

ARTICLE

Relational Authenticity in Community: A Key for Support on the Spiritual Journey?

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Abstract

As God leads his people in this current age, the church, ever-changing and growing, has responded with new expressions of independent community churches. Jesus' mandate for the church to care for its people has not changed. How then, are independent community churches supporting the spiritual journeys of their congregants? This article presents a case study of The Big Table, an independent community church in South Perth, Western Australia. It uses interviews and participant observations to examine how spiritual support is provided beyond traditional church models. It draws from and extends, a theoretical framework of relational authenticity proposed by Lynne Taylor (2017), emphasizing its role in nurturing faith during seasons of doubt, crisis and transition. This has theoretical relevance as it extends Taylor's research from recent converts to believers through faith transitions. The study shows how the deeply valued practices of community engagement, worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership sustain spiritual formation and faith continuity, whilst highlighting the importance of relational authenticity as central to supporting believers across faith transitions. The article also has ministry relevance for understanding the journeys of believers who depart existing expressions of church, whilst retaining faith in God. It also holds practical relevance for church leaders exploring new expressions of church, offering insights into fostering meaningful spiritual engagement and support outside traditional frameworks.

Keywords: Relational authenticity, Spiritual formation journey, Independent community church

1 Introduction

Through all stages of the spiritual journey, the church is mandated to care for its congregants. In Jn 21:15-17, Jesus instructed the church to nourish, teach and love God's children, and Peter in his first letter later urged the church to mature in their faith (1 Pet. 2:2). Scholars agree that spiritual formation and support of congregants' relationships with God through all stages of their growth and development is a vital role for the church.

With church numbers in decline, partly due to a lack of support on the spiritual journey, multiple independent community churches, understood to be non-traditional, non-denominational church communities, have arisen in response. Often structured with values and practices that respond to the postmodern world and community in which it finds itself, independent community churches express themselves in innovative ways to meet the needs of people in a changing cultural landscape. There has been minimal study, though, at the intersection of the spiritual formation journey and how independent community churches are best supporting their congregants.

This article posits that relational authenticity, understood as the ongoing journey toward authentic expression of persons in their relationships with God, self and others, is a crucial practice in independent community churches that support Christians through and beyond seasons of the spiritual journey, including doubt and crisis. The article does this by further defining and unpacking relational authenticity and its relationship to the spiritual formation journey. Then, by drawing upon a case study of one independent community church, it presents the role of relational authenticity in the lived experiences of churchgoers. Next, it reflects upon the significance of relational authenticity, in contrast to just relationships, through the spiritual practices of community, worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership. Finally, it considers the implications of this for ministry relevance to church departers as well as leaders who are pioneering new and diverse expressions of church.

2 Relational Authenticity and the Spiritual Journey

Lynne Taylor's work on atonement and relational authenticity asserts that atonement facilitates the restoration of relationships across all dimensions: personal, social and cosmological. Building upon Charles Guignon's (2004) definition of authenticity, Taylor defines relational authenticity as "The project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God" (Taylor 2017: 37). Atonement is the beginning of an ongoing movement toward relational authenticity and the becoming of a person's authentic self and all they were created to be (36-7). Having been made in the image of God, wholeness and relational authenticity are found in the created beings imaging God through loving relationships (31). The act of atonement positions

the Christian in right relationship with God, but the process of becoming relationally authentic, with God, self and others is a journey. Relational authenticity can be understood differently to just relationships, in that it is a part of the journey of the Christian from the starting point of a right relationship with God, that enables the imaging of God, in love, toward being one's true, whole and authentic self.

For the Christian, the spiritual formation journey is an ongoing and fundamental lifetime expedition, with circular movements and undulations of crescents and valleys. It is informed organically by one's relationship with God and responses to events that naturally occur throughout life (Hagberg and Guelich 2005). Faith struggles through doubt and crisis, are a crucial aspect of the spiritual journey intrinsic to the Christian's existence. The spiritual formation journey is the act of moving toward relational authenticity, set upon by, atonement.

Unfortunately, many churches are ill-equipped to facilitate spiritual formation effectively through all stages of the spiritual journey (Barton et al. 2014). Jamieson's (2002) research on the faith journeys of church departers from evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal institutional church models posits that churches often struggle to address queries around faith. Congregants have left the church, but their faith has remained intact. Not looking to leave the faith, people are exploring new ways of being the church and expressing their spirituality. In the changing cultural landscape where a subjective understanding of truth is more commonly accepted than an imposed metanarrative, people everywhere, including Christians, have a longing for "more God and less church, more faith and less religion" (Martin 2002: 9). People are searching for safe spaces where they can be truly authentic in relationships with others.

