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# (Yard) Signs of Our Worship

Exploring Faith, Meaning, and Messaging in 2020

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## Abstract

Through a sociological framework of *lived religion*, this research focused on the religious behavior and practices that lay people use in ordinary life to help create a sense of meaning and transcendence. Specifically, the research explored how Mennonite families were using yard signs to engage sociopolitical concerns during the fall of 2020 in the area around Harrisonburg, Virginia. Mennonite families were chosen as participants because of the conscious and overt link between religious practice and social behavior in the Anabaptist tradition. In the context of personal interviews, 12 participant households discussed their signs (25 signs total), their intentions for posting these signs at this specific time, and the messages they hoped to convey. This article features their voices and stories.

The year 2020 proved to be most unconventional. The COVID-19 pandemic turned our carefully scripted play of life into improvisation, and actors across the sectors found themselves trying out impromptu steps and new lines. These unanticipated pivots profoundly affected families and individuals in various communities of faith. For some families, the changes in congregational life felt like a little hiccup in the regular programming, a simple matter of minor changes against a backdrop of stability. Others experienced the changes as seismic waves crashing and redefining the religious landscape they had taken for granted prior to 2020. Either way, for many people of faith the previous ways of being in relationship and in dialogue became no longer accessible. In-person meetings with congregational singing, calls for volunteers, testimonies, offering, and communal prayer—abruptly paused. And yet, surely these people are still

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praying, still singing, still finding ways to financially support certain causes, and still finding ways to discuss the issues they find most compelling.

How are lay people adapting their religious practices, now that family and neighborhood life may seem more dominant than institutionalized forms of worship? It is still too early to name all the ways the pandemic is changing the religious landscape, but we know that it *is* indeed changing things—accelerating previous trends in one area while obfuscating trends in another. We also know that people live out their faith identities in their daily lives: sometimes we are conscious of the link between faith and behavior; sometimes we enact our faith identities in ways that other people can easily recognize as religious; and sometimes these expressions take place in locations that are collectively understood as sacred.

During this continuing time of COVID-19, as the average lay person is seeing less of pastors and worship professionals, the sanctuary, and institutional traditions, we might expect to see an increase in religious practices that are exploratory and more person-specific in nature. These practices may be located in unconventional spaces. This hiatus from in-person church life may be opening a space for certain forms of religious expression to come toward the fore as other forms fade to the background.

This research surveyed a small number of Mennonite lay families in a specific town during a specific period. It was a point-in-time dipstick to listen in on these families in the semi-public spaces of their front yards and to explore their motivation and intentions: What were they saying? Why were they saying it? And who were they talking to? Their messaging was cast, in that immediate moment, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 national election. Against this historical backdrop, this research is one tiny sliver of observation in the multigenerational unfolding of Mennonite families in American society as they responded to being prodded, pleased, and offended by the sociopolitical realities of the nation.

## 1. Theoretical Location of Research

*Lived religion* is an ethnographic framework that focuses on the day-to-day religious practices of lay people. It emerged as an academic field in the United States in the late 1900s and was developed by scholars in the field of religious studies. David D. Hall and Robert A. Orsi are two of these scholars who were concerned that popular religion—in the sense of the institutionalized, grand traditions—was exerting too much control over defining what is legitimate, normal, and centered spiritual experience and meaning-making.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*:

Lived religion places the microscope of academic research over the private, personal sphere—the micro locations where individuals or small groups embody their faith in ways, perhaps uniquely, that help them make sense of their experiences and anxieties. It emphasizes people and perspectives that may be considered peripheral, or at variance, with the grand traditions, noting the realities of what is happening at the margins as well as at the center, and the ways people actually embody their own faith (not only how they think they ought to). In doing so, it pays attention to the content and context of what the people are doing. As such, lived religion research investigates a plethora of other experiential locations such as home altars and shrines, special dietary choices, clothing choices, dance and arts, and homemade rituals, highlighting the things people do, discuss, and create. Lived religion allows for almost anything—so long as the “anything” is a vessel of meaning for the actors involved—to serve as a “text” for study.

