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# The openness of religious beliefs to the influence of external information

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# The openness of religious beliefs to the influence of external information

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jis](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jis)**Darin Freeburg**

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## Abstract

Religious beliefs have important and wide-reaching impacts on society. They also tend to be viewed as impervious to the influence of information external to a religious setting. Eight focus groups were held with attendees of two United Church of Christ congregations. Participants were asked about their core religious beliefs, and transcripts were qualitatively coded for the interplay of belief and information. Analysis found that beliefs that were focused on people, processes and events external to the congregation showed the characteristics of being more open to external information. Specifically, the breadth of these external beliefs allowed for a wider set of external information to be considered relevant; these beliefs were less biased, allowing participants to be more open to disconfirming information from outside the congregation; and these beliefs were held with less certainty, making it more likely that this disconfirming information would be attended to. This study provides suggestions for religious practitioners wishing to make the information behaviour of their organisations more open.

## Keywords

Information behaviour; religious belief; small worlds

## 1. Introduction

Beliefs are important to people. They ‘signal who one is and what one stands for’ [1]. They also make people feel good: ‘Wishfulness is an obvious source of benefit for instrumental beliefs’ [1]. Religious beliefs, in particular, are central to religious affiliation and have important and documented impacts on society. They impact views on healthcare legislation [2], income disparity [3] and even the rule of law [4]. Certain religious beliefs can increase an individual’s ability to show self-control [5] and delay gratification [6].

This study is interested in whether or not these beliefs are open to the influence of external information, that is, information from outside a congregation. It is argued that an analysis of different characteristics in espoused beliefs can provide important insight into the openness of these beliefs to external information. It is then possible to categorise and outline models that shed light on the ability of beliefs to remain open. General Systems Theory (GST) [7] and the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems [8] suggest that such openness increases the likelihood that beliefs could change. Given the wide-reaching impacts of these beliefs, the inability for beliefs to change – as a result of their blocking of external information – could have negative consequences for both society and religious organisations themselves. This study’s findings shed light on the nature of closed and unchangeable religious beliefs, providing suggestions for practitioners wishing to avoid this isolationist phenomenon. It also extends research on information behaviour by looking at barriers to information seeking. Given that the discipline of Library and Information Science is concerned with bringing knowledge to the point of use [9], this study of potential barriers to information is an important contribution to the discipline. The inability of external information to get inside of an organisation to impact behaviour is of central concern. This study highlights subtleties in these barriers, along with solutions to overcome them.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Beliefs

This study draws on Fishbein and Raven [10] for a definition of belief – integral to understanding the placement of this study within the larger field of belief studies. Fishbein and Raven [10] distinguished between belief – the probability of something existing or not – and attitude – an evaluation of whether or not this something is good or bad. In this study, both definitions are included in one definition of belief. Thus, belief is both the probability of something existing and the evaluation of it. Indeed, it seems unlikely that a religious belief would be held if it was considered improbable or if an individual thought it to be evil.

Entire groups can hold beliefs as well. Gilbert [11] outlined the concept of *collective belief* and noted that members of a group often negotiate a belief that is not necessarily reflective of any one member's belief. The belief stands 'insofar as the members ... have all indicated their readiness to let the belief in question be established as the group's belief' [11]. This is especially pertinent in religious groups, as Durkheim [12] argued that religious belief leads to group ritual, which in turn reinforces belief. Similarly, Stark and Finke [13] argued that participation in a religious group is founded in social support, and that participation itself engenders more participation. This collective nature of religion 'makes demands on the individual, requires sacrifice, and provides comfort and a sense of psychic rootedness' [14]. The group nature and influence of these beliefs is, therefore, important to consider.

Thus, this study is interested in those group-level beliefs shared by attendees of a religious congregation, and these are not restricted to beliefs about deep theological issues; instead, beliefs can simply be more mundane and 'about daily life' [15]. The use of a generalised definition for belief – and one drawn outside of studies in religion – is thus in line with the aims of the study. The information barriers uncovered are not limited to religious beliefs, but are present in organisations, communities and entire cultures. This study also distinguishes between beliefs that are externally oriented and beliefs that are internally oriented. The former includes beliefs about things, people or events *outside* of the immediate church context. The latter includes beliefs about things, people or events *within* the immediate church context

### 2.2. Beliefs and information

This study is explicitly interested in the interplay of beliefs with information. As a discipline, information science has considered religious contexts minimally. Kari provided the most extensive review to date of how information science has dealt with the spiritual. This includes how information processes regarding the spiritual have been studied in terms of 'source use, information work, information behaviour, and information habits' [16]. The current research provides an extension to previous work in these areas in three important ways. First, it is unique in its application of information science to formal religion – something Kari purposefully avoided. Second, Kari noted that previous work on how spiritual groups use information has focused on mediums like the Internet [17]. This study is not restricted to specific mediums, but looks at whether or not information sources come from outside the church or from within the church. Third, Kari noted that previous work on the role of the spiritual in information habits has focused on the use of spiritual places – like churches – as places where like-minded people meet and share information [18]. However, such a conceptualisation does not explicitly focus on the potential of these information grounds to put up barriers to external information – an issue of central concern to this study. Chatman [19], for instance, noted how janitors used the Bible, but did not in her other work look at religious groups themselves as possible small worlds.

Just as entire groups – or organisations – can have beliefs, they can have shared approaches to information. It is generally assumed that openness to information outside of an organisational context is necessary for an organisation to survive. Bertalanffy, whom most credit as the founder of GST, argued that living organisms could be described as sets of relationships among the various parts of the organism and the outside environment [7]. This relationship is typically viewed as an exchange of information [20], and successful organisations are ones that are open to information entering from the outside [7]. Open and living systems receive information from the environment, and they make changes based on this information. This rate of information flow is one of three control parameters, outlined by Stacey [8], that drive behaviour within a Complex Adaptive System. Organisations often attempt to control or limit the speed at which information is introduced at their detriment.

Although an open stance to external information is necessary for success, many assume that beliefs are fixed and closed to information outside of the context in which they develop. Pajares [21] argued, 'beliefs are basically unchanging'. He argued that beliefs are not swayed by reason, but altered only through 'a conversion or gestalt shift'. Akgun et al. [22] argued that established beliefs in organisations 'inhibit the reception and evaluation of new market and technology information, and reduce the value of perceived new information'. This characteristic of belief may suggest that information has little to no impact on belief. Indeed, Caplan [23] called it a 'puzzling feature of many people's political

and religious beliefs' that, although there is little information gathering, many people still hold those beliefs with a high degree of certainty. Likewise, Abelson and Prentice [1] noted the 'theoretical puzzle' of individuals who develop passionate beliefs about matters that are remote from their personal experience. These beliefs are 'tenaciously held, and seem impervious to persuasive argumentation' [1]. Chatman [24] suggested that organisational members do not seek out additional external information because the worldview within the group 'works most of the time with enough predictability'.

When information does impact belief, this typically occurs only after unusual events, such as after existing information fails [24] or when that information comes in the form of a traumatic event [25]. Weber and Crocker [26] looked at the disconfirming information that comes when a person does not match a stereotype. They found that the primary way people change their stereotypical beliefs about other people is when they are confronted with a larger number of individuals who only slightly disconfirm the stereotype. If only a few people break a stereotype in a number of different ways, this disconfirming information is *subtyped* and 'dismissed as flukes' [26]; but even when stereotypical beliefs do change, it is typically only incrementally and subconsciously, as a slight variation in existing beliefs.

Individuals may even *choose* to ignore external information about their beliefs. In his theory of rational irrationality, Caplan [23] argued that some individuals choose to ignore information in order to maintain a desirable belief: 'These *rationaly irrational* individuals make a decision to forgo the benefits of increased information in an effort to hold onto beliefs that are considered personally important or are deeply valued'. If the costs for being wrong are low, and a belief is considered beneficial, individuals will make little effort to seek information about that belief. They will close themselves off to additional information to hold this *bliss belief*.

### 2.3. Closed information systems

Having outlined a conceptualisation of belief and its interplay with information, this section will outline three primary variables of belief that tend to close beliefs off to the influence of external information. This provides an initial framework for coding participant beliefs as more or less probably to be closed off to external information. These include an internal belief focus, the degree of certainty and the level of bias.

**2.3.1. Internal focus.** First, organisational beliefs can become close to external information simply due to an exclusive inward focus. This means that beliefs tend to follow rigid social norms within the organisation, rather than maintain flexibility to a changing external environment. Individuals in religious groups, in particular, tend to 'interact with like-minded associates and are ostracized when they defy group norms' [27]. Hardin [28] outlined the possibility that individuals feign religious beliefs in order to fit in with those around them. However, over time of interacting within that group, they may come to actually believe it: 'As a result of my participation in the life of the group, I hear many things that actually support the belief that I merely pretend to have' [28].

The internal focus makes it harder to accept disconfirming information. Batson [29] found that, when faced with disconfirming information, religious individuals tend to increase their intensity of religious belief – including belief in the infallibility of the Bible and the divinity of Jesus. Searching for a reason for this, he argued that 'The more one publicly proclaims one's conviction about personally significant truths, the more one seems bound to these truths' [29]. This follows the argument by Festinger et al. [30] that the believer may have 'taken some important action that is difficult to undo'. Individuals are led to 'defend [themselves] against the implications of disconfirming information' [29]. Thus, the proclamation of belief in an internally focused context makes it more difficult to change that belief or be open to information that disconfirms it.

If a belief is internally focused, then, it tends to be closed to the influence of external information. Individuals in these contexts look to others within the organisation for information instead of looking to the external environment. Olatokun and Ajagbe [31] found that the majority of traditional medical practitioners in Ibadan, Nigeria relied on internal information from master healers, colleagues and the local association for medical practices. Only 15% relied on newspapers or magazines, and 7.5% relied on libraries and the Internet. Although this is partially due to lack of access, it was also noted that an internal focus was a factor: 'Their devotion to and faith in the local associations to which they belonged ... influenced their disposition to information received from sources outside their practice' [31]. Individuals who seek information only from the inside are 'deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and ... confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends' [32].

**2.3.2. Bias.** Such organisations can also develop into what Chatman [24] called a *small world*, in which social control biases what information is deemed relevant for affiliates of an organisation to seek. A shared worldview is developed through tradition and rituals, and this worldview is used to reject information outside of that world. Thus, there is no

consideration of the external environment. Chatman's [24] study of incarcerated women found that the small world of the prison environment led women to reject information about the world outside of the prison. Behaviour in small worlds is reliant upon the normative behaviour of groups [33]. As these groups become more isolated, an insider/outsider world-view develops that can lead to the rejection of outsider information in which information poverty is a desired state [34]. Little value is placed on outside information [35].

**2.3.3. Certainty.** This internal focus can also increase the certainty with which groups hold certain beliefs, blocking off external information and leading to what Stein [36] called *organisational narcissism*. This occurs when an organisation is viewed to 'be very special and to embody unique qualities' [36]. The powers of this organisation can then easily be exaggerated and its limitation understated. A church can certainly fit this description, and the danger of this view is that it can lead to an assumption by members that the organisation already knows everything, thereby limiting any need for external information seeking: 'All relevant information is believed to be accessible to the organization. It has complete knowledge of its environment, with nothing lying beyond its ken' [36].

This narcissistic favouring of internal processes and people allows the organisation to be 'dismissive' of outside information [36]. Haidt [37] argued that most Americans conduct this dismissal as they promote the interests of their in-group 'in competition with other groups'. Similarly, Kane et al. [38] found that individuals reject higher quality information about how to complete a task if that information comes from someone outside of their in-group.

## 2.4. Research questions

It is suggested that churches should open beliefs up to the influence of external information and the possibility of change. This is not to suggest that religious groups lose a sense of who they are but to suggest that the questioning of belief strengthens the relevancy of the organisation and reaffirms the suitability of these beliefs to the overall mission of the church. Thus, suggesting ways to overcome bias and certainty in these beliefs does not imply a lack of faith or confused identity. Rather, it implies a strengthening of both.

Thus, the current research seeks to first outline the characteristics of belief in churches and how beliefs themselves may be resistant to the questioning brought about by openness to external information.

RQ1: To what extent do internally focused religious beliefs show characteristics of being closed off to external information (high bias and certainty)?

And given that openness to external information is a hallmark of successful organisations, this study also seeks to offer practical solutions for religious practitioners for opening congregations up to the influences of information.

RQ2: What can the analysis of beliefs tell religious practitioners about how to overcome a belief's resistance to external information?

## 3. Methodology

To answer these research questions, the approach in this study was to analyse the beliefs themselves to uncover characteristics of those that were more or less open to external information. The existing literature was used as an initial framework, but a qualitative methodology using focus groups (FG) and directed content analysis [39] of FG transcripts uncovered additional variables. Thus, the categories uncovered through data collection and analysis go beyond those noted in the existing literature.

### 3.1. Sample

Two United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations in Ohio participated in the study. The UCC is a Mainline Protestant denomination headquartered in the United States. The latest data from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) show 5320 UCC churches with over 1.1 million members [40]. Ohio represents the 11th largest state distribution of UCC adherence in the United States [40]. They are typically viewed as liberal and progressive [41]. Some of this view can be attributed to their open stance towards LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) individuals, as highlighted by their Open and Affirming (ONA) designation. After 2 years of study and reflection, individual congregations can decide to 'make a public covenant of welcome into their full life and ministry to persons of all sexual orientations,

gender identities, and gender expressions' [42]. It might be assumed that a more progressive church may be more open to information. However, there is no reason to suggest that progressiveness allows for more openness to information about their own progressive beliefs. It is merely a statement about *what* beliefs they are probably to have – not how information might impact these beliefs.

Denominational leaders in the Eastern Ohio Association of the UCC were contacted for insight into the best representative congregations for both samples. These leaders then made first contact with the pastors of the congregations to inform them of the study and inquire about their interest in participating. The first congregation (C1) was founded in the early 19th century and has over 500 current members with an average worship attendance of over 200. This congregation is unique in that they hired an openly gay pastor before officially becoming ONA. The second congregation (C2) was also founded in the early 19th century and has over 1200 members with an average worship attendance of over 400. It began as part of the mission for the township in which it operates. It is not designated ONA.

It also might be assumed that churches would not want such an openness to information. However, a brief look at the stated goals and missions of these congregations articulate why such an openness is something they have indicated they wanted. An exact depiction of these goals would harm anonymity, so relevant sections are paraphrased.

C1: We want to come together to explore our meaning and purpose through worship, as we work for justice, and as we commit to local and global missions.

C2: We want to educate and nurture members as we promote fellowship within the church and the global church.

In C1, there is a desire to engage in questioning rather than assumptions of purpose and meaning, and this exploration was done in the context of bringing in new people who bring with them external information. In C2, there is a desire for learning in a context much larger than the congregation itself. The accomplishment of both missions requires an openness to external information. This may not be the desired practice, but it fits with the espoused mission.

### 3.2. Process

The pastor of each local congregation was given a list of requirements for the sample group and was given the responsibility of contacting potential attendees to participate. It was determined that each pastor would know his local congregation better than the researcher, allowing him to target these key culture carriers. This method follows Jakobsen's [43] sampling technique of putting leaders in charge of recruitment according to set criteria, as this shows respect for the organisation and reduces the risk of skewing the sample.

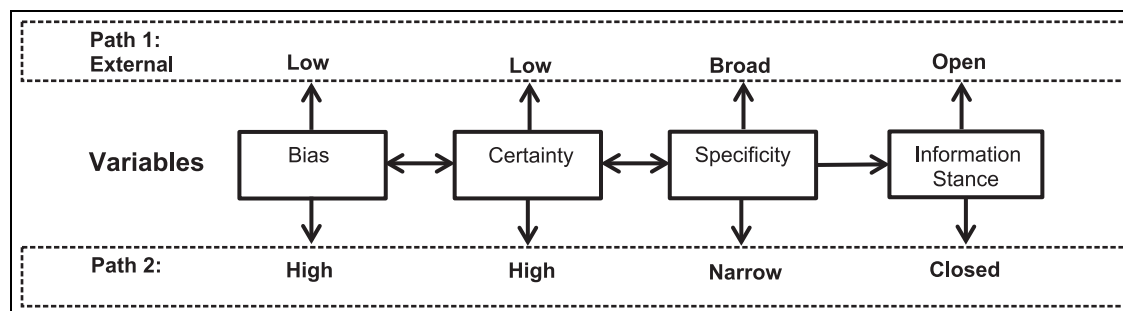
Each potential participant was sent an email informing him or her about the study, the rights of participants and the role of participants in the study. Emails were sent to 51 attendees from Congregation 1, of which 34 did not respond and 2 declined to participate. A total of 15 participants from Congregation 1 participated in the research. Emails were sent to 18 attendees of Congregation 2, of which 6 did not respond. A total of 13 participants from Congregation 2 participated in the research. Thus, a total of 28 individuals participated in FGs.

FGs were conducted on-site at each location, using a semi-structured FG guide (Appendix 1). FGs were used to help the researcher guard against standpoint epistemology – the assumption that, when isolated individuals say similar things, they necessarily agree with one another [44]. The FG allows for participants to question and challenge one another [43,45]. The reality of shared beliefs is enacted collaboratively as participants interact with one another [45].

There were two groups per church, and each group met twice. Thus, four FGs were conducted at each congregation for a total of eight FGs. The researcher arrived early in order to develop meet with participants and build trust, which increased credibility of the findings [46]. Each FG was videotaped using two camcorders at different angles. A voice recorder was also utilised as a backup to ensure good sound quality for transcription. Each FG was approximately 90 min in length. Effort was made to ensure groups started and ended on time.

### 3.3. Analysis

Videos and audio recordings were transferred to software for transcription. Transcriptions were written out word-for-word, including indications of body language from the videos. These transcriptions were imported into Nvivo for coding. Qualitative content analysis includes FG transcripts as text data that can be categorised into meaningful units through 'the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' [39]. Because some existing research exists on beliefs and information, and this study's goal was to extend this research, a directed approach to content analysis was used. Hsieh and Shannon [39] note that existing research can 'help focus the research question',



**Figure 1.** Paths to an open or closed information stance regarding beliefs.

while the research itself extends the conceptual limits of this existing research. Thus, initial coding categories were developed from the research, but additional categories were uncovered as the data continued to drive the research.

The coding process was extensive, as every word from the transcripts was coded in the initial coding phase. Transcripts were coded multiple times looking for ways to group concepts together into more overarching categories that explain more of the data. This generally follows the approach outlined by Corbin and Strauss [47]. With each coding phase, the categories became more abstracted from the data itself. However, it still retained a connection to the data through an *audit trail* [48], that is, the findings and broad abstractions could be traced back through transcripts and field notes to specific moments in the data collection process. This abstraction from the data provided meaningful categories that went beyond mere description of the context [49]. These categories represent ‘an overarching explanatory concept, one that stands above the rest’ [47].

Transcripts were coded for characteristics of beliefs, rather than for specific beliefs. This was done because the goal of the study was to identify how general beliefs might become closed or open to external information. Churches can apply these characteristics to any set of existing beliefs to increase the flow of information. Coding for specific beliefs would be less transferable and, thus, less beneficial.

## 4. Results

Externally oriented beliefs – about things, people or events *outside* of the immediate church context – included core beliefs about all of humanity, beliefs about newcomer behaviour and beliefs that people on a hypothetical island should or should not have. Internally oriented beliefs – about things, people or events *within* the immediate church context – included beliefs about how members of Congregation 1 (C1) and Congregation 2 (C2) should think and behave. The findings confirm that internally focused beliefs showed characteristics of being closed off to external information (RQ1), while externally focused beliefs showed characteristics of being open to external information. As shown in Figure 1, externally oriented beliefs tend to be unbiased and held with low certainty. However, internally oriented beliefs tend to be biased and held with high certainty. In addition, analysis uncovered an additional characteristic of these beliefs – the specificity of the belief definition. Externally oriented beliefs tended to be defined broadly, while internally oriented beliefs tended to be defined narrowly. These findings are outlined in Figure 1 as two paths, an external path that leads to an open stance towards external information and an internal path that leads to a closed stance towards external information.

This section will outline each variable, and the coding categories that outline characteristics of each variable. Table 1 provides an overview of the various characteristics of beliefs coded under each variable. Specific beliefs are provided only in certain instances where they help explain the characteristics themselves.

### 4.1. Bias

This study was interested in the extent to which religious organisations follow the pattern noted in the literature that internally focused beliefs are more biased (RQ1). Analysis confirms these assumptions. The externally directed beliefs in both congregations tended to show evidence of low bias. This meant that they did not assume that their beliefs were any better than those of other groups. Low bias meant leaving belief decisions to local contexts without forcing any *best* belief system. It meant an awareness of the feelings and goals of others. The internally directed beliefs tended to show evidence of high bias. This meant that they *did* think their beliefs superior to others, and they disparaged other beliefs.

**Table 1.** Overview of belief characteristic coding categories

Code	Belief characteristics
Low bias	Belief as personal issue; valued diversity in religious expression; information seeking rather than sharing; mutual respect; belief as contextual
High bias	Belief as demarcating; beliefs as source of pride; assumption of inflexibility in other beliefs; assumption of lack of freedom in other beliefs
Low certainty	Admitted ignorance; we are not judge; careful and selective responses
High certainty	Quick and absolute responses; lack of qualifiers
Broad	Abstract, unclear, open to interpretation, vague, unexplained or non-distinctive
Narrow	Specific, differentiating, delineated and involved strategic implementation

**4.1.1. It's personal.** When a belief was externally focused – such as beliefs about the relevancy of other religious traditions – bias was low. When focused on those outside of their respective churches, participants from both congregations felt that religious belief was a personal phenomenon: ‘It’s a personal relationship with God; it isn’t the same as [others], and it’s not supposed to be’. They were careful not to make assumptions about the personal relevancy of religious expression for those outside their immediate congregation. Even C2, who often disparaged fundamentalism and Catholicism, agreed that these traditions are relevant for certain people – just not for them. They agreed that, ‘Religion is always relevant if you’re someone who embraces it’. One C2 participant noted, ‘We would be judging, like what Orthodox Jews do is not relevant or something like that, but for them it is, by their choice’.

To further show this phenomenon, neither congregation liked the UCC statement, ‘Isn’t it time for religion with relevance’. They noted arrogance in the assumption that other religions are *not* relevant: ‘They’re trying to say we got it right and everybody else’s got it wrong’. They often brought up the feelings of others, as they did not feel that they could make a statement about the relevancy of any other means of religious expression for any other individual: ‘Religion is always relevant if you’re someone who embraces it’.

To illustrate this, participants were asked what they would do if they woke up on an island with a local group of people who had no experience with religion. When given the hypothetical reigns of religious development and asked how they would develop a statement of belief, C1 participants agreed: ‘I would ask the people’. Participants did not feel that their personal beliefs were necessarily the best for another group: ‘I’d need to know what they were actually trying to ... what they were forming for ... it would be intrinsically related to the mission that they [had]’. Thus, they approached beliefs more as an information seeking exercise than an information sharing one. Participants did not show a biased desire to re-establish some existing format for worship: ‘I’m going to respect you for your beliefs; hopefully you can respect me for mine, and we can live peacefully and everything’s fine’. Participants argued that groups of people behave in accordance with their context. As a result, one cannot make any assumptions without understanding this context. They believed that this lack of bias was required for peaceful and communal living: ‘I might ask what they do believe in just to get a better understanding, more of a, not a religious sense, but a community sense – I like to know people’. Participants described this process as ‘willing to hear what other people are saying without knowing exactly what you’re going to say back to them’.

**4.1.2. Our church.** When the beliefs moved away from the hypothetical external island and into the internal world of each congregation, the discussions became much more biased. Both congregations showed a biased preference for the beliefs of their chosen religious context – beliefs that make a clear and positive distinction between them and everyone else. For instance, C1 focused on the history of *their* ONA church as more loving: ‘*Our* church came through the Puritan era – which was very rigorous and defined – to more of an open, loving type of church’. There was pride noted in how participants described themselves. This is distinct from ‘those people’ in another church who were not welcoming of one participant’s friend ‘because he was gay’. One C1 participant argued that the reason a former congregation was not ONA was because they were ‘closed-minded’. When thinking of the non-ONA congregations, participants struggled to find a means of describing them: ‘I don’t know if you call it closed and condemning if we’re open and affirming. I don’t know what you call it, but you know, to sort of differentiate’.

In a similar way, C2 often pointed to Catholicism and fundamentalism as inferior. One participant noted that ‘other sects of the Protestant faith [are] rigid, inflexible, my way or the highway’. Another participant noted that Catholicism’s structure of fundamentalism makes it so ‘you don’t have to think ... you’re told more of what to think’. C2 participants agreed that their ‘free-thinking’ culture differed from ‘other sects of the Protestant faith that, when I hear their names I



think, rigid, inflexible, my way or the highway'. One C2 participant, who had experience with the Roman Catholic Church, described it as lacking a process of 'free thought' back in the late 1950s. He recalled a story in which he was asked what his favourite part of the Bible was, to which he responded, 'I was raised Catholic; we didn't read the Bible, whatever we needed to know we were told'. Another C2 participant described his experience in the Roman Catholic Church as 'kind of a one-way of information, mostly from the nuns down'.

## 4.2. Certainty

This study was also interested in the extent to which religious organisations follow the pattern noted in the literature that internally focused beliefs are held with more certainty (RQ1). Analysis confirms these assumptions that the direction of belief had a clear effect on the certainty with which participants discussed them, that is, external beliefs were held with less certainty than internal beliefs.

**4.2.1. I can't say.** One primary indicator of a lack of certainty was an admitted ignorance on certain topics. When discussing their beliefs about the personal relevancy of religions for other people – an externally oriented belief – participants were kept from making absolute statements because they did not think they knew enough: 'I'm not God so I can't say, yes you're right, yes you're wrong'. C2 agreed that they lacked the information to be able to tell anyone about how to *do* religion with any degree of certainty: 'I'm not educated enough to tell somebody all about religion, where it's from'. When asked about core beliefs, one C1 participant noted, 'I don't feel like you can be too confident [in your beliefs] ... this is what we believe but we don't know for sure'.

A careful and selective response was a second indicator. When asked if the core beliefs – all of which were externally oriented – were non-negotiable, one C1 participant noted rather timidly, 'All of them, I mean none of them, and all of them'. When asked if belief in God was a core belief, C2 participants had a variety of indecisive responses. These included 'Stumped us', 'