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Measuring Communities of Faith: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

Numerous references are made in the literature to communities of faith, yet there have been relatively few efforts to measure them empirically. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature by estimating a higher-order confirmatory factor model that consists of two tiers. Seven dimensions of church-based social support make up the first tier: emotional support received from rank-and-file church members, emotional support given to fellow church members, tangible support received from rank-and-file church members, tangible support given to fellow congregants, spiritual support received from fellow church members, emotional support received from a pastor, and tangible support received from a pastor. It is hypothesized that these first-order constructs are driven by a higher-order latent variable that denotes a community of faith. Data from a nationwide survey reveal that, for the sample taken as a whole, emotional support represents the way in which a community of faith is most likely to be manifest while tangible support is a less critical component. Moreover, the results indicate that a community of faith is more likely to reside in support exchanged among rank-and-file church members than support received from a pastor.

Keywords

Aging/Ageing; Church

Communities of faith are repeatedly discussed in a wide range of academic disciplines. For example, John Cottingham, a noted moral philosopher, argues that a community of faith is the most important force in the genesis of religious beliefs: “Belief in a God who transcends all natural categories of thought comes as a *result* of trust and involvement in a living community of faith” (p. 112, emphasis in the original). Similarly, Paul Tillich, a widely cited liberal theologian, maintains that the community of faith, “... is a decisive reality of all religions” (p. 27). Sounding much like Cottingham (2005), Tillich (1987) sees the community of faith as the wellspring of religious life: “...the act of faith, like every act in a man’s spiritual life, is dependent on language and therefore on community. For only in the community of spiritual beings is language alive” (p. 27). Josiah Royce (1913/2001), a noted philosopher, argued that the very essence of the Christian faith consists in what he called “the beloved community.” And the same views may be found in the work of psychologists, as well. For example, Graham and Haidt (2010) assert that, “...beliefs, rituals, and other aspects of religious practice are best understood as a means of creating a moral community” (p. 140).

Even though references to communities of faith have been discussed by scholars in many disciplines, researchers have yet to measure and evaluate them empirically. At least part of

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the problem arises from the fact that communities of faith are often not defined clearly and no systematic efforts have been taken to fully illuminate their key characteristics.

The purpose of the current study is to take a modest first-step toward addressing this daunting task. Casting the views of these scholars in more social psychological terms suggests that communities of faith arise, at least in part, in formal institutions where people share common religious beliefs that extol the virtues of loving each other, supporting each other, and helping each other grow in spiritual ways. Put in a more general way, communities of faith should arise from the interpersonal relationships that people forge with fellow church members.

But there may be more to it than this, as the work of Durkheim (1915/1965) suggests. He argues that individual worshipers are subsumed under a higher collective consciousness that arises from and acts upon the social bonds that are formed in the group: “So the individual soul is only a portion of the collective soul of the group; it is the anonymous force at the basis of the cult, but incarnated in an individual whose personality it espouses ...” (Durkheim 1915/1965, p. 299).

The discussion that has been provided up to this point suggests that a community of faith can be depicted by a two-tiered structure that consists of a more visible, lower-order level (i.e., mutually supportive church-based social relationships) that is driven by an invisible, higher-order influence. We aim to capture this two-tiered system in an empirical measurement model. In order to reach this goal, three key issues must be addressed. First, we will lay out the range of ways in which people can support each other in a community of faith. Second, based on the logic of higher-order confirmatory factor analysis (Cattell, 1978), we will express these lower-order supportive relationships as a function of a higher-order factor that remains unmeasured, but is construed as the collective conscience that is described by Durkheim (1915/1965). Third, because people in a congregation can support each other in a number of ways, we will identify the type of support that is exchanged most often as well as the type of support that best reflects the higher-order influences that Durkheim (1915/1965) believes is at work (i.e., the type of support that is the most strongly related to the higher-order factor).

A Higher –Order Factor Model of Communities of Faith

Figure 1 contains the higher-order confirmatory factor model that is evaluated in this study. As this conceptual scheme reveals, seven ways of assessing supportive relationships in the church form the more visible lower-level manifestations of a community of faith. After identifying each type of support below we provide a brief overview of the nature and meaning of a higher-order construct.

