to share a different part of the screen and see if that'll work.

Jason Fout

Sounds good.

Rebecca Glazier

Let's start at the very beginning and put it into slideshow mode and see if that works better. Okay. So this is the question that I heard when I moved to Arkansas is people ask me, do you have a church home? Now I don't know about where you are. I know that people who are watching this today are coming from places all across the country, But I moved to Arkansas from California, and no one had ever asked me about my church before or if I went to church, and they definitely never referred to it as a home.

Rebecca Glazier

So this was a new experience for me, and it's something that really stuck in my mind because it taught me something important about faith. It taught me that faith can feel like home, that your worship community can be a place where you connect with

people, where you feel like you belong, where you feel that sense of togetherness and connection. And this was so important that I started researching it. And I want us to just hold this idea of faith that feels like home with us and and think about what that might be like. Because maybe it's been your experience in your own faith journey that you felt that, or maybe that's very far from your own personal experience.

Rebecca Glazier

But isn't it aspirational? Isn't that a beautiful thing to consider is creating a community of worship where we really feel like we belong and like we're home? And I want you to hold on to that aspirational vision because I'm warning you now, the next slides are gonna get a little bit dark because we're talking about challenges. There are some significant challenges that religion faces in the world today. Jason outlined some of the criticisms for us at the top, and we see a lot of these.

Rebecca Glazier

So let's start with an issue like declining attendance. I'm sure that's one that many of us have thought a lot about. Because I'm a social scientist, I'm gonna give you some statistics as well. So when it comes to declining attendance, we look at the data, and these are congregations who report a decline in the regularly participating adults in their congregation. And in 02/2007, that number was at about 17%.

Rebecca Glazier

Fast forward to 2019, and the number of congregations that say that their attendance is declining is all the way up at 39%. So a significant decline in people who are attending. Let's also look here at the numbers of the average median attendance. And so in February, the average attendance was at a 137. But we fast forward to 2020, and that's dropped almost in half at only 65.

Rebecca Glazier

Now this is a major challenge that places of worship are facing right now, but it's certainly not the only one. Another is the idea of our congregations are aging. So you may have heard about the increasing prevalence of religious nuns, and people who are aged 20 to 29, in particular, have really fallen into this category where they say that they don't identify with a religion at all. Now back in 1986, it was only about ten percent of them. But then when we look ahead, we look at 2022, it was up to 46% of these people in their twenties who say that they don't belong to a religion at all.

Rebecca Glazier

We can also see this in the average age of our congregations. Because in February, the average age of the attendee was about 50, and by 02/2020, it was up to 57. So our congregations are definitely aging, and young people may not feel like they have a place in them. So those are two challenges, but don't worry. I'm gonna keep coming at you with more.

Rebecca Glazier

Society is feeling more polarized these days. In fact, 32% of people who are working in clergy, which I know many of you are or you're working towards and considering, 32% say that current political divisions negatively impact their ability to lead at church. And let me show you just on a map what this might look like. This is a map of geographic partisan sorting in the Dallas Fort Worth area. So here we can see that people who identify more with Republicans are represented in red, and people who identify more with Democrats are represented in blue, and they're living in entirely different parts of the city and having fewer and fewer opportunities to actually interact with one another.

Rebecca Glazier

And that can make it really difficult for people who are trying to lead congregations if they feel like the members within the congregation are divided or if they feel like they're all politically on one side that they kind of have to cater to. Another challenge

is that many people are experiencing faith crises. When we look at the belief in God these days, we see that, in fact, when you ask people if they believe in God, it's around 80% will say yes. But if you ask them, are you sure? That number drops down to less than half.

Rebecca Glazier

So fewer than half of Americans right now are sure that there's a God, and that ambiguity of faith or struggle with faith may not always feel like it's able to be expressed in worship spaces today. So we take all of this data together, and then we add to it the fact that many congregations are facing diminishing resources. Giving is down, and they're trying to do all the things they need to do to care for their members and to help those in need and to also share their faith, but with fewer and fewer people, fewer and fewer donations, fewer and fewer resources. Okay. So we've come this far in my talk, and you're probably thinking, great.

