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# UNION

Dallas, Texas | United Methodist Church

BY *Joy L. Arroyo*

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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In addition to a national survey, researchers from The Confirmation Project visited congregations, using the research method of Portraiture to understand how confirmation and equivalent practices are practiced in congregations. Portraiture is a method of inquiry that shares some of the features of other qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative, but it is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. This Portrait is one from a gallery that can be found at [www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery](http://www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery).

### CO-DIRECTORS

Katherine M. Douglass | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Richard R. Osmer | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### PROJECT MANAGER

Kristie Finley | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### STEERING COMMITTEE

Reginald Blount | Garret Evangelical Seminary, AME  
Kenda Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Gordon Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Joy L. Arroyo | Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesleyan Church  
Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Shonda Gladden | Garrett Evangelical Seminary, AME  
Kate Obermueller Unruh | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Kate Siberine | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Jacob Sorenson | Luther Seminary, ELCA, Camp Consultant

### SPECIALISTS

Michael Gewecke | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, [www.designbysarah.net](http://www.designbysarah.net)  
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

## ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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The Confirmation Project seeks to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth. These denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church. It seeks to provide Christian leaders with examples of good practice and with strategies that are effective in helping young Christians grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengthening discipleship includes nurturing faith in Jesus Christ and facilitating youth encounters with Christian traditions (Scripture, creeds, confessions, and practices) to support lifelong Christian vocation. This project is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary.

## CONTEXTUAL SETTING



The first thing I noticed as I walked to Union Coffee from my hotel was the large “SMU: East Campus” building beside my hotel. Across the freeway, the spire of another Southern Methodist University building rose from the main campus, right beside a building named the George W. Bush library. I passed by a street called “SMU Boulevard” on my way to Dyer Street. There were no other pedestrians, and cars sped by on the road to my left. At the corner of Dyer Street was a large, empty lot filled with broken glass bottles and beer cans. I walked along the deserted road, broken glass crunching beneath my shoes, imagining tumbleweeds floating across the street toward the sundry buildings and businesses, each their own separate kingdom: Park Cities Obedience School for dogs, a law office, a yoga studio. Railroad crossing lights flashed, and I stopped for a shuttle to pass by on the tracks. As I neared the address, I saw no sign for Union Coffee. I wondered if I had an old address, until I looked across a parking lot and saw a glass door and a sign posted on a metal grate high above the door at the opposite end of the building: Union: Coffee, Community, Cause.

Union is both a coffee shop and an innovative United Methodist church that worships on Sunday and Tuesday evenings. It is located in the neighborhood of University Crossing, Dallas, just down the street from Southern Methodist University. University Crossing is a public improvement district, sitting at the intersection of several neighborhoods in Dallas, and is working to form its own identity. The pastor of the church, Mike Baughman, explained that the location was chosen carefully because of the large number of residents in the area in their 20s, and because of the proximity to SMU. It would provide potential customers to the coffee shop (with the SMU students) as well as reach the church’s target demographic of 18 to 35 year olds. Just north of University Crossing is a large

housing development for all socioeconomic classes called The Village. Several refugees live there, along with many young professionals. It is the first stop for many people moving to Dallas, and because of the transitory population of The Village, there is not much community connection. Many people who attend Studio or Kuneo, the two worship services Union offers, live in apartments in The Village, a couple of miles from Union. Most people commute by car rather than by foot.

The best way of reaching Union is not to walk along the busy street, but to drive or turn down SMU Boulevard and cross the parking lot of two restaurants: Spin Pizza and Banh Mi sandwich shop. Union is just across this parking lot. The following day, I noticed a young woman with a backpack cross the parking lot, heading to Union, possibly walking from SMU.