According to our conceptual model, fellow congregants receive and provide support to each other in a number of ways. The first is emotional support, which is defined as the provision of empathy, caring, love, and trust (Krause, 2008). However, fellow church members can also exchange tangible help. Tangible support is instrumental behavior that is designed to help a person directly. In this instance, the support provider takes practical action, such as helping with household chores or providing transportation (Barrera, 1986). In addition to these more universal ways of helping each other, people in a congregation may also support each other in uniquely religious ways by exchanging spiritual support. Spiritual support is assistance that is specifically intended to bolster the religious commitment, beliefs, and behaviors of a fellow church member. So, for example, a person may share their own religious experiences with a fellow congregant, they may show them how to implement religious principles in daily life, or they encourage them to turn to the Bible for help with problems they have encountered (Krause, 2008).

In addition to capturing different types of support, our measurement model was designed to assess the source of support, as well. Although there are a number of ways to classify the source of support in a congregation (see Krause, 2008), we focus on the primary distinction between rank-and-file church members and the clergy. There are two reasons why it is important to assess informal support provided by fellow rank-and-file members separately from assistance that is given by a pastor. First, researchers have argued for decades that members of the clergy occupy a unique position in the church that is imbued with authority and typically garners a significant amount of trust and respect. Moreover, members of the clergy are expected to adhere more closely to the fundamental tenets of the faith than rank-and-file church members (Lenski, 1961, Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). The second reason for focusing on support from pastors is found in the work of Kilpatrick (2005). He argues that many religious beliefs and behaviors can be explained by the fact that people tend to view God as an attachment figure. But he also considers whether attachment relationships can be formed with other religious figures, especially members of the clergy: "Whether these leaders also function as a secure base in the true manner of an attachment figure is a more difficult question, but it surely seems possible" (Kilpatrick, 2005, p. 93). As shown in Figure 1, we intend to see if emotional and tangible support that is informally provided by a member of the clergy also constitutes an integral part of a community of faith.

As our measurement model reveals, we want to see if the seven dimensions of church-based support reflect the influence of the more abstract and higher-order collective conscience that was discussed Durkheim (1915/1965). Because we were unable to find any studies on religion that estimate this type of model, it is important to describe how a higher-order construct, such as a community of faith, can be empirically evaluated if there appears to be no direct measures of it. Focusing specifically on emotional support that is received from fellow church members provides a useful point of departure for better understanding this issue. Emotional support is not something that researchers can readily observe in a survey research setting. Nevertheless, this unobserved construct can be captured by asking questions about it. As we will show later when our study measures are reviewed, this construct is assessed with three questions that ask study participants whether fellow congregants love and care for them, whether they express interest in their well-being, and whether they are willing to listen to them talk about their private problems. If these questions are designed properly, they will reflect various aspects of the wider unobserved emotional support construct. And if this is true, then the three measures of emotional support should be correlated. Viewed in a more general way, the unobserved emotional support construct is inferred by focusing on the point where these measures converge (i.e., by focusing on the shared variance among them).

But as our model reveals, a community of faith involves more than just receiving emotional support from fellow congregants. If communities of faith are as tightly knit as Durkheim (1915/1965) and others maintain, then people should also receive spiritual support as well as tangible help at church. If this is true, then the seven dimensions of church-based support should also be correlated. These correlations can be assessed factor analytically in the same way that the three items that assess emotional support are evaluated. And the point where the correlations among the seven dimensions of support converge is a community of faith. So in effect, the lower-order unobserved emotional support construct is itself an indicator of the higher-order community of faith.

Before turning to the study methods, a word is in order about how to interpret findings from a second-order factor model. Ultimately, naming an underlying and unobserved second-order construct is a theoretical issue. However, this is precisely the same issue that arises when interpreting findings from a more common first-order factor analyses. Returning to the example of emotional support provided by fellow church members helps clarify this point.

When the three emotional support items are assessed in a first-order factor analysis, a researcher must determine the conceptual nature of the unobserved construct they represent and he or she must give this unobserved construct a name. There is no empirical way to make these decisions. Instead, the investigator must look carefully at the observed indicators and identify the common conceptual domain they share. In this instance, assuming the indicators assess a specific instance of a wider underlying emotional support construct is reasonable because this conceptual interpretation is evident in the way all the items are phrased.

Exactly the same steps are taken when determining the nature and label of a second-order factor. In the current study, the seven first-order constructs each capture a specific and more circumscribed type of church-based social relationship. If the data at the second-order level indicate that these first-order factors are highly correlated, then we must identify the conceptual domain that all seven first-order factors share and we must give it a name. And if Durkheim (1915/1965) is correct, then these individual positive social exchanges are specific instances of a higher-order community of faith.