Rebecca Glazier

Thanks for coming, Rebecca. We're all super depressed, and I'm just gonna go home and weep about the state of religion in America. But I hope that that is not where you are. I hope you'll hang with me for a little bit longer because one answer to all of these challenges that's that are facing the church right now is community engagement. And I wanna tell you about how we found that out.

Rebecca Glazier

So I, since 02/2012, have been the director of a community based research project called the Little Rock Congregation Study. And this research project has worked with 57 different Little Rock congregations focusing on those that are within the city limits, and we've conducted hundreds of surveys of clergy members and interviews with them as well. And working together with those clergy who have just been fantastic partners for our research, we've been able to also survey many of their members, serving over 4,000 congregants and talking with a 180 of them in focus groups. And

from this, we've been able to gather a lot of data, both qualitative and quantitative. And what it shows is that when people and places of faith get engaged in their community, when they get outside of those four walls, there are benefits to individuals, to congregations, and to society as a whole.

Rebecca Glazier

And so I wanna shift to a place of a little more hope right now because there are definitely challenges, but by engaging and serving in our communities, we can meet those challenges and help make our places of worship more relevant and more meaningful. So let's talk about these three benefits. We're gonna start with how community engagement is good for individuals. So these are people just like you and me who are engaging and helping to serve in the community. And what we see from the data is that there's higher levels of life satisfaction for that service and engagement.

Rebecca Glazier

The people who are the least community engaged, their life satisfaction is around 71, whereas those who are and this is a zero to a 100 scale when we ask people how satisfied are you with your life right now. But when you add that community engagement, that service, that getting out and helping other people and being plugged into your community, we see that increase by a solid 10 points. Additionally, we find that people who are engaged in their communities report feeling closer to God. And I'm sure that this is something that people of faith, you hear on this Zoom call right now, know this already in your heart. But what the data shows is that it's actually statistically significant as well, that when people are engaged in serving, they're gonna feel closer and more connected to God.

Rebecca Glazier

And I know that that's been my own experience as well. This picture is my my son, Wilk. He is 13, and he loves going out and being part of service projects. This one was

packing meals with the hunger relief army to get out to to people who are in need. And getting to use the little machine that, like, seals those plastic containers, getting to scoop and weigh things, he loved being a part of it and to know that by the time we were done with this project, we had put together 5,000 meals to help people who were hungry.

Rebecca Glazier

And I imagine that you have also had experiences where your heart has been touched in serving. And because so many of you are here today, I would encourage you to just share that in the chat to add some goodness to each other's lives today by sharing how when you've been serving others that that's helped connect you to God. Maybe it's part of a big project, getting a whole team of people out of the food bank, doing a a neighborhood cleanup, or maybe it's just sharing some cookies that you made with an elderly neighbor. How has service helped you feel closer to God? Because we see those benefits on an individual level, and I think it's always great to hear how other people are also feeling close to God through their service.

Rebecca Glazier

But that's not the only benefit. In fact, community engagement is associated with better physical and mental health. And the main causal mechanism or social science speak for how this works is through abating loneliness. As many of you might know, loneliness is an epidemic in The United States today. But when we have communities where people are engaged and helping each other, they are the kind of communities where you check-in on someone if they miss church for a week, or you bring chicken noodle soup if somebody's sick, or you help drive someone to a doctor's appointment, or you take a walk with a friend or sit with them if they're grieving and if they've lost someone.

Rebecca Glazier

All of those small pieces of engagement add up to better physical and mental health for individuals who are participating and engaging as well. Okay. So we've talked about how community engagement is good for individual people, and I hope you know and see that experience in your own lives. Now I wanna level it up to the next stage and talk about how community engagement is good for congregations. So we saw all those challenges that congregations are facing, but what we see is that when members get engaged in service, they're more likely to attend.