Dallas, Texas, is known for its food and patriotism. Many of the massive buildings downtown have restaurants on the ground level and I saw several Texas flags on the cab ride from the airport, with the star of Texas embedded on every support beam for the freeway. On the cab ride to Union, we passed by a vast complex of buildings that I thought were several downtown businesses. Instead, they were a church: Watermark Community Church, one of twenty-one mega churches in Dallas.<sup>1</sup> Dallas has a population of 1.28 million, as of 2014. About 29 percent of people are white alone without a Hispanic or Latino background, 25 percent black, 42 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 3 percent Asian.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to this, in the zip code where Union is located, 94.2 percent of the population is white.<sup>3</sup> Whereas 42 percent of households in Dallas speak a language other than English, only 9.4 percent of households in the neighborhood speak a language other than English. The median household income is \$176 thousand, compared to a median household income of \$43 thousand for the rest of Dallas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Megachurch Search Results.” Hartford Institute for Religion Research. [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view\\_records=1&ID=\\*%&sb=4&State=TX](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*%&sb=4&State=TX). Accessed March 2, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> US Census. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4819000.html> Accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> US Census data. <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4874492,4819000,00> Accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The Village, however, is known to be more racially and economically diverse than the rest of the mostly white neighborhood.

Union Coffee was packed with students and young adults as I entered and surveyed the menu. The layout seemed both open and intimate, with comfy chairs and couches arranged around modern black tables and rustic wooden tables, divided by



interior walls made of transparent glass, and nooks and rooms for studious students or people meeting. Most of the customers were white, some black, and some Asian. Almost all worked on their laptops or read books. A cheery young white woman greeted me behind the counter and

helped me sort through the menu: grilled sandwiches, baked goods, and drinks. I ordered a bagel with cream cheese and called Mike while I sat at a counter along a glass wall to eat. He came out from one of the glassed in rooms in the coffee shop and greeted me while I was munching on my snack. He wore jeans and a blue hoodie, and greeted me with energy, showing me the cracked screen on his phone and apologizing for not answering my call right away.

He showed me the woman I would be interviewing first: a young blonde woman who sat just on the other side of the glass, Rosalie. She was one of the masterminds of The Union Way, Union's unique membership/discipleship program. Even though I had ten minutes before the interview, since I was staring at her from the other side of the glass, I waved to her and brought my bagel around the glass wall, settling into the grey couch around a wooden table. She sat on a comfy grey chair beside mine, and we launched into conversation while my mouth was still full of bagel. Rosalie graduated from college a few years ago and now works in marketing at a large firm in Dallas. She explained how she grew up in the United Methodist tradition and knew she wanted it to be a part of her adult life. She came across the church at

Union because of her desire to find a community that pushed her to live out her faith in a new way.



As I talked with Rosalie, another young woman, named Dallas, joined us. She is the second mastermind behind The Union Way. Dallas is completing a fellowship in child neurology and will soon be moving to Philadelphia for a second research fellowship. She grew up in the Disciples of Christ tradition but transferred to a United Methodist church as a teenager, where she completed confirmation. She joined Union because she wanted a place she felt comfortable bringing her friends, and she also appreciated the blend of tradition and innovation at Union.

## THE UNION WAY: AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONFIRMATION -----

I asked Rosalie and Dallas to talk about the origins and specifics of The Union Way. The two began talking energetically about the ministry, both taking turns and asking the other to speak about a specific aspect.

### ***Rebranding Membership for Church Refugees***

Rosalie and Dallas met over the course of four months to envision this program. They wanted to distill the tradition and key aspects of membership classes, keeping the core components while reframing certain aspects in a way that would connect with the young adults in their ministry. Rosalie said that they wanted to focus on “church refugees:” young people who had perhaps been hurt by church in the past, and also on people who had no church background.