As Nancy Ammerman summarizes the emerging field, it is about lay people (instead of clergy), what they practice (instead of dogma they believe), of their own agency (instead of prescribed behavior).<sup>2</sup> But some scholars go a step further, suggesting that the field does not actually differentiate between these categories. Orsi argues that attention must be given to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practices *and* theology, things *and* ideas. The central issue, he says, is the way people reach for a sense of transcendence from the context of their quotidian realities.<sup>3</sup>

This theoretical framework pairs well with research on religious practices that are emerging or fluid, which makes it particularly useful in times of rapid change. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic left very little untouched, and religious behavior was no exception. But as church oversight boards in this research group took on laborious tasks of rewriting policies, redesigning spaces, restructuring personnel, and so on to adapt to COVID-19, the lay people were handed a tremendous amount of freedom to improvise and experiment.

Mennonite families, of course, are not the only ones that have been given this freedom. Ironically, America’s fastest growing religious classification, the Nones, have been working in this space for a while—developing meaningful ways of nurturing spirituality beyond the boundaries of the church/synagogue/mosque. But the Anabaptist community is particularly intriguing to watch at junctures like this because of the overt link between faith and behavior—and,

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*Faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

2 Nancy T. Ammerman, “Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29, no. 2 (February 1, 2016): 83–99, <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2016-02-01>.

3 Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*.

specifically, *social* behavior (that is, behaviors in the context of community) in their lives. This research project emerged from a broader curiosity about how today’s American Mennonite families would adapt to their churches being “closed.”

*Engagement* is a prevalent theme in the Anabaptist construction of spirituality,<sup>4</sup> and so the research question for this project developed along the lines of “How are Mennonite families showing up in their local community during this time?” As Palmer Becker puts it in *Anabaptist Essentials*,<sup>5</sup> while Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our life. As such, the way Mennonites show up in their neighborhoods carries a lot of weight—not just social weight but also theological weight. This interplay between behavior in the social sphere and belief in the theological sphere is present at official levels of the church as well as among the laity. And this is not a glitch in Anabaptist spirituality! Rather, Mennonites view it as a feature of their faith. In their way of understanding, avoiding (or at least minimizing) a dichotomy between belief and behavior forces faithful living to remain concrete, practical, and as genuinely messy as the human community always will be.

## 2. Methods

Participants for the study were initially sought through social media and direct requests for interviews among known households who qualified for the study. Participants were limited to households who self-identified as Mennonite; resided in the area around Harrisonburg, Virginia; and currently had at least one sign in their yard. Initial interviewees were encouraged to suggest additional participants, so the sampling method was mixed (purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling).

Individuals from 12 different households were interviewed between September 25 and October 6, 2020. Of the 12 interviews, 10 were conducted by phone, 1 by email, and 1 in person. These participants were connected to six different local Anabaptist bodies. Their real first names are used here with permission.

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<sup>4</sup> Engagement is a more prevalent theme for certain branches of the Anabaptist family than others. This comment is based on Ervin Stutzman’s work in *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2011), in which he argues that in the one hundred years between 1908 and 2008, changes in the USA-Mennonite community were characterized by movement from quietism to activism, from separatism to engagement, and apolitical church life to political involvement.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017).

Participants were asked the following questions:

- What sign(s) are currently posted in your yard?
- What was the issue(s) you meant to engage with/respond to by posting your sign(s)?
- What do you hope others will think about, or what is the message you hope to convey with this sign?
- Assuming that there is some level of congruity between your signs and what you believe, can you describe the link between the signs and your faith/values?
- Are there any ways in which having this sign posted prompted changes in your social behavior, or changed the ways that others relate to you?

One might take issue with the claim that posting a sign constitutes *social* behavior, as, conspicuously, it does not involve any face-to-face interaction between people. While this may be ostensibly true, participants in the study were unambiguous about their intention for communication. No one reported posting the signs for purposes of aesthetics or public safety, for example. Without exception, the signs were intentionally situated in open spaces so they might be read by anyone who came near the house.

The posting of yard signs is not “corporate” worship in the same way that congregational singing is corporate, but perhaps it could be viewed as “corporate” in the sense of family-level, collective behavior. Eleven of the 12 participant households in this study indicated that their household discussed the sign they put up in their yard before posting it and/or generally were in agreement about posting it (even though purchasing and posting the sign only required one actor). The sense of collective, family-level ownership of the messaging suggests genuinely corporate behavior on the micro scale.