Rebecca Glazier

So when you're out serving and helping, you're more likely to come back and be at worship services with your congregations. And as declining attendance is a major concern, this is a data point that we can really be excited about. I wanna show you some additional data here. This is looking at the number of social or community programs that are offered by congregations and then whether their attendance has decreased, increased, or remained the same. And when we did this analysis, we controlled for the size of the congregation, their budget, how long their leader had been in that role because greater longevity might lead to more community connections.

Rebecca Glazier

Even controlling for all of those things, the more programs that a congregation is offering, the more people are gonna be coming and attending to that congregation. That engagement leads to increased attendance. I also wanna talk about how it affects the congregational culture when you have service going on. So one of the things that we measured is this battery of questions looking at congregational warmth. And congregational warmth is questions like, does your church feel like family to you?

Rebecca Glazier

Or I can talk with my clergy member about any problems, or I wanna invite people to come to attend my church. And when that congregational warmth score is higher, it's associated with higher attendance, it's associated with greater service, and it's associated with greater congregational giving. So in these resource constrained environments, when we go out and serve with members of our church and engage in the community with them, it creates a warmer congregational culture where we feel like family. And that, in turn, leads to a greater commitment to that congregation, including higher levels of giving. And this is a quote from one of the clergy members that we interviewed who said that churches with high member involvement are places where people make friends and form community, which is a gift to the church and to the member.

Rebecca Glazier

So connecting what we've been talking about about the individual benefits and also those congregational benefits. That high involvement, that high engagement blesses both of those categories. Now some of the data that I'm most excited about coming out of our research is regarding younger members. So there's kind of a stereotype that the people who are serving and who are interested in the community engagement are the older members of the congregation, the ones who are retired, who have more time on their hands. But in fact, our data show that it's the younger members who are more likely to want to serve.

Rebecca Glazier

So when we ask them about their hours of service that they're giving each month, younger members are more likely to be serving both inside and outside of the congregation. We also ask them about what are the community issues that are most important to you, everything from education to crime to race relations. And what we found is that across the board, it's these younger people who are saying, I would get involved. I would personally volunteer if my congregation was doing a service project on that issue. These younger people want more than just worship services.

Rebecca Glazier

They want meaningful engagement, doing service, being part of the community, and building that sense of family in their congregation. And they just need the opportunities. These younger people want to serve. So if we wanna pull them back in to attending our congregations, we have to give them more than just Sunday worship services. We have to show them how their faith in action can be really meaningful.

Rebecca Glazier

Now I am grateful in this research to work with a clergy advisory board in the community who really pushed us to add questions to our survey to specifically assess the spiritual health of the members because that's information that they wanted to know. And as a result, we know that people who are serving and who are more engaged out in the community are more likely to be closer to God, as we said earlier, and also to feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being. And this is something that we that clergy members want for their members. Right? You want your members to feel this closeness to God and this deep sense of well-being that comes from giving and serving others.

Rebecca Glazier

And this is a quote from another clergy member who was part of our research, and they said, we have better church when our community projects are going on. I believe it is a spiritual law. Church is just better when we're engaged and when we're serving in our communities. Now those of you who are in the ministry or who are thinking of going into the ministry might be thinking right now, look. That sounds great.

Rebecca Glazier

Community engagement is good. But what about our resource limitations? So many congregations are running with reduced staff, or they're worried about asking their people to do more. They're worried that if they say, hey. We have a big Habitat for

Humanity project we wanna get all the volunteers out for, that then those people aren't gonna have enough bandwidth to help set up for the fish fry or, you know, hide eggs for the Easter egg hunt.

Rebecca Glazier

But I want you to think about your own experience because those of you who are here today, I bet that you've done some community service before. I bet that you've been out in the community volunteering, and I bet you've also helped out at your own place of worship before. You've put up chairs. You've helped clean things. You've brought food for the potluck.