Dallas spoke at length about the importance of changing the language surrounding typical discipleship ministries. They wanted to avoid the terms “membership,” and “accountability” because several people had bad experiences of judgment with past “accountability” groups in college. And yet, they wanted to still have a form of

accountability. Both of them looked at other business models of membership, based on Mike's recommendations, including Cross Fit and sororities, wanting to see what made young people "buy in" and commit to an organization. The aspect of *buy in* was important to them as they designed The Union Way. Dallas explained one of their guiding questions: "What if the church were a framework for growth, but you had a lot of freedom within it?" Agency is an important concept in The Union Way—acknowledging each person's agency as he or she lives out their faith. According to Rosalie, Union Way goes to the core of what each person believes, what the faith community believes, and how that informs how participants live their lives.

Once they came up with the concept of The Union Way, they presented it to the worship planning team, including pastor Mike Baughman. Mike noticed how much their design fit within the Methodist tradition, with its emphasis on personal holiness, corporate holiness, and social holiness, and signed off on it. The Union Way was born.

### ***A Repeatable Rite***

The Union Way is a membership and confirmation program that all church members are encouraged to repeat every two years. The people I interviewed assumed they would go through Union Way every other year. Mike explained to me that confirmation is a repeatable rite, and that he believes it is more developmentally appropriate for individuals in their later teens and twenties than those in middle school, since it involves concepts of commitment and membership. That is why he had this program designed specifically for people in their twenties. At the beginning of The Union Way, each person going through the program participates in a rite during one of the worship services in which Mike places salt on their foreheads and prays over them. This marks the beginning of their journey and comes from the RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, from the Roman Catholic Church, which is based on Christian liturgies from the second and third centuries.

The ending is a ceremony that usually occurs during Easter or Epiphany, in which they join the church (if they decide to do so). At this ceremony, Mike asks the

traditional UMC baptism and membership vows, but he adds vows that are more particular than in the average church setting. He will ask questions such as, “Will these people be your people, and will you be theirs? Will you pray for them? When the shit hits the fan, are you going to take care of these people?” Then he asks questions of the congregation: “When they lose their job, will you take them out to dinner or bring cake to their house and help them eat their feelings? When they get dumped by that person, will you promise to call that person by terrible names? Will you take them out with your other friends so they have someone to go out with that weekend?”<sup>5</sup> As Mike explained these vows to me, he got choked up, because he sees them taking these vows seriously. “They take that shit seriously,” he said. The key is in making the vows specific to their context and language. The final question he asks the congregation is this: “And no matter what, in whatever situation they face, will you have their ass?” Mike showed me a gesture that they developed as a church that means “ass-having” – literally holding their ass.

### ***The Bento Box***

Each person going through The Union Way attends two classes and designs his or her own “Bento Box” of spiritual disciplines. A Bento box is a home-packed or takeout meal in Japanese culture that contains specific food groups, usually rice, fish or meat, and a vegetable. This metaphor emphasizes the importance of a well-balanced “meal.” Each Union Way participant chooses spiritual goals in three different categories to fill their “Bento box.” The three categories are “Me, We, and The World.” Participants are encouraged to make each goal something achievable and measurable. These goals are based on core values of Union, which are given to each participant.

Along with the goals that each participant chooses, the Bento Box also includes three goals that are core components for membership at Union, each fitting into the categories of “Me, We, and The World.” The goal for “Me” is to practice some form of Sabbath. The participant can choose what this looks like and when it occurs, but Dallas and Rosalie encourage participants to find “some way to remove themselves

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<sup>5</sup> Mike Baughman, interviewed by Joy L. Arroyo, January 19, 2016.



from the rat-race.”<sup>6</sup> The second goal, in the “We” category, is attending worship regularly. The hope is that participants would attend Union regularly, but several people also have home churches and may choose to regularly attend worship somewhere else. The third goal, in “The World” category, is Tithing. Tithing in The Union Way is not necessarily giving 10 percent of income to the church, but rather learning to give something monetarily to some organization—it could be the church, or it could be the local animal shelter. The point is to encourage participants to get into the rhythm of feeling that the money that comes through their hands can be used for good, even when money is tight as a student.