Methods

Sample

The data for this study come from the first wave of an ongoing nationwide survey of older adults in the United States. The population for this survey was defined as all household residents who were black or white, non-institutionalized, English-speaking, and 66 years of age or older. Geographically, the study population was restricted to all eligible persons residing in the coterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). In addition, the study population was restricted to individuals who were currently practicing the Christian faith, people who were Christian in the past but no longer practice any religion, and individuals who were never affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime. People who practice a religion other than Christianity (e.g., Jews or Muslims) were excluded because it would be difficult to devise a set of religious support measures that are suitable for persons of all faiths.

The sampling frame consisted of all eligible persons contained in the files that are maintained by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). It should be emphasized that people are included in this list even if they are not receiving Social Security benefits. A five-step process was used to draw the sample from the CMS data base (see Krause 2002a, for a detailed discussion of these procedures).

Interviewing for the first wave of interviews began in March 2001, and concluded in August 2001. The data collection was performed by Harris Interactive (New York). A total of 1,500 Wave 1 interviews were completed face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. Older blacks were over-sampled so sufficient statistical power would be available to examine race differences in religion. Consequently, the sample consisted of 748 older whites and 752 older blacks. The overall response rate for the study was 62%.

The analyses that are presented below are based on the Wave 1 data only because the issue we address is best approached initially in a cross-sectional manner before tackling the far more challenging task of specifying how communities of faith may change over time. Although there are 1,500 participants in the Wave 1 survey, some are not included in the analyses presented below. When the study questionnaire was designed, the research team decided that it didn't make sense to ask about things like the social support that is provided by fellow church members if people either never go to church, or if they only attend worship services once or twice a year. Based on this rationale, 380 study participants are excluded

from the analyses presented below because the questions dealing with church-based relationships were not administered to them.

Missing values in the data were imputed with the full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) procedure. Simulation studies suggest that the FIML procedure is preferable to listwise deletion because listwise deletion may produce biased estimates (Enders, 2010). Moreover, as Graham, Olchowski, and Gilreath (2007) report, FIML is equivalent to more time consuming procedures for dealing with item nonresponse, such as multiple imputation.

Preliminary analysis revealed that approximately 46 percent of the study participants were white, 35% were men, the average age of the study participants was 74.7 years ($SD = 6.3$ years) and the respondents completed, on average, 11.4 years of schooling ($SD = 3.5$ years)

Measures

The measures that were used in estimating the study model are provided in Table 1. The procedures that were used to code these variables are reported in the footnotes of this table.

Before the Wave 1 interviews were conducted, three years were spent carrying out a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and cognitive interviews with a separate sample of 399 older people (see Krause 2002b, for a detailed discussion of this item-development strategy). The goal of the item-development program was to craft a set of religion measures that capture the way older adults experience religion in daily life. All the measures reported below were developed with this item development strategy.

Emotional Support Received from Church Members—Recall that emotional support received from fellow church members is measured with three items. In order to insure that we would be able to assess the source of this support, study participants were asked not to include emotional support they might have received from their pastor. A high score denotes more frequent emotional support. The mean of this brief composite is 8.3 ($SD = 2.6$).

Emotional Support Provided to Church Members—Three questions were also administered to find out how often older study participants provide emotional support to their fellow church members. As shown in Table 1, the content of the question stems is identical to the items assessing received emotional support thereby making it possible to directly compare and contrast these two dimensions of church-based support. A high score on this composite represents study participants who give emotional support more often. The mean is 8.5 ($SD = 2.6$).

Tangible Support Received from Church Members—Four items were developed to determine how often rank-and-file church members provide study participants with tangible support. These indicators deal with receiving transportation, help with work around the home, and help when illness occurs. A high score means study participants receive tangible support from fellow congregants more often. The mean is 6.3 ($SD = 3.0$).

Tangible Support Provided to Church Members—Four indicators were devised to assess how often older study participants provide tangible support to the people they worship with. Once again, the substantive content of the question stems was preserved thereby making it possible to compare and contrast giving and receiving tangible help. A high score on these measures represents older respondents who give their fellow church members tangible assistance more often. The mean is 6.2 ($SD = 2.6$).