Rebecca Glazier

And this is what we actually find in the data is that there is no trade off between congregational and community service. That, in fact, as you get your members more engaged in the community, they're also gonna be serving more in the church itself. Those two things are mutually reinforcing. You're creating a culture of service that brings people in and helps them serve in all kinds of different ways. Okay.

Rebecca Glazier

So we've talked about the benefits to individuals. We've also talked about the benefits to congregations. Now I wanna tell you about how those aggregate up to benefit society as a whole. And one of the key ways that that happens is through just general social service provision. So many places of worship are doing so much good out in the community and just helping people who are in need.

Rebecca Glazier

And as those needs are met, our communities become stronger. When we surveyed the the congregations just here in Little Rock, we found that each congregation was

providing an average of 3.8 social or community services. And you may be able to guess what the most common ones are. In fact, marriage and family counseling was very high with pastors talking with people who may be struggling through marriage or family issues. Providing rent and utility assistance was also very high.

Rebecca Glazier

Unfortunately, Arkansas is a very poor state, and so many people need that kind of help, and they're finding it at their places of worship. And then food assistance was also very high in terms of what congregations are providing, engaging with with food pantries or helping to provide food or a hot meal to to people who are in need in the community. But beyond that social service provision, when we get together and we engage and we serve in our community, we're building social capital. So we're building the kind of social capital that bridges different groups as we go out and serve people that we might not otherwise come into contact with or even better, join arms with other organizations or other places of worship and work together to try to address community problems. And it's also building bonding social capital, and that's what grows your congregational warmth, that sense that your place of worship feels like family.

Rebecca Glazier

Here's a quote from one of our clergy members who talks about their church being a place for people who vote red and blue, and they don't wanna alienate each other because there's too few places in society where they can mingle. And service is a great way to break down those barriers even within your own congregation. Because when you're standing shoulder to shoulder with someone trying to help feed the hungry, you're much less likely to demonize them or think, you know, everyone who holds that political ideology is a terrible human because they're standing right there, and you're working towards the same shared goal of helping those who are in need. Maybe you even have a chance to chat with each other and talk about your kid's soccer game or talk about the local football team or talk about what you're watching on TV. You can find opportunities for connection as we serve together.

Rebecca Glazier

I just wanna tell you a a brief story about a congregation that I worked with. So here in this picture, we have some women who are Muslim, and then the woman in the black and white polka dotted dress in the center, she's a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints. And they got together. They're they're two congregations. During Ramadan, Muslims will fast all day long, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints fast on the first Sunday of every month.

Rebecca Glazier

And so they got together on that first Sunday of the month of Ramadan when both of their faith traditions were fasting and helped connect with one another and then also did some good. And this is the quote that that came from this woman who said, I had no idea, despite our differences, how much we have in common. We both love our god. We have faith. We fast.

Rebecca Glazier

We have values. We have youth programs. It was a huge change for me. When we get out and we get engaged in our communities, even if we're just meeting new people, sharing in our faith traditions, connecting with each other, that breaks down barriers and builds up social capital that makes democracy run better, that makes our communities better, more welcoming, and wonderful places to be. And so in talking about that social capital and political efficacy, political efficacy is a a term that political scientists like to use, and it basically means that you feel like your voice matters and that you can make a difference.

Rebecca Glazier

And right now, there are so many people who are jaded and disengaged and don't feel like their voice matters at all. But when you're serving and engaging in your community, you have opportunities to build up that social capital and that sense of

efficacy that can offset those feelings of disconnection and disillusionment that are unfortunately all too common today. And this is a quote from this fantastic church that's working together to help provide services, and it's building up that sense of community, and it's building up the congregation itself to have that greater warmth. They said, you develop camaraderie because you're working towards the same goal. And, basically, I love this quote, you become like family.