### ***The Union Way Buddy***

After forming the Bento Box, for the next four months, participants meet one-on-one with an assigned “buddy” (although they are often called “the Union Way person”—several young people I interviewed were confused about what to call their “person.” Dallas and Rosalie wanted to avoid the term “mentor” because of possible power dynamics implied, but some participants used the term “mentor” or “accountability person”.) This “buddy” meets every month to talk about how the spiritual disciplines are going, to adjust them if necessary, and to talk about any other concerns.

During one of the classes, Rosalie and Dallas present a role-play of what a meeting might look like with this buddy. The buddy is encouraged to ask how things are going, especially with the Bento Box, but he or she must not make negative comments such as “You should have done that,” or “that goal’s not challenging.”<sup>7</sup> The main point is to listen and to care for the participant. Also, there is no pressure to overshare; in the role play, Dallas and Rosalie present a scenario in which the Union Way participant chooses not to share about something. They affirm boundaries in this relationship. The main thing that occurs is listening and companionship.

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<sup>6</sup> Dallas and Rosalie, interviewed by Joy L. Arroyo, January 17, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

### ***Meeting with Pastor Mike and The Creed***

After the four months of practicing the disciplines in The Bento Box, participants meet for one last class and are encouraged to create their own Creed. Rosalie and Dallas give them copies of various creeds the church has used historically, many of them found at the back of the United Methodist Hymnal, and participants can choose one creed as their own, or copy and paste from several, or reword whatever they wish. This activity encourages them to think through what they actually believe about Christianity. Participants are also given an overview of membership options, which can include full membership or affiliate membership (for those who also attend other churches).

After creating the creed, each participant then meets with Mike. He asks them about their general experience with Union Way. And then he explains that the process they went through is a confirmation of their baptismal vows—this is the point at which the word “confirmation” comes in. Most people will say, “I’ve already been confirmed,” and then Mike explains how confirmation is a repeatable rite and should be repeated so that people do not grow stagnant in their faith. He talks with them about their Creed (if they created one). For those who did not create a Creed, Mike goes over the vows of baptism with them and discusses what they believe. He goes over membership options and sees if they are interested in any form of membership. And then he asks participants ways they wish to serve the church. Most people end up getting plugged in to service or leadership roles as a result of going through The Union Way.

### ***Overall Thoughts***

Mike shared with me what he has learned from using this model of confirmation. He is convinced of a few things. First, “We should be way more specific about our expectations of people.” A second conviction is,

That if we want people to change the way that they live their life, and be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we should challenge them to actually change the way they live their life and not just teach them something with the assumption that they’re going to live differently. . . . Teaching isn’t enough to make someone a disciple. Coach them in the way they live.

Finally, he explained that these people are older than those in a typical confirmation programs. He is convinced that confirmation is geared toward people who are too young—a thirteen year-old can't make a life-long commitment. Now that he has seen confirmation with these young adults, he has stories of life changing commitments that impact both the individuals and their church community.

## LEADERSHIP

Rosalie and Dallas lead the Union Way, teaching the initial classes. They recruit buddies to meet one on one, at least once a month, with a specific person going through The Union Way. These buddies have either been through The Union Way in the past, or are currently going through it. After going through Union Way, many participants become involved in leadership roles or in service roles in the church. Dallas will soon be leaving and is considering who might replace her. She is hoping that someone detail-oriented will take her place, as she and Rosalie are both big-picture thinkers, but not great with details. “It takes a servant’s heart to do the details,” Dallas explained to me informally after our interview.<sup>8</sup>

## CONGREGATION OF THE CONFIRMATION MINISTRY

Union is an alternative church plant started by the United Methodist Church. They experiment with three key things: being a generationally specific ministry (18 to 30 or 35 year olds); alternative means of sustainability for church (a coffee shop model); and alternative means of community engagement (being an integral part of the community, embedded in the community). Union Coffee is three years old. The worshipping congregation, Kuneo, is two and a half years old, and Studio is a second worship service that began even more recently. Between the two services, the average attendance is about ninety people per week, with an active base of about one hundred and fifty people. Mike explained that about a third are “hyper-churchy” people who have been in church their entire lives, whereas about two-thirds would

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<sup>8</sup> Dallas, informal conversation with Joy L. Arroyo, January 17, 2016.

qualify as “church refugees” in some form—meaning they have left the church at some point in their lives.