A call to church renewal at the turn of the last century has seen the church respond with new and inventive expressions of faith and the establishment of multiple, diverse small congregations of believers primarily concerned with Jesus and authentic relationships with one another. Independent community churches, understood to be non-traditional, non-denominational church models with common overlapping hallmarks such as informal and non-conventional locations for meetings, like cafes and pubs, and a declericalized leadership structure have arisen across the globe. Callahan's (2000) work on small community churches observed a growing trend toward small, strong congregations, arguing that people were looking for communities that embraced relationships over busy church programmes.

Gibbs and Bolger's (2006) investigation on the nature of emerging churches and movements emphasizes that supportive and effective churches meet the spiritual needs of congregants in a changing culture with the main concern being congregants' holistic growth through rich encounters with God (Gibbs & Bolger 2006: 234). Viola (2009) asserts that mutual edification through community gatherings without pretence and a hands-on approach in its meetings will accelerate Christian spiritual growth. In the missional church space, Beard, through his study on spiritual formation practices

in the missional movement, suggests that spiritual formation through missional discipleship takes place via the organic flow of living life together (Beard 2015: 181).

In these new expressions of church though, the question arises of which practices best support their congregants on their spiritual journey? Liesch (2001), on the importance of worship in church today, emphasizes the need for mutual edification in community for worship to be effective, whilst TenElshof suggests the (universal) Church needs to provide good listening and responding skills to allow for sharing honestly and authentically and for the Holy Spirit to bring holistic spiritual growth (Barton et al. 2014: 300). Breedt and Niemandt's (2013) research on relational leadership and the missional church posits that, in a time where honesty, truthfulness, integrity and relationships are highly prized, for leaders to lead effectively, it is necessary for authentic relationships to be cultivated among those whom the leaders lead. In each of these practices, relational authenticity is at their centre.

The case study below showcases an independent community church and the significance of relational authenticity in the lived experiences of its congregants as they move along the spiritual journey. Before I develop my method and share my findings, let me briefly introduce the case study.

3 The Big Table South Perth Case Study

The Big Table South Perth (henceforth referred to as TBTSP), is one in a network of small churches in Perth, Western Australia. With a belief that the Church is primarily a who and not a what, they "gather together in a bunch of different contexts to worship God, deepen relationship with Jesus, live out faith together, be shaped by his Word and share the good news of Jesus through living their ordinary lives together in community" (The Big Table 2010).

The Big Table network has an emphasis on small numbers for the cultivation of authentic and vulnerable relationships. As the lead pastor Simon stated, "At The Big Table, there is an opportunity for flourishing intimacy that is not easily conceived in larger groups" (The Big Table 2021). The missing component of relationships over programs for flourishing churches as argued by Callahan (2000), Viola (2009) and Beard (2015) is foundational to The Big Table model.

The vision of TBTSP is to be a "church-planting church" (The Big Table 2010). It is a community of people centred around Jesus Christ seeking to love and support one another in daily life and share this love with the greater communities in which the church finds itself. This occurs by "bringing the Kingdom of God into daily contexts through (as examples) participation in running clubs and community gardens" (The Big Table 2010).

Upon arrival at the family home where the Sunday morning service is held, I was immediately taken by its informal atmosphere. Children ate toast in the open

kitchen living area, and two musicians in the lounge corner acoustically practised worship songs for the service. The pastor made coffee while small groups of people conversed in the backyard around a long, big table. Whilst TBTSP has never defined itself by its venue, it is aptly named because everyone who gathers at the table is considered equal, welcome and valued. With societal status stripped away, each person has a place and is seen.

During the worship block, a small child spontaneously asked to share his week's reflection on faith, before assisting with the morning's preparation of a community service initiative, a Bread Run, where bread is delivered to the homes of people in need. This is just one expression of the diverse rhythms adopted by the community, which include formal and informal gatherings of brunches, retreats, formal church services and shared meals.