Rebecca Glazier

He becomes like my dad working alongside me. She becomes like my sister passing out clothes. He becomes like my brother bringing supplies in, and that develops a bond that can't be broken. If we wanna talk about breaking down divisions and helping make our communities stronger, more welcoming places, helping and serving alongside each other, engaging in our communities, that's exactly the way to do it. So revisit with me for a moment all of these challenges that we talked about at the beginning.

Rebecca Glazier

We know that congregations are declining in attendance. They're aging. Things feel really polarized. People are struggling with their faith, and there are fewer and fewer resources available. For all of these challenges, community engagement is a solution that can help address them and help make our places of worship more relevant in society today.

Rebecca Glazier

And I just wanna encourage you that you, through community engagement, can create a faith that feels like home in your own community. So one example that is talked about in the book, and there's a a picture of the book where you could dig deeper into this if you want more examples, more data that's available to you for sure. But one example is the data shows that more people are attending more than one congregation. One of the case studies in the book is Canvas Community Church, and

Canvas is a congregation that's specifically organized to help address the needs of people who are unhoused. And so they have members who maybe attend their main worship service at a different congregation, but then they come to Canvas once a month or once a week to help serve meals, to lead a devotional that is directed towards people who are unhoused in our city.

Rebecca Glazier

And that kind of dual membership gives them the, maybe, theological sermons that they want on Sunday, but also gives them their faith in action that they want out in the community by engaging with Canvas. So we're seeing more and more of that of people who maybe are feeling connected to more than one congregation, and that's one case study that is in the book of Canvas Community Church. There are six others if you're interested in models of what this really might look like on the ground. And with that, I'm very happy to open it up for questions and discussion. It's been a joy to be able to share this with you.

Rebecca Glazier

Thank you so much.

Jason Fout

Excellent. Thank thank you so much, Rebecca. This has been amazing. I have a couple of questions myself. We'll we'll also open it up to questions from those who are gathered.

Jason Fout

And please enter your questions into the the the chat, and I'll be happy to share them as as we go along. I think I'm as you were approaching this research project yourself and thinking about community engagement, what was it that you had in mind? Was

there something you had in mind originally, and did that change through the research? Or maybe more broadly, just maybe talk about how get into grips with the sort of actual people on the ground, the things that they were doing. How did your questions change along the way?

Jason Fout

How did were there particularly surprising findings?

Rebecca Glazier

Yeah. Thank you so much for that question. So this research began in 2012. And as a professor, I'm trained. My PhD is in political science.

Rebecca Glazier

I was honestly interested in asking some more politically minded questions. I was teaching, and I wanted my students to kind of get out of the classroom and get into the community to learn a little more about the community that they're a part of. And so with those goals in mind, we started reaching out to to congregation leaders to take a survey and then asked a sample of them if they would participate and distribute our survey to all of their members. And the students have been absolutely integral to the research. We have over 200 graduate and undergraduate student researchers who've been a part of it since 02/2012.

Rebecca Glazier

So I just have to give a huge kudos to the students who've been part of this community engaged work. But when we first started asking questions, we asked things that were as explicitly political as who are you voting for this year, and how confident are you that that is the right person for the job. And we got some feedback after that first iteration from the congregations that they weren't entirely comfortable

answering these political questions in their place of worship. They maybe didn't feel like it was totally appropriate. And that's why I'm grateful that we were able to bring on a clergy advisory board to help us understand how could we be better community researchers by asking the questions that the congregations themselves are gonna be really interested in.

Rebecca Glazier

What's the data that the leaders want to hear? And that's when we started adding in more questions about community engagement and more questions about people's faith and how that community engagement and service might strengthen their connection to God and give them higher levels of what we call spiritual health. So it definitely shifted over the years as we became better community researchers. Now there were always some political questions on there because as a political scientist, I was really interested in those, especially the questions about efficacy because I think that's so foundational for a democracy for people to feel like they can actually contribute and that their voice matters.