Spiritual Support Received from Fellow Church Members—Five questions were crafted to evaluate how often older respondents receive spiritual support from other rank-and-file members of their congregation. As shown in Table 1, study participants were asked not to count spiritual support they might have been given in Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services. This measurement strategy keeps the focus on informal sources of support, thereby making it possible to see if a community of faith is best captured by the emotional, tangible, or spiritual support that is exchanged in a place of worship. A high score indicates that they received spiritual support from their fellow congregants more often. The mean is 11.9 ($SD = 4.4$).

Emotional Support from the Pastor—Three questions were administered to find out how often older study participants receive emotional support from their minister, pastor, or priest. A high score represents receiving emotional support from a member of the clergy more frequently. The mean is 6.8 ($SD = 2.5$).

Tangible Help from the Pastor—Three indicators were also used to measure how often study participants may have gotten tangible assistance from their pastor. A high score denotes study participants who received this kind of help more often. The mean is 3.7 ($SD = 1.7$).

Results

The findings from this study are presented below in four sections. Technical issues involving the estimation of the study model are discussed first. Following this, data on the reliability of the measures is presented in section two. Then, the findings from the higher-order factor model are reviewed in section three. Finally, in an effort to round out the emerging picture of the community of faith, the frequencies of the church-based support measures are compared and contrasted in section four.

Model Estimation Issues

The model that is depicted in Figure 1 was evaluated with the maximum likelihood estimator in Version 8.80 of the LISREL statistical software program (du Toit and du Toit 2001). Use of this estimator is based on the assumption that the observed indicators have a multivariate normal distribution. Preliminary tests (not shown here) reveal that this assumption had been violated. Although there are a number of ways to deal with departures from multivariate normality, the straightforward approach that is discussed by du Toit and du Toit (2001) was followed here. These investigators report that departures from multivariate normality can be handled by converting the raw scores of the observed indicators to normal scores prior to estimating the model (du Toit and du Toit 200, p. 143). Based on these insights, the analyses presented below are based on observed indicators that have been normalized.

Because the FIML procedure was used to deal with item non-response, the LISREL software program provides only two goodness-of-fit measures. The first is the full information maximum likelihood chi-square (1821.913 with 268 degrees of freedom, $p < .001$). Unfortunately, this statistic is not very useful because it tends to underestimate the fit of the model to the data when samples are large, like the sample in the current study. Better insight into the fit of the model to the data is provided by the second goodness-of-fit measure - the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The RMSEA value for the model in Figure 1 is .072. As Kelloway (1998) suggests, values below .05 indicate a very good fit of the model to the data while values below .10 denote a good fit to the data.

Reliability Estimates

The factor loadings and measurement error terms that were derived from estimating the study model are presented in Table 2. The top panel in this table contains the factor loadings and measurement error terms that represent the relationship between the observed indicators and the lower-order church-based support constructs. The bottom panel contains the factor loadings and measurement error terms that are associated with the relationship between the social support measures and the higher-order community of faith construct. The factor loadings and measurement error terms in this table are important because they provide preliminary information about the reliability of the study measures. Although researchers have yet to reach a consensus, standardized factor loadings in excess of .600 tend to have reasonably good reliability (Kline, 1995).

The standardized factor loadings that are associated with the lower-order social support measures range from .555 to .865. Only three out of twenty-five factor loadings fell below the .600 level (i.e., .555, .576, and .585) and the difference between these estimates and the desired cut-point score is trivial. The factor loadings in the bottom panel of Table 2 have a wider range (.381 to .909). Researchers often delete items or constructs with fairly low factor loadings from a study model. However, given the current state of the knowledge base, we retain the measures with low factor loadings in the study model because doing so provides valuable insight into the way in which communities of faith are most likely to be manifest.

Although the factor loadings and measurement error terms associated with the observed indicators provide useful information about the reliability of each item, it would be helpful to know something about the reliability for the multiple item scales as a whole. Fortunately, it is possible to compute these reliability estimates with a formula provided by DeShon (1998). This procedure is based on the factor loadings and measurement error terms. Applying the procedures described by DeShon (1998) to the data in Table 2 yields the following reliability estimates for the lower-order constructs: emotional support received from church members (.810); emotional support provided to rank-and-file church members (.852); tangible help received from fellow congregants (.787); tangible assistance given to fellow church members (.772); spiritual support (.903); emotional support from the clergy (.812); and tangible help from a pastor (.812). Taken as a whole, these data suggest that the reliability of the items that assess the lower-order constructs in this study is acceptable.

The formula provided by DeShon (1998) can also be used to assess the reliability of the higher-order community of faith construct. Applying this formula to the data in the bottom panel of Table 2 reveals that the reliability of this construct is also acceptable (.851).