I attended Studio Sunday evening, after interviewing Dallas and Rosalie and having dinner with them and some others who attend Studio, mostly young professionals. For dinner, we shoved several tables together in a pizza place beside Union and got cozy, enjoying large personal pizzas. Rosalie and Dallas say it’s one of the ways they try to foster community with the Studio group, since many do not want to go to the bar after the service, as they have to go to work the next day. They try to reach people who are in the performing arts community and have Sundays free, and also young consultants, with the Studio service.

Many people introduced themselves to me, knowing that I was a visitor: “I haven’t seen you here before. What is your name?” I felt comfortable and welcomed, although I was not sure how to introduce myself, and which words to avoid when I explained what I was doing there. My internal dialogue included questions such as: *Should I use the word confirmation? Is it really a confirmation program? Is that how they understand it? Should I use the word membership? Dallas and Rosalie wanted to avoid that term. What in the world can I tell them I’m doing?* I ended up fumbling through an explanation of The Confirmation Project and saying that I am researching the unique way they practice discipleship and membership through The Union Way.

After dinner, I entered Union to observe the transition from coffee shop into church. Several of the people from dinner were now in the coffee shop, rearranging tables around a wooden platform, taping paper to the tables and placing crayons and markers on top of the paper, setting bulletins on the tables. I sat at a back table and asked one of the Studio workers what the coffee shop customers did when Studio started. She explained that some leave after the first “performance.” It made me wonder how open they were about their identity as a church to the coffee shop customers. Later, Mike explained to me that someone goes around to each



person in the coffee shop and explains what is about to happen and invites them to stay if they wish, or to find a different spot in one of the conference rooms. Near 8:00, they dimmed the lights, and Mike sat on a stool on the stage with a guitar, strumming a tune.

Rosalie got on stage, in front of a microphone, and welcomed people to Studio, “a novel exploration of faith and community.” She then led the small congregation, about twenty people grouped around tables, in an updated version of a Christian creed, printed in the front of the bulletin. She invited the first performer of the night, a young white man who sang a song about racial reconciliation from the show “Memphis” while Mike played the guitar. The next performer, a young black woman, sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness” *a cappella*. Members of the congregation responded verbally during these songs with whoops and cheers. Both performances were vocally strong, filled with emotion. I wondered if the singers were members of a performing arts community. I noticed several customers get up and leave during these performances, although some still lingered in the back. Several customers now sat behind the glass walls or in the study rooms, doors shut.



Mike took the stage with a headset microphone and began his sermon, one piece of a three-part “conversation.” He flipped through slides on a TV screen while he spoke, explaining the Wesleyan quadrilateral and how it can be used to inform personal decisions and world issues. Both he and Rosalie were open about

the United Methodist identity of the congregation, starting with this introduction to the quadrilateral. The second part of the “conversation” was discussion around the tables. I had been tapping away, taking notes on my iPad in the back, but at this point, someone invited me to a table, and I joined Rosalie, Dallas, and a few others in discussing which aspect of the quadrilateral they personally use to inform their

decisions. The final part of the “conversation” was a full group discussion on what had been discussed in the small groups. Mike led this discussion, adding insights on the uniqueness of United Methodism, which has a wobbly “stool,” since Scripture is given more weight, or a longer leg, than the other legs of the “stool.” This wobbly identity can make United Methodists adaptable and able to have civil conversations around hot topic issues, he explained. He then led the group in discussing the refugee crisis from the perspective of the quadrilateral.

After the conversation, Mike introduced three people who were starting The Union Way. He placed salt on each of their foreheads, explaining that salt was meant to preserve, to bring out flavor, and to be abrasive, equating each with God’s actions in the lives of the people embarking on the Union Way. His prayer was that God would preserve them, bring out their unique flavor, and challenge them.