Jason Fout

Yeah. Thanks very much. Yeah. It was reading a book and and and, you know, hearing about that or reading about that that change, that, I mean, was really, really helpful. And it's it's asking you know?

Jason Fout

Because so often we ask questions about religions rather than asking the questions of the religions. So and they're both legitimate, but they they have their place. And this project then to that growth seems to incorporate both of those, and I really appreciate that about it. Just one other quick question, and you touched on this very briefly at the end of what what you were just saying. It really strikes me that a key term in your work is political efficacy.

Jason Fout

And you you talked about it in the near the end of your your your presentation. You were mentioning it just now. I wonder if you might just say a little bit more about that and if you have particular ways that you've seen that congregations tend to affect greater political efficacy for people?

Rebecca Glazier

Yeah. Thanks so much for that question. Yeah. In political science, this idea of of efficacy is really important because it matters for how democracy functions, for how we trust each other, for if we feel like we don't have a place and don't have a voice, or if we feel like we can engage and accomplish something. So one example that I like to point to that I talk about in the book of how congregations really did increase that efficacy is the Afghan resettlement program that we had in our community.

Rebecca Glazier

So after The United States withdrew from Afghanistan, there were many families who and translators and people who had worked with the US government who needed to be resettled in The United States and to not be under Taliban controlled Afghanistan. And as those families came into our community here in Little Rock, we settled over 20 families in in Little Rock, and that was done through an interfaith effort through congregations working together, different congregations being assigned different families. We had people who, you know, maybe was a a retired CEO who's now driving, you know, kindergarten carpool because everybody wanted to to engage and plug in however they could, teaching English, helping people learn how to use a grocery store, building furniture, all of these different components. And in talking with people and holding these interviews and focus groups, that really was an inflection point where they were able to engage with real people, feed them meals, help them set up a new apartment home for for them and their family. And that personal engagement made them feel like what was happening in Afghanistan wasn't just

terrible, sad images of the Kabul Airport on a television screen, but there were people that they were really actually able to help right here in our own community.

Rebecca Glazier

And that makes a huge difference for people's sense of efficacy.

Jason Fout

Thank you. And I'm I'm I imagine in time, it also helped to increase the political efficacy in at least some ways of those of those refugees as well so that it's a a kind of a capacity that capacitates others as well.

Rebecca Glazier

So Yeah. Absolutely. We didn't specifically measure

Jason Fout

them with

Rebecca Glazier

our data, but but I think you're exactly right. As people are feel helped and cared about, that that can increase their own sense that that they can do something, and they can make a difference.

Jason Fout

Wonderful. Thanks. There are a few questions in the in the chat. We may or may not be able to get to all of them. Some really good ones here.

Jason Fout

And but if you please do feel free to con continue to add. I'll just turn first here to to Emlins. Similar observations were made by the Alban Institute in the nineteen nineties. What might be different about your research for this time in the life of the church? So in other words, maybe, you know, in the from the twenty tens to the twenty twenties.

Jason Fout

But then also, what do you have particular thoughts about what might be culturally different in different parts of the country? In other words, you know, Little Rock, the sort of the Mid South is one particular cultural area. Are there things that you can extrapolate from or or differences, different contexts that you can that that you could speculate on or or or have knowledge of?

Rebecca Glazier

Yeah. Absolutely. Thanks so much for that question. I think that one thing that is really encouraging about the findings is that we worked with really diverse congregations across Little Rock. So we had Jewish synagogues.

Rebecca Glazier

We had Muslim mosques. We had Baha'i faith. We had black Protestant traditions, evangelicals, mainline Protestant, all across the city. Some of them were huge megachurches all the way down to one that was in a little bit of a rural area that I attended that had about 12 people there that day. So lots of diversity in terms of the congregations.