TBTSP is an independent community church that displays characteristics necessary for relevance today. The church gathers in non-institutional contexts, primarily a home, but also finds itself in cafes, by the river and in the garden. There is a recognition that worship extends beyond the music block, with various styles having been explored. The church structure prioritizes community accountability with a relational leadership model, drawing inspiration from the book of Acts.

This community of Jesus-followers seeks to embody his mission to the greater community through love for one another. They come from diverse denominational backgrounds, engage with contemporary culture and emphasize personal choice and the individual's responsibility for participation in the community. The church has inadvertently addressed the spiritual needs of a community navigating a shifting cultural landscape.

3.1 Case Study Design

The case study used a phenomenological design to inform the data collection and analysis. To answer the central question of which practises best support congregants on their spiritual journey, a thorough study of The Big Table website, and phenomenological methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews were undertaken.

For the research, Hagberg and Guelich's (2005) *Critical Journey* model was utilized for mapping the progress and development of the individual participants' spiritual journeys. Their six-stage development model integrates biblical principles and historical perspectives offering a flexible framework, where individuals progress through the journey in a spiral-like fashion. According to Hagberg and Guelich, the critical (spiritual) journey is the "response to faith in God and the resulting life changes" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005: xv).

Hagberg and Guelich's spiritual journey model stages are described as follows: (Demarest 2008: 160)

1. The Beginning of a Converted Life, where God is discovered and recognized.
2. The Life of Learning and Discipleship: where exploration and practice of the new belief system takes place.
3. The Productive Life: where one consciously serves God using their spiritual gifts.
4. The Journey Inwards: a period where beliefs and paradigms are challenged in what is commonly a disconcerting experience, aptly named The Wall. The Wall defines a time where the journeyer questions, explores doubts and entertains possibilities that were once easily dismissed as incongruent with their belief system, and which often appear as a failing faith in the eyes of those in Stages One to Three. Coming through to Stage Five normally comes with a letting go and acceptance that doubt can be congruent with faith.
5. The Journey Outward: where the journeyer is recentered, surrendering self to God, unafraid of the consequences and aware of God's love for the believer. This stage can appear as weakness, impracticality and inefficiency to those at earlier stages.
6. The Life of Love: where God's love is demonstrated through the person, who is now able to love more compassionately and consistently.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants gathered their insights on faith, the spiritual journey and supportive church practices. An open-ended approach was utilized by incorporating structured and direct questions but allowing flexibility for the participant and interviewer to explore topics that arose organically. The questions were specifically themed to locate where each participant considered themselves on their spiritual journey and identify if they had experienced a season of doubt and crisis. The Big Table values and specific church practices were then mapped against this placement and explored to determine how they may have supported the participants on their journey through the various stages.

Interviews were recorded and analysed by coding the collected data. The multiple participants' interviews helped to achieve data triangulation, enabling a broader, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Four themes were explored during the interviews:¹

1. Understanding of Definitions and Location on the Critical Journey model.
2. Identification of resonance with church values.
3. Open-ended questions on spiritual formation practices.
4. Explicit questions on Scripture, worship, church structure and leadership.

¹ Examples of interview questions for each section include: 1.) How would you describe where you're at on your spiritual journey of faith in God? 2.) Of your church values, which resonate most strongly with you for faith support? 3.) In the church community, what opportunities have you had to explore questions that might reveal doubt or unsurety around Christian faith, identity and ways of being? 4.) How does community inform your faith development? Examples?

Concerning the Critical Journey model, participants were informed about the model and stages, philosophical underpinnings, and offered a diagram to consider and reflect upon. They were asked if they resonated with the model, and if so, where they might locate themselves. They were also asked if they had experienced The Wall, and if that occurred during their time at TBTSP. Further questions were asked to draw out descriptions of their experience and church support during the time.

During both participant-observations as a researcher, I recorded the events and behaviours of the congregants in a journal: the events of the service, how congregants responded as a whole group, individual behavior that stood out as unique, and discernment of the church's atmosphere. The specific practices of worship, Scripture exploration and expression of gifts were also observed closely. The greatest limitation of the study was the sample size affecting generalizability to the greater population. As the researcher and an indirect pastor in the greater Big Table network, there was potential for bias, which was overcome through a common phenomenological research practice called bracketing. This process involves creating an *epoché*, wherein I suspended my own bias, opinions and feelings for the purpose and duration of the study. To achieve this, I made note of any instances where my personal thoughts and perspectives could potentially influence the data collection or analysis. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the congregants I was researching their responses for the study and with no agenda for TBTSP itself.