Mike then led the congregation in communion. I noticed at least two people who had remained in the coffee shop, on their laptops, come forward to receive communion. One, a young African American man covered in necklaces and piercings, held his hands together and bowed as he received communion. He then went back to his table, on his laptop.

I also had the opportunity to attend the Tuesday night worship gathering called “Kuneo.” One church member explained that Kuneo is a younger crowd than Studio, almost the difference between middle and high school—possibly



people in their younger twenties (Kuneo) and people in their older twenties, some married (Studio). Many more people attended Kuneo than Studio, as Kuneo was the first worship gathering, whereas Studio was more recently launched. Kuneo featured a worship team sitting on chairs singing secular folk songs that could have

spiritual implications, but were not overtly Christian. A young woman invited the group to respond to the service via Twitter, and the Tweets were read at the end of the service, mostly announcements. After showing a clip from the TV show *Parks and Recreation* on money, Mike spoke about the importance of thinking through how money is used, and he mentioned how John Wesley gave any extra income to the poor. Other members introduced communion and gave the benediction. I got the impression that the group who attended Kuneo had a sense of ownership over the service, with many people participating either in setting up or in the service itself.

## YOUTH EXPERIENCE -----

Every participant I interviewed of The Union Way had been confirmed in the United Methodist Church as teenagers. Mike explained to me later that this was an interesting accident, that about a third of the people who joined Union had never before been confirmed.<sup>9</sup> Most of those I interviewed experienced a time of questioning their faith or falling away from the church, before finding a home at Union. I assume that this is not the case with every single participant, but the particular people I interviewed had experienced this pattern. Below, I will present three narratives of young adults who have gone through the Union Way. I conducted seven interviews with participants and have chosen the three narratives below to demonstrate the varying impacts Union Way has on participants.

### ***Heather - “Getting involved in Union was very relational”***

I met Heather after the Studio worship gathering. I had seen her at the beginning of the gathering rearranging tables, placing bulletins and writing utensils on the tables. We met at one of the tables in Union after the service. Heather wore a bright green sweater, a black floral scarf around her neck, and greeted me with a smile. She seemed a grounded, welcoming person. She was in her late twenties and works as a Kindergarten teacher in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> Mike Baughman, email correspondence, March 29, 2016.

Heather grew up United Methodist, and described herself as coming from a long tradition of United Methodism; her grandfather was a United Methodist minister. She attended Southern Methodist University and was heavily involved in the Wesley Foundation, which she described as the richest time of spiritual growth for her. After graduating from college, she got involved at a local UMC church as an intern in the children’s department, until she got a full time job as a Kindergarten teacher. She spent some time searching for a church that had a group of people her age, pre-marriage and family, but post-college. The only churches she found that had that were mega-churches, which she did not want to attend. She ended up joining her former UMC church as a member because she loved the people and decided that was more important than finding a group her own age. After joining, she discovered Union through a friend who was a barista. She began attending Kuneo in addition to attending the other church. “I can still go to [my other church] and be involved.... But Kuneo was where I found the community of people going through the same issues I was going through, people I could really share life with, that I could relate to<sup>10</sup>.”

Dallas was one of the first people Heather met when she attended Kuneo, and Dallas encouraged her to participate in The Union Way. Heather has gone through confirmation and membership programs at other UMC churches. What stood out to her about The Union Way was how it “customizes the experience for the person going through it.” She described The Union Way as more introspective than other programs. “It also had this whole element of ‘What are some of the ways that you can better your own relationship with God, even apart from the community?’ and then an aspect of, ‘How can you better the community of Christians globally?’ And that was something I hadn’t experienced before in a membership class<sup>11</sup>.”