Rebecca Glazier

And across the board, we found no statistically significant differences in terms of who was being more engaged in the community. So if you're a Catholic parish, if you're a historically black church, all of these places are doing some community engagement and holding that value. And that love for neighbor and wanting to to serve, that is something that really is consistent across many, many faith traditions. And so we can see that commonality. But at the same time, there absolutely are different ways that congregations might engage based upon their own theological tradition, based upon even, you know, the political ideology of their members, or based on where they might be geographically located.

Rebecca Glazier

And I think that that's really valuable for people to consider for their own congregation. On the the publisher's website for Temple University Press, there's just a one page document that is kind of a discussion guide for congregations so that they can reflect and think about these ideas and how they might be able to best engage. And that could be a really helpful resource if someone's trying to figure out what's the right fit for my place of worship. The case studies might also help give people ideas of how are different places doing it. If you have a lot of resources, if you have a homogenous congregation, if you're in a historical area of your neighborhood or your city, or if you're a minority religious tradition, it might look different for all of those circumstances.

Rebecca Glazier

And talking with members, to coming to it prayerfully to try to discern what's the best way for your congregation to engage, I think, is a great idea. And, hopefully, that discussion guide could help people along that path.

Jason Fout

Thank you. And and that actually anticipates, in some ways, my next question. And I know that we're we're getting a little out of out of political science and maybe a little a little more in a congressional practice, but these are the kind of questions we have. Yeah. Israel Portia Gomez asks, I've noticed that new families have a very busy schedule.

Jason Fout

It looks like there's not much time for church things. What ideas or service projects could we use to give them opportunities to serve? And, I mean, one of the things you noticed is that it seems like younger people in particular also have this thirst or or to to want to serve or connect in this way. But, you know, those of us in in congregations and so forth often feel this tension as well. We've got these younger families or, you know, people who feel stretched.

Jason Fout

Were there particular things that you observed that helped people to to maybe move through busyness to this engagement or something?

Rebecca Glazier

Yeah. I think that one thing that can be really helpful, especially for ministry leaders, is to connect that engagement to, like, important social and spiritual developments. So calling it out as a faith obligation or calling it out as how we how we will live our faith or this is what our congregation does to put our faith into practice can be a way to help people see, like, this isn't just a one off. This is fundamental to to who we are. And, absolutely, young families, those are really busy schedules.

Rebecca Glazier

I think appealing to the parents to say, engaging in this service, being part of this community, that's gonna help your child develop into the kind of person you want them to be so that they value helping and serving others. And there are lots of ways to make it fun. Doing, like, a a park cleanup. You can do a scavenger hunt for, you know, who can find these different things that need to be fixed or cleaned up or going and helping people in a neighborhood. If you're visiting people who are in a retirement home or who are homebound, it can be really rewarding to for kids to, you know, see their cool medals or to hear their stories of the past or to bake something and share it with them so that they really feel like they're giving.

Rebecca Glazier

So I would counsel together with the young families in your congregation and talk about what they might be excited about engaging in, but to frame it as something that's gonna be spiritually beneficial for their family and especially to help their kids develop into the kind of humans who will be ready to serve and look outside themselves.

Jason Fout

Thank you. I wonder if there isn't even sort of if you catch the imagination of the the children too, the potential for a bit of pastor power. Like, are are we gonna do that again? You know? That was so great or whatever.

Jason Fout

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you so much. One one last question. It's a it's a couple of questions that Miguel has has raised for us.

Jason Fout

He asks whether this might apply in a Latino community, and then also about the possibility of a multiethnic community, you know, maybe a congregation that is really intentionally multiethnic, multiracial in its in its composition. Did you notice particular things like that in your in your study?

Rebecca Glazier

Yeah. So I I maybe would would take those a little bit separately. So we did work with a couple of multiethnic congregations in Little Rock, which, honestly, a multiethnic congregation is a challenge in the South, and I give lots of respect to to those people who are leading those congregations and are are able to do that. And, actually, what we saw both with multiethnic congregations and also with minority congregations who are part of a minority religious tradition is that there's actually a tendency towards greater service because they feel like they really have something to say to the broader community. So, like, those minority traditions, like our Jewish and Muslim and Hindu and Baha'i congregations, they're really engaged in service so that the people are able to meet them and see that that they're your neighbors and not an outsider or an other.