4 The Results

This section will discuss the results of the case study: the participants' journey location, their resonance with church values and spiritual practices, and relational authenticity in community, through worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership. It can be noted here that the results show God works in and through relationships on the spiritual journey.

4.1 The Perceived Journey Location

Table 1 reflects where the six participants located themselves on their spiritual journey, with five of the six participants indicating they were past questioning the basic tenets of their faith. They expressed that regardless of whatever may eventuate in life, they would be unlikely to reject God. Each indicated they were at a place of surrender in life, aware there may be mystery and tension, but God remains the same and they were content to be led by their faith and for God's purposes. This surrendering to God affirms what Taylor (2017) describes as reconciliation with God and self.

When presented with the Critical Journey model, each participant resonated with it. Renee commented, "The oscillation back and forth between stages is a

relatable experience” (Renee 2023). Five participants identified as being at Stage Five of the journey and described journeying through The Wall in the past, mostly before coming to TBTSP. Gabriel identified as fluctuating between Stages Three and Four. She is exploring the Productive Life but recognizes that a lot of life right now is spent on the Journey Inward.

Taylor’s (2017) work on atonement is positioned in Stage One: The Beginning of a Converted Life, whilst the case study shows participants placing themselves between Stages Three and Five, making this study beneficial in better understanding relational authenticity in later faith transitions of the Christian.

Table 1 Participants’ present stage on the Critical Journey (including The Wall experience)

1. Beginning					
2. Discipleship					
3. Productive Life	Gabriel				
4. Journey Inward	Gabriel				
4a. Wall Experience prior to TBTSP	Daphne	Tricia	Gregory		
4b. Wall Experience during TBTSP	Jill	Renee			
5. Journey Outward	Jill	Renee	Daphne	Tricia	Gregory
6. Love					

Renee and Jill both mentioned experiencing The Wall during their time at TBTSP. Renee discussed how the stressful period of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 triggered a wall experience for her, causing oscillation between the Journey Inward of Stage Four and repeatedly hitting The Wall. Through the support of various friends in the community praying for her and offering prophetic words of encouragement in a timely manner, she learned to “stop letting my brain overthink things and simply surrender” (Renee 2023).

Renee’s response prompts reflection on Jamieson’s research and the large number of church departers who felt they didn’t have space in their churches to explore questions of doubt that often exist during The Wall experience. When asked, all participants agreed they had the opportunity to discuss doubt at TBTSP, but not on a Sunday morning. When challenging questions are raised, Renee explained that individuals are graciously invited to discuss their questions in smaller groups where such questions are addressed with love and authenticity.

The self-assessed stage of the spiritual journey for participants in this study places them much further along than the initial conversion stage (Stages Three to Five in comparison to Stage One), which is the focus of Taylor’s (2017) work. However, the participants’ advanced progression on the journey shows that Christians can and do move towards and experience the relational authenticity Taylor proposed.

4.2 Church Values and Spiritual Practices

An important aspect of TBTSP is its values.² The study revealed that the community’s core values are commitment to Jesus, intentional relationships and authentic, meaningful connects with others. This can be viewed in Table 2 below. This highlights how relational authenticity play a crucial role in spiritual practices that best support growth along one’s spiritual journey.

Table 2 Participants’ resonance with church values

Value	Number of participants					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Jesus-centredness						
Gospel-directed						
Open-handed						
Missionally faithful						
Justice seekers						
Relationally intentional						
Authenticity						
Gratitude						
Love of planting churches						
Everyone’s on mission						
Shaped by the Bible						
Theologically considerate						

As seen in Table 3, the study found worship, Scripture exploration and gift expression to be key practices impacting congregants’ spiritual journeys. The relational

2 The Big Table values can be viewed at www.thebigtable.org.au

leadership model plays a key structural role in practice effectiveness and will also be discussed as significant. The interpretive key, however, is that the practices are most effective when exercised through the most important values. Commitment to Jesus and relational authenticity in community undergird each of these practices. It can be noted at this point that relational authenticity itself begins at the starting position of relationship with God through Jesus (Taylor 2017). Without this relationship first, loving relationships within the community matter little towards authenticity. Experiencing God’s love enables believers to love one another towards relational authenticity.