During Union Way, Heather explained that she grew in the discipline of personal Bible study. Her buddy (whom she referred to as “mentor”) texted her every week to ask her how she was doing, in general, and that reminded her to continue with her Bible study. She also felt that writing the Creed was significant to her, because she

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<sup>10</sup> Heather, interviewed by Joy L. Arroyo, January 19, 2016. Heather, and other names of those involved at Union in a non-leadership capacity, are pseudonyms.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



had a chance to assess the tradition, to analyze it and see if she disagreed with anything or if she would reword anything. At the end of The Union Way, Heather decided to join as an affiliate member, since she has membership at another church.

At the end of our interview, I asked Heather what she took away from the experience of going through The Union Way. She responded:

I take away from it a call to action, that to be a member of a church, I should be constantly remembering that I have a duty to myself and my own faith, and to my community here at the church, as well as a responsibility to the world. That I should always be thinking about all three of those roles when I'm doing ministry or mission work or any of that. I should be assessing, like, 'Am I healthy with myself? Am I part of a healthy community? And am I helping make the world a healthier place? And how am I promoting Christ through all of those ways, too? It kind of gave me a helpful framework to view all of the things that I do.<sup>12</sup>

***John - "This is Part of My Education"***

John is a recent college graduate who attends the Kuneo worship service. He met with me before Kuneo. John sported a strawberry blonde beard, a mop of strawberry blonde hair, and glasses. He reminded me of a young Philip Seymour Hoffman. He currently is working at a school through a program called, "City Year," through Americorps. He has just begun going through Union Way and sat with me to discuss his faith journey and what the experience has been like so far. John grew up United Methodist, was baptized and confirmed in the United Methodist Church. He described distancing himself from his faith for a time in high school, but came back around to it in college. He attended a small, private United Methodist college, and through participating in trips to Taize and a cohort called "The Word and the World," he experienced Christianity in a new way. During his summers, he lived in Dallas and attended Union's Kuneo service. He graduated a year ago from college, and now has spent almost a full year in Dallas, attending Kuneo. He contacted Mike about transferring his membership to Union, and Mike told him that Union Way was a part of that process.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

So far, John has attended the initial two classes of Union Way and has created his Bento Box. “It’s not a Sunday school class. It’s more self-paced,” he explained.<sup>13</sup> He described the process of creating his Bento Box.

It was really kind of sitting down and evaluating the things that I value about this community and how I can help grow those. And then looking at myself and finding . . . an area where I recognize the potential for growth but I can also fairly easily break it down into actual steps. I’m very much the person who’s like, ‘I want to do all of the things,’ and then I wind up doing none of them.

He continued to say, “That process of making the box wasn’t all that hard. Sticking with it has been a little more difficult.”<sup>14</sup>

He has not yet met with his buddy. “There’s a person who . . . *accountability* isn’t the right word. There’s a person who cares about me and listens to me about how my journey is going. That’s what they’re there for. They’re there to listen.”<sup>15</sup> He knows both the person he will be “caring for” as well as the person “who cares and listens for me,” and he intends to set up a time to meet with both in the near future.

He says that overall he is excited to be a part of Union Way:

It’s . . . a mechanism for me to be intentional about my faith, about learning about Christianity, about myself, about the community that I’m a part of. I’m very passionate about education, and education is about more than just school. Like this is part of my education. I work with a bunch of 14 and 15 year olds who complain about having to learn things, and that’s very frustrating for me for several reasons, one of them being that I really enjoy learning things. . . . And this is a way for me to do that.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Sylvia - “This seems like a way I can be more involved”***

I met with Sylvia after the Kuneo service. She had been heavily involved in the Kuneo service, leading parts of the worship. Sylvia wore a grey sweater, jeans, and had short, wavy brown hair. Sylvia described her faith background as “heavy Methodist, break in the middle” and now she’s a Methodist again “unintentionally” through Union. She was baptized and confirmed in the Methodist church. When she