What about “worship”? Is it too far-fetched to talk about posting a sign as an act of worship? This article responds with a clear no. Here “worship” is conceptualized as voluntary action intended to honor God or enhance a sense of connection with that which is sacred. Even beyond this general correlation, in the context of Anabaptism, putting faith into action through a physical act like driving a yard sign into the ground may be considered an example of worship *par excellence*.

### 3. Limitations of the study

This study was not designed to reach a representative sample across congregations, political persuasion, or signage. As a case in point, the single most frequently discussed sign in this research was the Black Lives Matter sign (8 cases out of 25), and none of the Scripture-based signs—which are more common in the county—were represented here. This is not problematic, given the focus on faith, messaging, and meaning, but this research should not be extrapolated to make statements about the area that it was not designed to make.

A second limitation of this research is that it focused exclusively on the discourse of the families who posted the signs, while the voices from the intended audience—the drivers and pedestrians who read the signs—are largely absent. Those voices only entered into this research through participant-reported anecdotes of their audiences “responding” through actions of pulling up, damaging, or stealing signs, or yelling messages out the window of their vehicles as they drove past.

### 4. Results

In this sample of 25 signs, the most common sign was Black Lives Matter ( $n=8$ ), followed by signs of support for a political candidate ( $n=7$ ), “Welcome Your Neighbor” signs ( $n=6$ ), and four other signs that only appeared once each. With only one exception, all the signs were manufactured, which suggests that families spent money to acquire them. On Amazon.com these signs typically cost between \$5 and \$30. All the signs were intentionally posted in the yard of the family’s home; that is to say that they were not posted by other parties (such as a landlord) or in a space where any anonymity was possible (such as a storefront or business). Five of the 12 participant households (42%) mentioned that at some point in the past year, at least one of their signs had been pulled up, damaged, or stolen.

Data from the interviews are organized below according to the sequence of the questions asked:

#### Question #1

Participants were asked, “What were the issues you meant to engage with by posting this/these signs?” Their responses, consolidated into 5 general categories, are listed below in order of thematic prevalence:

1. racism and minorities (9)
2. concerns about immigration<sup>6</sup> (5)

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<sup>6</sup> While participants expressed common concerns about immigration, they approached those concerns differently—some from the angle of hospitality toward immi-

3. concerns about hospitality [toward minorities and/or immigrants] (5)
4. concerns about the accountability of the police force (4)
5. other concerns

## Question #2

The second question prompted participants to reflect on the specific message they wanted to convey, to move deeper than their general concern (e.g., immigration, for example): What was the specific message they wanted to communicate about that concern? What did they want others to think about when they read the sign? This question moved the conversation from general themes to concrete and specific messages. Below are selected responses from interviews, organized thematically.

Regarding racism and minority-related concerns, participants said:

- “I want people who have felt alone to know that they are not alone.”
- “For me, it’s making visible and acknowledging the harm that comes from the invisibility and silencing.”
- “I want to show that I care about the part of the community that is getting the short end of the stick.”
- “It’s White people’s problem, and we have got to take responsibility for our problem. I really feel like now is the time to not be silent and [to] take responsibility for what we need to be responsible for and turn this around.”
- “We should rally in support of people who are vulnerable.”
- “[I want to show] just how hard we’re all working and talking about this [Black Lives Matter] situation.”
- “The Black Lives Matter sign is an indication of who we are and how we want our neighbors to be treated.”

Regarding immigration-related concerns, participants said:

- “I am publicly protesting the treatment against immigrants.”
- “The big [political issue] is immigrants and the awful situation with immigrants.”
- “Immigrant-friendly policies are good for our nation.”

Regarding hospitality-related concerns, participants said:

- “As a family we have had experiences of incredible welcome as guests [abroad] and very painful experiences of governmental barriers to being in a place we loved, so issues of welcome are very close to our hearts and the hearts of our children.”

- “We want to convey an openness to relationship, especially toward people for whom English is not their first language.”
- “I want people to feel like this neighborhood welcomes them.”
- “I have received hospitality and love from my neighbors, and I would like to share it to the best of my ability.”