Table 3 Participants’ esteem of practices for spiritual journey support

Spiritual practice	Number of Participants					
Worship						
Scripture exploration						
Gift expression						
Prayer						
Missional presence in the community						
50-50 Giving model						

4.3 Relational Authenticity and Community

God’s mission is for us to be in community. Though not an assessed practice, TBTSP’s community focus through ecclesiology and structures proves essential to all its spiritual practices. Relational authenticity in community with genuine Jesus-followers is foundational for this cultivation of community as highlighted in the commonly held values observed above. The results show God works in and through relationships on the spiritual journey.

Dining Tables (groups of six to eight people meeting fortnightly for a meal), Coffee Tables (groups of two to three people meeting for a time of sharing and relationship building) and other informal gatherings organically create varying vulnerability within relationships. Dining Tables offer space to explore faith and doubt through diverse Scripture interpretations, whilst Coffee Tables offer intimacy for exploring personal issues. Gregory emphasized the role of others in challenging ideas and notions, commenting, “Hearing what other people think, regardless of whether I agree or disagree, causes me to question my own opinion and this informs my faith” (Gregory 2023).

TBTSP's structure seems to accomplish this and hence affirms its role to support spiritual growth amongst its congregants. It is important to note, however, the willingness of the participants to engage with one another in relational authenticity. As people commune organically and intentionally, relational authenticity is cultivated, encouraging acceptance and reconciliation between God, self and others. This supports people as they move through the different stages of the spiritual journey.

For Tricia, "being in community is the most significant thing to support for the spiritual journey" (Tricia 2023). Tricia reflected that a relationally intentional community is highly important to spiritual growth because disagreements and differences are highlighted, providing an opportunity to truly pursue love and reconciliation. This has forced Tricia to learn healthy strategies for dealing with relationships, struggles and problems and has progressed her along her spiritual journey. Gibbs and Bolger (2006) note the challenge of building relationships on a deeper foundation in a culture where contractual and casual relationships prevail. Yet, they assert that the family of God, when expressing itself through relationships rather than weekly meetings and events, can do this. "Emerging church people commit to one another, and God, and that commitment is deep and lasting" (Gibbs and Bolger 2006: 97). This is the case for the participants of this study.

Renee expressed longing for solitude with God during seasons of hardship, but stated, "I don't think that's God's design. I think God wants us to grow together and be a community of love and you can't do that by yourself" (Renee 2023). When reflecting upon previous big church experiences, where relationships were not intentionally cultivated, Renee said, "People claimed to be your friend, but they didn't show up when you needed it most" (Renee 2023). Given that Renee journeyed through The Wall during her time at TBTSP, these comments reveal how important community has been to her.

4.4 Relational Authenticity and Worship

Worship was identified by all six participants as key to supporting their spiritual journeys. The participants described worship as a way of living, but recognized the service's worship block, as an opportunity to connect in community as they intentionally seek God through music and song. Participants highly rated meditating on the truths of God's love in a safe space where everyone is together as important for faith building. For Gabriel, "I look forward to worshipping the most. It's the being together and singing to God I find moving. Being so isolated from key people in my life is overcome by a strong sense of connectedness with my church community and God together" (Gabriel 2023).

While all churches worship together, participants felt that worshipping together in a community where the congregation is connected through relational authenticity was a unique dimension of TBTSP. It is reminiscent of Gibbs and Bolger's

description of worship in the emerging church as a “shared event that binds people together” (Gibbs and Bolger 2006: 93). Callahan (2000) asserted that dynamic, corporate worship with a strong sense of belonging and community was essential for an effective church. Liesch (2001) goes further and points out that Colossians 3.16 and Ephesians 5.21 instruct the Church to sing to God and one another, teaching and admonishing one another. For Liesch (2001), worshipping together in community is an instruction for spiritual growth and the church should embrace this. TBTSP aligns with Liesch’s scriptural interpretation and its impact upon the congregation is evident.

Participants acknowledged that the worship block is always saturated with prayer by both the worship ministers and the congregation. Open space and encouragement for the sharing of Scripture and prayer make sure that worship is underpinned by relational authenticity, as Jill illustrated. She recalled a time she wrote a song to God, heavily founded on Scripture, called “Rest”. Jill, along with Simon and the worship team, collaborated to finish the song, and she felt it was a special expression linked to the particular people at TBTSP. After recording it, they presented it at church and Simon delivered a sermon that day connected to the lyrics of the song. Jill articulated how encouraging this was to her; that it was not only her expression of faith toward God, but it had become everyone’s.