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<sup>13</sup> John, interviewed by Joy L. Arroyo, January 19, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

went to college, however, she fell away from Methodism for a while because she did not know how to reconcile that with being gay. None of her gay friends went to church. “It is really hard to be a gay Christian because you really have to pick either one or the other. . . . And so I had to make a choice, and at the time, I needed support from all my friends who were gay rather than my Christian friends.” Sylvia described a conversation she had with a youth group leader when in high school, that when it came to her gay friends, she should “hate the sin, not the sinner.” She takes that as the attitude that many people have in church, and she does not want to make others in church uncomfortable by her presence. Since she has short hair and “not super feminine clothes,” she thinks it would make it awkward for church people and thus awkward for her, and so for a time, she chose to avoid church altogether.

Sylvia became involved with Union while working for Project Transformation, a UMC-affiliated nonprofit that Union adopted for a summer and continues to have a close relationship with, as many of its participants worship at Kuneo. Mike invited her to be a part of the band and the worship planning team. She is aware that Union is “very accepting,” but she still struggles to reconcile being gay and a Christian. “I’m trying to be authentic to myself, but at the same time, I feel called to be involved. I still don’t know what that means.”

Participating in Union Way was a confusing experience for her because she did not participate in it to grow spiritually. She was not looking to grow in her faith. “I’m still trying to figure all of that out, like how I feel about all of that. And so I didn’t choose to do Union Way as a means of growing spiritually. It was more of, ‘Hey I like this place, and I hang out here a lot, so I guess I should be more involved, and this seems like a way I can be more involved.’” Although she could not positively answer the questions at the end of the process related to membership, she did have her membership transferred since she had already been confirmed in the United Methodist Church. During the process, she had conversations with Mike and her Union Way person about her struggles; she said these conversations were significant to her. They did not resolve any of her struggles. “I don’t know how you resolve that.

I don't think you can expect to resolve that. I do think it opens the door to have those conversations.”

## OVERALL IMPRESSIONS -----

I left Union with a desire to go through Union Way on my own. The concept of “buy in” stayed with me—Union Way was designed for young adults to “buy in” to the church and to their own faith, to take ownership of their faith and exercise responsibility through the church and serving the world. I could imagine myself repeating this rite every two years, reaffirming my “buy in” to the church. I am slightly older than the targeted age range of Union—in my early thirties, married, with a young child. But I could see the appeal of Union Way, with its focus on spiritual growth, agency, involvement, and spiritual companionship. I found myself agreeing with Mike that confirmation should be a repeatable rite, especially as life circumstances change.

I do not think I am alone in feeling drawn to participate in Union Way. The young adults I interviewed were motivated to participate. This may speak to its generational appeal, but I suspect this repeatable program could have its appeal for people in other generations, as well, who wish to grow spiritually and have a companion to talk with about spiritual issues. The program taps into the desire of many Millennials to think through spiritual issues, to grow personally, and to be taken seriously in what they think and what they can offer. The Union Way also teaches the skill of listening, of companioning another and listening deeply to another's story without jumping to judgment.

What stayed with me the most is something Mike said to me in an interview, as he described why “buy in” matters particularly to the Methodist movement. I will quote it here in full, and let the final words in this report be Mike's:

I feel like churches in the Wesleyan tradition should be killing confirmation [that is, doing it really well]. It's our heritage. The Methodist movement started with a handful of young adults and college students who tried to figure out a way to live a holier life, who tried to take this notion of following Jesus seriously and actually live it out. That's what we came from. We should be killing it. We should be better at confirmation than anyone on the planet.

We should be doing it in robust and meaningful ways, and we're just not. We're just not. I think we're too afraid to ask more of people. And what I've encountered with this group of people here, twenty-somethings, the vast majority of them have left the church and find little to no value in it, is that the more I ask of them, the more likely they are to participate in it. . . . I think they know that something that is worth their investment is going to ask for something of them. And when the church asks little, and has minimal expectations, we are communicating that it doesn't matter. They could do 8000 things in any given week. They are only going to do the things that matter. Those are the things that are going to ask something from them.