Regarding accountability for police, participants said:

- “We believe in social change, we believe in change that could happen at the governmental level . . . like prison reform, police training, and defunding.”
- [The Black Lives Matter sign] “It’s about racism and the treatment of Black people by police departments with impunity. They don’t have any accountability if they kill somebody or treat someone bad.”
- “Our [Black] daughters have experienced blatant, overt racism in this country, both inside and outside the police department.”
- “The extrajudicial killings by police [of] citizens, disproportionately Black and Brown people . . . is morally reprehensible.”

### Question #3

The third question asked participants to explore the ways in which their signage is congruent with their faith as Anabaptist Christians. Most of the participants spoke naturally and easily about this, frequently citing scenes of Jesus in the New Testament and implying that they wanted to emulate his behavior. Some referenced other authors, such as John Howard Yoder and his book *Politics of Jesus* and [Walter Wink’s?] *The Powers*. For some of the participants, however, this question seemed confusing and/or too abstract. It appeared to the interviewer that the question may have been problematic because it assumed a differentiation between values, politics, and religious convictions. This distinction was sharper for some than for others.

Here are a few participant comments about the link between their faith and their signs:

- “All of my signs are connected to my politics, and my politics are deeply connected to my faith.”
- “I see the Christian calling—and Anabaptist faith is part of that stream—is to be a blessing to the nations wherever we find ourselves. A more specific call to be people who welcome relationship—as ambassadors . . . I do see a posture of welcoming relationship at the heart of God’s intention for the world. That is central to who I am as a neighbor.”
- “I think of the phrase ‘They’ll know us by our actions rather than what comes out of my mouth.’ The act of putting my signs there [is my] pub-

lic protest of the treatment of immigrants and women and LGBTQ people. . . . Protest can be political, but can also be about being a follower of Jesus.”

- “I would hope that these signs remind me to live prophetically in a way that resists the dominant narratives of domination and empire.”
- “The crux of it for me is in where power lies. Based on the life of Jesus and where Jesus put energy, it was for people who found themselves outside the protection of the power that was communally held. Because my faith is based on living out things communally, I believe that it is important how others are treated in my community. I really believe that the KOG [kingdom of God] is realized when the imbalances of power are set right.”
- “I just feel like the whole early church was active, they were out there in the community and talking to the prisoners in jail. . . . They were definitely not passive people.”
- “The faith connection is Jesus’s teachings about supporting those who do not have voices, who do not have power, those who have been mistreated.”
- “Anabaptism . . . challenges followers of Jesus to put their faith into practice every day. [My signs] are a reminder to me of what I believe in my heart and want to live with my feet and hands.”

#### Question #4

The final interview question asked participants to reflect on ways that having sign(s) in their yards may have prompted changes in their social behavior or in the behavior of others toward them. Responses to this question went in several directions. When asked, “Has the sign prompted changes in your behavior?” one woman replied with spunk: “Not at all!” Another man said, “My life is an open book.” In these cases, participants appeared to feel a sense of satisfaction with the congruity between their signs and their character—a simple and direct statement about what *is*. For other respondents, the signs were more *aspirational*—a statement about who they want to be and what they want their community to be. Their answers indicated that, at the very least, they hope the signs prompt changes in themselves and in others.

As a case in point, Matthew Bucher, who led the Welcome your Neighbor sign initiative,<sup>7</sup> spoke in depth about this aspiration for change. He reported that the original sign was hand-painted on both sides: the church where he is pastor positioned the front side to face the street and the back side to face the

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<sup>7</sup> See “Welcome Your Neighbors,” <https://www.welcomeyourneighbors.org/about>.

front door of the church. “It’s as much about *our* transformation as the *community’s* transformation,” he says. “There’s a temptation to post the right Facebook post and then move on to the next thing. But this is not a virtue signal that ‘we’re ok;’ it’s a reminder to us that this is how we are to be living.” That sign was intended, from its inception, to shape the person who posts it at least as much as the passersby who read it.

Other comments about changes in social behavior included the following:

- “The sign is a proclamation, and a reminder to me that I am committed to being a welcoming neighbor.”
- “It’s an opportunity to keep asking myself how I’m doing that in practical ways. Am I the kind of person who really welcomes everyone—because that’s what it says: I’m glad you’re my neighbor. It’s been formative for me.”
- “We’ve thought about making donuts and just delivering them to neighbors, making Christmas cookies, etc. We just have to put ourselves out there, especially if we’re putting ourselves out there in this way [with a sign].”
- “I think [non-English speakers] are more likely to stop and talk to us.”

These were the types of responses one might expect. Several respondents, however, took the question in a different direction. Christine, whose family’s signs were stolen and their mailbox destroyed, said simply, “We started locking our door.” Jennifer’s comment was similar: “You get paranoid.”

Several interviewees described how they feel—as citizens who often go walking, jogging, or biking in their community—when they see a certain sign. Most of the comments were connected to either the Welcome Your Neighbor or the Black Lives Matter signs. Matthew said, “I remember once when I was bloodied on the side of the road and I saw a Welcome Your Neighbor sign. I was greatly relieved to see it. It happened to be [on the property of] the Harrisonburg mosque.” Two participants reported that Black friends and/or family members have expressed appreciation for their Black Lives Matter signs; one remarked, “When I’m jogging, if I get into trouble I know which houses would be safe for me to ask for help.”

## Discussion

### Connections: Politics, Faith, Social Issues

The content of the interviews brought to the fore several items of particular interest. First, these interviews suggest a close connection between politics, faith, and social issues in participants’ thinking. Several participants spoke directly to this through comments like “God’s intention for the world . . . is central to

who I am as a neighbor” and (of immigration concerns) “It is a merging of faith and politics.” Since the 1990s, Americans have been trending toward increased alignment between religious identity and political identity,<sup>8</sup> so this is not particularly a surprise, but it does prompt deeper questions of what this alignment might mean.

This congruity between faith, politics, and social issues may, on one hand, indicate a healthy level of integration between various facets of an individual or family. On the other hand, it may suggest muddy thinking, a fusion of ideas where individual parts might get lost. This may be especially true when the congruence between theology, politics, and social ideology is woven so tightly that it creates an almost impenetrable sense of certainty. Such an approach to politics and social issues that carries the full (perceived) weight of a theological system, combined with an approach to faith that carries very specific political and social ideals, can result in what appear to be self-reinforcing loops.

### Sign Messaging

Another complexity that arose was multiplicity in messaging, when one sign was intended to deliver different messages to various audiences. The Black Lives Matter signs were perhaps the most indicative of this occurrence; several participants discussed that they wanted to send one message for Black people (a message of solidarity), and a different message for White people (a message of raising awareness and perhaps a rebuke). It appears that the intended message of a sign is much clearer to the person posting it than it may be to those who are reading it.

A related issue—scope of the messaging—was similarly complex. To what extent does a sign endorse an entire movement or political platform? For example, does a Black Lives Matter sign indicate support for the entire movement or only the specific claim that Black lives do, indeed, matter? One man said, “I will support anything that will mend race relations, but the Black Lives Matter movement is rotten to the core. I don’t have a problem saying Black Lives Matter, because they do! But if you look at that organization, it is nothing that Christians should be supporting.” A pro-Biden sign also elicited various responses: for one person it was about police “training and defunding”; for another person it was a message about creation care; for another a message in support of healthcare, and for yet another the sign was not about Biden at all but simply a statement of dissatisfaction with former president Donald Trump.

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Another observation regarding message drift points to ways the intended message of a sign can shift over time. Amy’s case made this point exceptionally well: she and her husband were entering their first election season as a recently married couple. Near the beginning of the season, Amy put a Biden/Harris sign in the grass on one side of the sidewalk leading to the front door. Several days later, her husband responded by posting a Trump/Pence sign on the other side of the sidewalk. When the interviewer asked what message they were trying to convey with their signage, she replied that her message had shifted. “At first, I wasn’t expecting the other sign. [My sign merely] conveyed that I support the Democratic party. Now that two signs are up . . . it suggests that in spite of the incredible polarization in our society, that two people could be married and live in the same house and raise children together.” For Amy, the messaging shifted from pro-Democratic to pro-depolarization and became a fist pump for nuanced discourse.

Elizabeth shared a similar story of message drift. When the Black Lives Matter signs came out, she initially chose not to post one. “I am African American, but through the years I have not felt the racism and [the level of] attack that average African Americans do. At first I thought it was saying ‘Black Lives Matter’ with so much force, it was almost like you were saying that no other lives were important so I didn’t put up the sign.” But as time passed and she listened to more stories from other people of color, she began to reconsider. Ultimately, she decided to post a Black Lives Matter sign—specifically as a show of her solidarity with a particular friend, “Jordan,” who had suffered significantly from racism. For Elizabeth, the meaning of the sign changed over time from a message of exclusivity (“no other lives are important”) to a very specific message of support for Jordan.

## Community Responses

Many of the participants cited concerns about how others would respond to their signs. Some deliberately selected signs that were unlikely to antagonize their neighbors, while others reported wanting to support a message or give witness to an idea, even though they expected the message would be unpopular with some. Deanna, for example, who keeps a homemade PEACE sign permanently posted in her yard, said, “The idea of peace on earth is something my neighbors would be okay with. It doesn’t antagonize them in the same way that possibly a political sign would.” Jennifer, on the other hand, posted a Black Lives Matter sign even though she knew it would be unpopular with her neighbors. “I feel like it’s not ok for me to be silent,” she said. “We’re stirring up conflict in our community [with the signs]. How do we, as a peace church, stir up conflict in a way that is healthy? How do I value [my neighbors] at the same time that I am horrified by what they’re doing [in this situation where] we’re making things uncomfortable for our community and even uncomfortable for us?”

In spite of the apparent absence of antagonistic motives for posting signs, half of the participants reported being targeted for some form of mistreatment or harassment<sup>9</sup> by people reacting to their signs. In John's case, he was cut off from his extended family. He reported that following some discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement and issues of police misconduct, "We [my relatives and I] are no longer on speaking terms."

Other participants experienced signs being toppled, destroyed, or stolen, messages shouted from passing cars or pedestrians, and social ostracism. The belongings (the signs themselves) of 5 interviewees were destroyed or stolen. In most cases, except when the signs were posted by the road, access to the signs included trespassing. One woman reported, "Within 36 hours [of posting the sign] someone climbed the fence, damaged it, and stole it." (She added, "We put a new one out right away. We have to bring it in every night [so it doesn't get stolen]; it's like our pet.") Christine, who had posted 6 signs, reported that they all were stolen in September and her mailbox was bashed. Jennifer reported that when she posted a Black Lives Matter sign, "Right away, people were driving by yelling, 'White lives matter' and 'All lives matter!'" A man walked by their home "screaming" toward the house and later toward her twenty-year-old son when he drove out the driveway.

Naturally, this type of pushback has been upsetting. Jennifer observed that she feels less safe in her community: "It makes you re-think everything. If he had seen me jogging by and he had been in a car, would he have swerved at me? You kind of get paranoid." Nevertheless, in every case where participants were the targets of hostility, they chose to repurchase and repost the same signs. Greta, whose Black Lives Matter sign was stolen, said, "Having had the sign stolen makes me realize that this takes effort. By reposting the signs, I'm saying, 'No, this [issue] isn't going away.'"

### Intentions: The Question of "Why?"

This research took place during the eighth month of a pandemic, in the middle of a contentious election season, with the unemployment higher than it has been in the past seventy years. As economic and political concerns reached a crescendo, it was fascinating to listen in on what these families were talking about in the spaces of their front yards. But going a step beyond the *what* of their messages, there remained the question of *why*. Why bother? Why bother to go to the effort for something that might irk your neighbors and eventually get stolen?

Participants' intentions, shown below in five general categories, were full of substance:

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<sup>9</sup> Harassment here refers to various forms of pushback from community members.