4.5 Relational Authenticity and Leadership

Relational leadership refers to the paradigm that effective leadership involves the leader’s capacity to participate in and cultivate positive relationships within an organization (Beard 2015: 175). Like a servant leadership model, its emphasis, however, is on relationships, rather than just serving. A relational leadership church model is well-fitting in a relationship-based church because it reflects God’s Triune relationship and God’s relationship with the Church. This model encourages mutual submission and accountability between all. In a time where honesty, truthfulness, integrity and relationships are highly prized, for leaders to lead effectively it is necessary that authentic relationships are cultivated among those whom the leaders lead (Breedt and Niemandt 2013). TenElshof affirmed that this emphasis on relationship is necessary and posited that congregants must see and experience a level of authenticity and brokenness from leadership for spiritual formation to occur (Barton et al. 2014: 304). TBTSP’s relational leadership model underpinned by values of relational authenticity created opportunity for this.

At TBTSP, the relational leadership model was most evident in the way it undergirded other spiritual practices. Tricia emphasized there is not a hierarchy in the leadership style and structures that do exist. Every member was encouraged, if God was leading them, to share a word or pray for one another. Permission to speak into one another’s lives was encouraged and practised. From my participant

observations, this was obvious in the way every member was encouraged to share during the worship block; this extended even to a young child who shared a reflection on their faith. Others spoke out Scripture, words of encouragement and prayer for the congregation.

The value of the relational leadership model was also highly evident in the glowing descriptions participants gave of the opportunities they had to express their spiritual gifts. This model leans into Paul's body theology (in Rom. 12.4-8 and 1 Cor. 12.12-27) that every member has a part to play, and Jesus is the Head of the people. Daphne described the community as bolstering the value of its congregants and including them in everything. "Everyone gets a chance. You don't have to audition for anything or be the best. You just need to have a willing heart and that's what counts the most" (Daphne 2023). Jill iterated that this nature of leadership provided a lot of space for people to flourish in their gifts and move into positions of organic leadership amongst the body, commenting that, "as long as people are mature, this generally works out quite okay" (Jill 2023). This reflected the good leadership Cole (2010) speaks of, leadership not only about casting vision, but empowering others to find their own vision and release it.

4.6 Relational Authenticity and Scripture

At TBTSP, Scripture is regarded as God's revealed Word to humanity. For Tricia, being shaped by the Bible is a key value. She believed it was extremely important to not get caught up in traditions or expectations, but to simply remain faithful to Scripture. A part of this value was the way in which teaching and interpreting Scripture was practised at TBTSP, with a strong emphasis on conversation. Sunday mornings generally offer a sermon, and Scripture also features in worship through lyrics as well as general proclamation amongst the congregants. The church organized regular panels and interviews with congregants to explore Scripture and personal testimonies. The Dining Tables were also places for Scripture study and discussion. Tricia commented that it was through the relational aspects of TBTSP that Scripture often became alive to her. "A word is spoken in season, by someone I am in relationship with, becoming a part of who I am" (Tricia 2023).

Jill highlighted how congregants are encouraged to come to their own conclusions on what Scripture is saying and how to apply it to life, rather than adopt a dogmatic view. Renee expressed a similar theme and highlighted how TBTSP does not shy away from difficult portions of Scripture that congregants may have different perspectives on. "I really appreciate that in our church you're allowed to have your own view on certain things, but we do have key tenets of faith that keep us all connected and on the same page" (Renee 2023).

As a pastor at TBTSP, Simon expressed his willingness to engage in open conversation when confronted with opposing interpretations of Scripture, seeking dialogue

rather than giving a dismissive response. Gregory recalled a conversation with another congregant where they disagreed over a particular interpretation of Scripture. Through conversation they recognized their misalignment, but acknowledged they still loved and valued one another as members of the family of God. It is here we see commitment to relational authenticity. The congregants chose to be open and honest in their dialogue, even beyond comfort for the purpose of relational authenticity. To continue successfully in this way for thirteen years is commendable, something Gabriel believed was due to the maturity of the congregants. "There's not an expectation that everyone would interpret things the same according to a set doctrine. That could get a little bit muddy, but it seems to work in our context because people are quite mature in their faith" (Gabriel 2023). TBTSP's acknowledgment that the core tenets of faith were non-negotiable, but minor doctrine was open to interpretation affirmed the central importance of this notion in relation to the success of this model.