Findings from the Second –Order Factor Model

The data in Table 2 provide far more than information on the reliability of the study measures. More specifically, the higher-order factor loadings in the bottom panel of this table help identify how a community of faith is most likely to be manifest. Taken as a whole, a clear hierarchy exists in the magnitude of these higher-order factor loadings. The largest factor loadings are associated with giving emotional support (standardized estimate = .917; metric estimate = .989) and receiving emotional support from fellow church members (standardized estimate = .909; metric estimate = 1.011).¹ A test was conducted to see if the

¹Tests for differences in the magnitude of the factor loadings are performed with the unstandardized coefficients. This avoids confounding differences in effect sizes with differences in the standard deviations. It is for this reason that these estimates are presented in the text. However, they are not shown in Table 2. We discuss both estimates in the text because the metric of the observed indicators is arbitrary and as a result, viewing both standardized and metric (i.e., unstandardized) estimates provides a more comprehensive vantage point for viewing the relative importance of the factor loadings.

size of coefficients associated with these constructs differ significant. This test was performed in two steps. First, the model was estimated allowing the two coefficients to vary freely. This produces a chi-square goodness of fit value. Then in the second step, the two coefficients are constrained to be equal. A second chi-square value is generated in this step. The difference between the two chi-square values was then used as a test of difference in the size of the coefficients that are associated with giving and receiving emotional support differ significantly. These additional tests reveal that the difference between the two estimates is not statistically significant. Viewed in a more substantive way, these coefficients suggest that the shared emotional caring among fellow church members is the central most way in which a community of faith is expressed.

Returning to Table 2, spiritual support received from rank-and-file church members comes next in the hierarchy of core community of faith components (standardized estimate = .761; metric estimate = .710). However, in this instance, the tests described above suggest that the size of the factor loading that is associated with spiritual support is significantly smaller than the size of either emotional support received ($p < .001$) or emotional support that is provided to fellow church members ($p < .001$).

Emotional support from a member of the clergy is the next largest manifestation of a community of faith (standardized estimate = .718; metric estimate = .599). A subsequent test reveals that this coefficient is significantly smaller than the estimate associated with spiritual support ($p < .05$).

The three smallest components of a community of faith all involve tangible support. Subsequent tests with these constructs suggest that there is no significant difference in the size of the coefficients that assess tangible support received from (standardized estimate = .454; metric estimate = .472) and tangible help given to rank-and-file church members (standardized estimate = .452; metric estimate = .454). However, both of these estimates are significantly smaller than the coefficient that is associated with emotional support from a pastor ($p < .01$). The coefficient with the smallest higher-order factor loading is associated with tangible assistance from a member of the clergy (standardized estimate = .381; metric estimate = .249). This estimate is significantly smaller than the coefficients associated with either tangible support received from or tangible support provided to rank-and-file church members ($p < .001$).

There is another straightforward way of to express the differential role that a community of faith plays in shaping each of the lower-order measures of church-based support. This involves focusing on the amount of variance in the lower-order constructs that is explained by the higher-order community of faith construct. These estimates (not shown in Table 2) are as follows: emotional support provided to rank-and-file church members (.841), emotional support received from rank-and file church members (.825), spiritual support received from fellow church members (.579), emotional support from a pastor (.516), tangible support received from rank-and-file church members (.206), tangible support provided to rank-and-file church members (.205), tangible support received from a pastor (.145).

Viewed in more substantive terms, two clear patterns of findings emerge from the higher-order factor model. First, the exchange of emotional support with fellow church members appears to matter most while tangible assistance is significantly less important. Second, the source of support is also important. More specifically, the data indicate that the community of spirit is more likely to be manifest in the informal relationships among rank-and-file church members than in informal relationships with members of the clergy.

Church-Based Support Frequencies

In order to better understand the nature of a community of faith, it is also helpful to assess how often each type of church-based support is exchanged. Initially, it might seem as though this can be accomplished by merely testing for the differences between the means of these measures. But recall that spiritual support is measured with five indicators, tangible help is assessed with four, and three items are used to capture the remaining constructs. Fortunately, the same response options are used for the measures of all seven constructs (i.e., never, once in a while, fairly often, and very often - see Table 1). Therefore, a straightforward solution to this problem involves dividing the mean of each construct by the number of items in each scale. This produces an average of the responses to each church-based support item. Once these averages were computed, we conducted a series of simple t-tests to see if the magnitudes of these estimates differ significantly. The results of these tests are provided in Table 3.