1. **A vote for shalom and good neighborliness.** Several of the signs in this study, such as the PEACE sign, appeared to be a subtle but deliberate move to promote simple friendliness between neighbors—a reminder of shared humanity and an expression of goodwill. In times of tension and stress, this type of messaging may be particularly appropriate.
2. **Proclamation of faith.** Some people used their signs as a public declaration of faith—a clear and direct message about the beliefs of the families who were living at that address. John said, “We want people to see those signs and say, ‘The people who live in that house, social justice is important to them and they are willing to stand up for what they believe in.’” Proclamation signs, unlike the signs in the following categories, do not necessarily purport to change other people or systems. It is a family’s way of drawing a line in the sand: this is who we are, this is what we stand for. This kind of public declaration takes courage.
3. **Prophetic messages.** A number of the participants used their signs as a prophetic gesture: to raise awareness about problems, to lament, to encourage the confession of corporate sin, and to plead with their community to consider positive change. The messages behind these signs focused on “us”/“our community” and themes of redemption; they were grounded in a sense of hope that we, collectively, can do better. In this way, they may be reminiscent of certain forms of public prayer—expressions of lament and acknowledgment that as a human community we have fallen short.
4. **Social Action: intentional activism for improving certain aspects of the community.** Some families posted signs because they wanted to change the readers’ perspectives. Lee, for example, hopes his political sign “will help people think about alternatives . . . what is more edifying, what has more healing, what is more inclusive.” Jennifer said she hopes her neighbors will give consideration to the message on her sign, a sign that has not been popular in her area, because they know her personally: “Maybe because [our neighbors] know us as people, it can be a counterpoint to all the media stuff about [left-wing people] being baby killers.”
5. **Protest: an intentional show of disapproval for something another person or group has done.** Unlike the statements of faith, protest is often a response to someone *else’s* position. The audience is the “other.” The message is “Stop!” These messages of protest can be delivered with a high or low level of confrontation, and can likewise be interpreted (regardless of the intent) with high or low levels of hostility.

## Yard Signs as Religious Dialogue

Using yard signs as a way to talk about deep values and complex concerns has a number of inherent limitations. Perhaps the most obvious one is the ambiguity created by the (necessary) brevity of the signs, which are often just one, two, or three words in length. These signs, packed with unspoken subtexts, may mean completely different things to the people who post them versus the people who read them. Take the Black Lives Matter sign in a neighbor's yard, for instance—is it a message about Black people, White people, policing, or voting reform?

Another important limitation is the relative absence of dialogue. When a sign is posted, it may or may not lead to conversation between those who post the signs and those who read them. For complicated issues, other platforms are better suited to an exchange of ideas—to questions and responses, and to the personal stories lying behind the emotions that yard signs often represent.

In spite of the limitations, however, these interviews underscored that families can indeed post signs as a platform to make public statements about things that matter to them a great deal—things that matter so much, in fact, that they may be willing to repeatedly purchase the same sign and keep posting it in their yards even when they fully anticipate that it will be stolen or destroyed.

Front yards may not be a typical place for religious dialogue, and plastic signs may not be traditional worship art, but these interviews suggest that participants are using yard signs for profoundly religious actions, including confession of sin, statements of faith, and action for social justice.

## Continuing the Ancient Story: Faith Amid Change

At the time of this study, like so many families of faith across the nation, the Mennonite participants in this study had been experiencing an enormous (and nonvoluntary) disruption in how they were practicing faith during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 1 of the 12 families represented was able to attend weekly meetings at their home churches in person. For the other 11 families, such conversations and activities were no longer happening in the same ways.

It seems likely that people will look for ways to replace what has been lost or changed during the pandemic and, in the process, develop new faith practices or explore new aspects of old faith practices. Perhaps in the eye of history the year 2020 will be a moment of paradigmatic change in American religious life. Perhaps it will be a time when our concept of “the sacred” bursts open. There will probably be changes in the way we relate to our spaces: as our relationship with the church building shifts, new spaces will take on sacred significance over time. Considering the current pandemic-induced limitations on social gatherings, these new spaces are likely to be smaller and more personal, perhaps centering around homes and neighborhoods. The rapidly evolving environment will continue to churn up new dilemmas, replacing the current “hot topic” issues in

our dialogue with new issues that 2020 has brought to the fore. And as families and faith communities adapt, social maps will invariably be redrawn as people cluster in new ways around novel issues and practices.

Gauging from history, some of our new habits are likely to be problematic—new habits often are—but perhaps some of these are changes we can welcome. The current status quo is certainly not free of problems, especially when viewed from the perspective of the margins. Perhaps it is not such a bad thing for our religious landscape to be upended. People of faith will continue to create meaningful practices; they will find ways to embody the values they cherish—which is as it should be.

Each generation must appropriate their faith to make it real. And as we move forward into new spaces, we also will be moving back into a very old story, a story repeated across many times and spaces, a story of faith, upheaval, and innovation.