5 Implications for the Church Moving Forward

For church leaders seeking to establish new expressions of church that support congregants on their spiritual journeys, there are some implications found through this case study. Developing an ecclesiology that focuses on the Church being a people formed in Christ, together with an emphasis on providing safe spaces for people to develop relational authenticity with each other, will organically support people during various stages of their spiritual journey, especially through seasons of doubt and crisis. This in turn will support people in becoming their authentic selves. Wholeness through restoration in relationship with God, self and others will be more closely achieved and the Church's mandate more closely fulfilled.

Leaders recognizing that relational authenticity in shared life (Beard 2015), is beneficial throughout the spiritual journey is key to fulfilling God's mission of reconciliation and wholeness. Participants' reflections, particularly during The Wall experience, highlight the importance of authentic relationships through faith transitions. My findings show the congregants identified as being between Stages Three and Five further along than those in Taylor's (2017) work on atonement. This underscores the ongoing role relational authenticity has in supporting Christians in their spiritual formation. Leaning into Taylor's work reminds us of the crucial role being authentic in relationships with others is, for both pre-converts and more mature believers.

For church communities, this will look like a commitment to cultivating relational authenticity through open conversation and dialogue and being respectful of others' views, whilst holding common tenets of faith. This will come with a recognition that Jesus is the head of the church, and leadership functions best in open,

honest, authentic relationships, which allows for brokenness – even from leadership themselves.

To practically cultivate relational authenticity, church leaders should encourage diverse spaces for community to congregate and for the organic cultivation of intimate, authentic relationships. TBTSP is a community centred around Jesus, concerned with creating authentic relationships, characteristics Viola (2009) asserts are necessary for flourishing . It is a “body of believers who are committed to one another in community and centered around Jesus” (The Big Table, 2010) where growth can take place in transparent, non-judgmental spaces.

In line with Callahan’s (2000) suggestions, TBTSP emphasizes small, strong congregations. This community is less about busy church programmes, but the cultivation of church family to live faith fully in their daily lives, demonstrated through communal meals, Scripture sharing, prayers and reliance on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Scholars like Barton and TenElshof have suggested the church support its congregants’ spiritual journeys by providing wise and loving structures (Barton et al. 2014: 292–311); structures that are demonstrated at TBTSP through its Dining and Coffee Tables along with other organic meeting groups.

One suggestion by Bass and Copeland (2010) for effective church support today, is to revisit ancient practices in fresh inventive ways . This is practised by TBTSP through their dialogical approach to Scripture and open worship with space for all to participate. This mutual accountability and love at TBTSP has provided a safe community to discuss grey areas of faith and to live authentically enabling them to grow in their relationship with Christ and progress along the spiritual journey together.

A further implication for the church is for church departers. This study affirms that safe, loving, authentic church communities do exist and that, whilst the Church may have its imperfections, it is continually held and led by Jesus, the author and finisher of the Christian’s faith. It can be a place of refreshment and nourishing. Churches who hold space for congregants on all stages of their journeys, even when their faith is challenged and doubts prevail, are communities Christians can become their authentic selves, knowing they are loved and belong. This will ultimately keep them in fellowship – a place they are encouraged to remain.

6 In Conclusion

In a time of fake news and AI, where the line between false and real is thwarted by obscurity and ambiguity, authenticity is longed for. Relational authenticity is a movement toward becoming one’s authentic self through loving relationships, which flow from the source who is love, namely God. This case study helps the church, God’s family, to understand and appreciate that the journey toward wholeness and authenticity is found in open and honest relationships, cultivated in safe spaces,

where God's children can truly be themselves with one another; regardless of their stage on the spiritual formation journey through and beyond seasons of doubt and crisis. Relational authenticity, in community, worship, Scripture exploration, and relational leadership is key to supporting one another on our spiritual formation journeys. Not falsely or by imitation, but as our true selves and through loving relationships with God and each other.

Approval for this research was granted by the University of Divinity, by following its ethics review and approval procedures. Before commencing the research, I secured site permission and obtained informed consent from all participants. Each participant was informed that they could raise any questions or concerns with the researcher at any point and were provided with the contact details for the Human Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, all research participants were entitled to keep a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form associated with this research project. These are available from the researcher upon request.

About the Author

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