The additional analyses reveal that emotional support provided by a study participant to fellow church members is the most frequently exchanged type of support in a community of faith ($M = 2.823$). This mean is significantly larger ($p < .001$) than the next most frequent type of support - emotional support received from rank-and-file church members ($M = 2.742$). Spiritual support that is received from fellow congregants comes after this ($M = 2.370$), and this type of support occurs significantly less often than emotional support from rank-and-file church members ($p < .001$). Emotional support from a pastor comes next ($M = 2.275$), and this type of support is provided significantly less often than spiritual support ($p < .001$).

The coefficients associated with the three tangible support measures indicate that these types of support are found much less often in communities of faith. More specifically, tangible support received from fellow church members ($M = 1.570$) as well as tangible assistance that is given to fellow congregants ($M = 1.554$) both occur significantly less often in communities of faith than emotional support from a pastor ($p < .001$). However, there is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of tangible support received from and tangible support provided to rank-and-file church members. Finally, the type of support that occurs the least often in a community of faith is tangible support from a member of the clergy ($M = 1.218$). The analyses reveal that this type of support is found significantly less often ($p < .001$) than either tangible support received or tangible help provided to rank-and-file church members.

Three important findings emerge from the data in Table 3. First, emotional support is exchanged more often in communities of faith while tangible help is exchanged the least often. Second, informal support is more likely to be exchanged with rank-and-file church members than with members of the clergy. Third, the pattern of findings associated with the frequency of support closely parallel the results that emerged from the higher-order factor analysis. Simply put, the types of support that best reflect the spirit of a community of faith are also the types of support that occur most often in a community of faith.

Conclusion

G. K. Chesterton was an astute Christian apologetic. Writing in 1908, he commented on the central role that interpersonal relationships occupy in the Christian faith: "For Western religion has always felt keenly the idea 'it is not good for man to be alone.' The social instinct has asserted itself everywhere to us God Himself is a society" (p. 128). Based on this general orientation, we used the insights provided by Durkheim (1915/1965) to stake out the content domain of a community of faith. This kind of basic work is essential because references to communities of faith abound in the literature even though their key

characteristics have not been evaluated systematically in empirical research. We addressed this issue by arguing that a community of faith is a higher-order phenomenon that cannot be measured directly but is nevertheless manifest in the informal relationships that people form in a congregation. These informal social ties were measured, in turn, with seven dimensions of church-based support.

The findings from the higher-order confirmatory factor model reveal that some types of social support lie closer to the heart of a community of faith than others. More specifically, the exchange of emotional support among rank-and-file church members appears to be more central in this respect. This makes a good deal of sense and is consistent with the observations of Roberts (2007) that were discussed earlier. Recall that he said that, “The church is a society of people who have undertaken the struggle to love one another....” (Roberts, 2007, p. 91). Simply put, our findings suggest that a community of faith is primarily manifest in terms of mutual caring, concern, and love. But this is not to say that spiritual support and tangible support are inconsequential. Instead, the data indicate that among the various types of support, emotional support is relatively more important. It should be emphasized, however, that this conclusion holds when all Christians are analyzed as a single group. As we discuss below, there may be variations across faith traditions in the factor structure of communities of faith.

We also found that the source of support is an important factor, as well. More specifically, the results suggest that support that is exchanged among rank-and-file church members comes closer to reflecting the essence of a community of faith than informal support from a member of the clergy. However, it is important to emphasize that pastors do matter, but they simply do not matter as much as rank-and-file members. It might be helpful to reflect on why this may be so. Perhaps part of the reason may be found in the notion of the pedestal effect that is discussed by Blackbird and Wright (1985). According to this perspective, close personal relationships between the clergy and rank-and-file church members are discouraged by norms of propriety and anti-fraternization norms. However, we suspect that two other factors may come into play, as well. The first involves the power differential between the clergy and other church members. As research in social psychology reveals, differences in power can have a profound impact on the nature and frequency of social interaction (Mast, 2010). Second, because rank-and-file church members far outnumber pastors in a congregation, the opportunity to find a suitable source of informal support is greater in the pews than in the pulpit. Put another way, if a relationship with a clergy member proves to be less satisfying, there are fewer options for finding a good source of pastoral support within the same congregation.