Rebecca Glazier

And I think that multiethnic congregations also often say we have something to talk about, that this is a a real mission for us, and we want to share with the broader community what we're doing and then to invite you to be a part of it. So I think that our experience from the data has been that those kinds of congregations are actually benefiting even more from that community engagement because of how they're particularly positioned within a community. Now when it comes to congregations that maybe are a little bit more homogenous, maybe a Spanish speaking or a a Latino congregation, there can be some challenges with engagement there because sometimes those communities might tend to be a little bit more insular, And we did have them participating in our our survey. We had it translated into Spanish, and we worked with some explicitly Latino serving Spanish speaking congregations. But it was harder for us to get responses from those congregations than it was to get responses from our other congregations for reasons that are very understandable.

Rebecca Glazier

There's a a lack of institutional trust. People were a little bit skeptical of what is this university? Who is this person coming in and asking me all of these questions that feel a little bit invasive? So it was hard for us to get broad participation from those congregations because they're a little bit more insular. But what usually happens with more insular congregations is they're great at taking care of their own members.

Rebecca Glazier

That if people move in, they're really good at helping them move in or giving people meals when they have a baby or, right, taking care of their own members, but they might be a little bit more hesitant to do broader engagement. But both of those things can really benefit the congregation and help build that congregational warmth and that that sense that your place of worship is a home.

Jason Fout

Wonderful. Thank you. Rebecca, thank you so much for your time today, for sharing your work. I this has been incredibly stimulating, and I'm just really grateful that you were able to join us and be our first our first presentation. I I would just like to to ask my colleague, Emlyn, if she might just say a quick word about what we're thinking about for or, you know, what the plans are for the next Beyond Well seminar and webinar.

Jason Fout

And then also just a quick word about the the DMIN program, and then I'll I'll kind of take us out from there.

Emlyn Ott

So first of all, thank you, Rebecca. As someone who served for twenty years in Oklahoma State neighboring Arkansas, I'm really interested in the the part of the country, how that also contributes towards attitudes towards home and family. So that was part of my question there, that there's something different in different parts of the country. We're looking toward the next webinar, Beyond Walls, to be around the visitation that a group of colleagues and I went on this summer in Palestine and Jordan, and we're going to each talk about, our reflections on that experience being mostly in the West Bank for several several weeks and, our both our theological and practical, response to that as we have returned to be part of Come and See, Go and Tell as part of our experience. I am blessed to be able to serve as the director of the doctor ministry program and congregational development at Bexley Seabury.

Emlyn Ott

One of the things that's really important is that we have right now, we have 26, students who are mid ministry. They're deepening their learning. They're engaging with colleagues. They're raising questions and responding to the ministry needs that they have where they are, as they're working on, becoming more and more thoughtful practitioners. So if you have any questions about the doctor of ministry program, would love to respond to you.

Emlyn Ott

Please feel free to contact me, eott@bexleyseaberry.edu. Jason, did I cover it all?

Jason Fout

Absolutely. That's wonderful. Thanks so much, Emlyn. I think the only thing that remains then is to say a really warm thank you to Rebecca again for your time joining us, and, again, sharing the sharing your work. Just wonderful.

Jason Fout

Thank you so much.

Rebecca Glazier

Thank you. It's been my joy.

Jason Fout

K. In that case then, I think that we're concluded. We hope to see you at a future, beyond walls webinar where we're talking about works in progress. We really hope that all of this has been a blessing to you and your work, thought provoking, and providing some good resources for you. And, that's what we're here, for as Bexley Seabury.

Jason Fout

So we're always pleased when we can serve in this way. So in the meantime, keep in touch, look forward to see you next time. So long, everyone.