The findings from this study further reveal that the types of support that best reflect a community of faith are also exchanged more frequently in congregations. This is not surprising because the characteristics that are most central to an organization should be those that its members make the greatest effort to maintain.

It is important to emphasize that we do not claim to provide a definitive view of the essential nature of communities of faith. Instead, our principle aim has been to open a dialog on how to move conceptual discussions of communities of faith into the empirical arena. And the first issue that should be addressed in future scholarly exchanges deals with finding ways to improve the model we have evaluated. At least three factors that were not examined in the current study should be considered in this respect.

First, the participants in our study are all practicing Christians. However, there may be considerable variation across denominations in the composition (i.e., factor structure) of communities of faith. For example, we found that emotional support was the central element

in a community of faith for all Christians taken together. However, it is important to see if this holds for different faith traditions, as well (e.g., Protestants and Catholics). Moreover, research is needed to see if the key characteristics of communities of faith vary by race. So, for example, it is important to assess whether congregations that are comprised primarily of African Americans differ significantly from those that are comprised primarily of Whites.

Second, spiritual support that was received from fellow church members was included in our study model. However, measures of spiritual support that study participants provide to their fellow congregants were not available in the data. Developing and testing measures of this construct should be a high priority in future research.

Third, we focused solely on informal support that is exchanged within communities of faith. However, as Krause (2008) and others point out, formal relationships also arise in congregations, such as formal pastoral counseling as well as social relationships that are forged in Bible study groups and prayer groups. Once again, measures of these constructs were not available in the data.

Although other types of church-based social relationships could be included in models of communities of faith, estimating such conceptual schemes can be challenging because the sheer number of variables and factors may become unwieldy. Even so, an intriguing possibility involves moving from a two-tiered to a three-tiered higher-order factor model (see Cattell, 1978, for examples of third-order factor models). Cast within the context of the current study, a community of faith would form the top-most tier. This community of faith would give rise to two second-order factors that reflect formal and informal relationships in the church. The formal church factor would, in turn, drive first-order constructs like the ones discussed above (e.g., support in Bible study groups) while the informal dimension would be manifest in terms of the constructs shown in Figure 1 (e.g., informal emotional support received from fellow church members).

Josiah Royce was a close friend (and, at times, a critic) of William James. Writing in 1912, he captured the essence of what we have been trying to portray: "*I call the community of all who have sought for salvation through loyalty the Invisible Church your salvation arises in its reality, in your service, and in your communion with its endlessly varied company of those who suffer and who in the might of the spirit overcome*" (Royce, 1912/2001:280, p. 282, emphasis in the original). Tracing the ways in which this Invisible Church becomes manifest in the relationships that are forged among the faithful holds out the promise of delineating some of the most elusive, but some of the most fundamental, aspect of religion. We hope the work that we have presented encourages other investigators to join us in making the more invisible aspects of religion easier to grasp.

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Figure 1.
A Higher-Order Confirmatory Factor Model of Communities of Faith

Table 1**Church-Based Social Support Measures**Social Relationships with Rank-and-File Church Members

- 1 Emotional Support Received from Church Members^a
 - A. Other than your minister, pastor, or priest, how often does someone in your congregation let you know they love and care for you?
 - B. How often does someone in your congregation talk with you about your private problems and concerns?
 - C. How often does someone in your congregation express interest and concern in your well-being?
- 2 Emotional Support Provided to Church Members^a
 - A. How often do you show someone in your congregation that you love and care for him/her?
 - B. How often have you talked with someone in your congregation about his/her private feelings and concerns?
 - C. How often have you expressed interest and concern in the well-being of someone in your congregation?
- 3 Tangible Support Received from Church Members^a
 - A. How often does someone in your congregation give you a ride to church services?
 - B. How often does someone in your congregation provide you with transportation to other places, like the grocery store or doctor's office?
 - C. How often does someone in your congregation help you with things that need to be done around your house, such as household chores or yard work?
 - D. How often does someone in your congregation help out when you or a family member are ill?
- 4 Tangible Support Provided to Church Members^a
 - A. How often do you provide transportation to church for someone in your congregation?
 - B. How often do you provide transportation for someone in your congregation to other places, like the grocery store or the doctor's office?
 - C. How often do you help someone in your congregation with things that need to be done around his or her home, such as household chores or yard work?
 - D. How often have you helped take care of someone in your congregation when he/she was ill?
- 5 Spiritual Support from Church Members^a
 - A. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation share their own religious experiences with you?
 - B. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you find solutions to your problems in the Bible?
 - C. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often do the examples set by others in your congregation help you lead a better religious life?
 - D. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you to know God better?
 - E. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you live according to your religious beliefs?

Social Relationships with the Clergy

- 1 Emotional Support from the Clergy^a
 - A. How often does your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) speak with you about your private problems and concerns?
 - B. When talking with your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) on an individual basis, how often does he or she express interest and concern in your well-being?
 - C. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) visited you or a family member when you/they were ill?
- 2 Tangible Support from the Clergy^a
 - A. How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) helped out with things that needed to be done around your home, such as repairs, yard work, or household chores?

- B.** How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) told you who to see for help with practical matters, like buying a car, buying a kitchen appliance, or finding a job?
 - C.** How often has your (MINISTER, PASTOR, OR PRIEST) helped you get community services, like financial assistance or medical care?
-

^aThese items are scored in the following manner (coding in parentheses): never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

Table 2

Factor Loadings and Measurement Error Terms from Higher-Order Factor Model (N = 1,120)

Construct	Factor Loading ^a	Measurement Error ^b
<u>Lower-Order Coefficients</u>		
1. Emotional Support Received from Rank-and-File Church members		
A. Love and care for you ^c	.822	.324
B. Talk about your concerns	.632	.600
C. Express interest in your well-being	.833	.307
2. Emotional Support Provided to Rank-and-File Church Members		
A. You love and care for them	.839	.296
B. You listen to them talk	.747	.443
C. You express interest in their well-being	.843	.290
3. Tangible Support Received from Rank-and-File Church Members		
A. Give you a ride to church	.712	.493
B. Give you a ride to the doctor	.783	.387
C. Help with your household chores	.641	.589
D. Help when you were ill	.629	.605
4. Tangible Support Provided to Rank-and-File Church Members		
A. Give them a ride to church	.779	.393
B. Give them a ride to the doctor	.784	.386
C. Help with their housework	.555	.692
D. Help when they were ill	.576	.669
5. Spiritual Support Received from Rank-and-File Church Members		
A. Share religious experiences	.715	.489
B. Help find solutions in Bible	.739	.454
C. Lead a better religious life	.845	.286
D. Help you to know God better	.865	.252
E. Help you live religious beliefs	.862	.257
6. Emotional Support Received from a Pastor		
A. Talk with you about concerns	.684	.553
B. Express interest in your well-being	.756	.429
C. Visited you when ill	.583	.660
7. Tangible Support Received from a Pastor		
A. Helped you with housework	.749	.440
B. Helped with practical matters	.838	.298
C. Helped get community services	.716	.487
<u>Higher-Order Coefficients</u>		
1. Emotional Support Received from Rank-and-File Church Members	.909	.175
2. Emotional Support Provided to Rank-and-File Church Members	.917	.159
3. Tangible Support Received from Rank-and-File Church Members	.454	.794
4. Tangible Support Provided to Rank-and-File Church Members	.452	.795
5. Spiritual Support Received from Rank-and-File Church Members	.761	.421

Construct	Factor Loading ^a	Measurement Error ^b
6. Emotional Support Received from a Pastor	.718	.484
7. Tangible Support Received from a Pastor	.381	.855

^aThe factor loadings are from the completely standardized solution. The first-listed item for each latent construct was fixed to 1.0 in the unstandardized solution.

^bMeasurement error terms are from the completely standardized solution. All factor loadings and measurement error terms are significant at the .001 level

^cItem content is paraphrased for the purpose of identification. See Table 1 for the complete text.

Table 3

Frequency of Church-Based Support in Communities of Faith (N = 1,120)

Construct	Item Mean ^a	T-Test ^b
1. Emotional Support Provided to Rank-and-File Members	2.823	-----
2. Emotional Support Received from Rank-and-File Members	2.742	$p < .001$
3. Spiritual Support from Rank-and-File Members	2.370	$p < .001$
4. Emotional Support from a Pastor	2.275	$p < .001$
5. Tangible Support Received from Rank-and-File Members	1.570	$p < .001$
6. Tangible Support Given to Rank-and-File Members	1.554	<i>n.s.</i>
7. Tangible Support from a Pastor	1.218	$p < .001$

^aThese coefficients were estimated by dividing the total scale score by the number of items in the scale.

^bThe t-test significance values were estimated by comparing the item mean with the item mean of the preceding measure (e.g., emotional support received from fellow church members with emotional support provided to fellow church members).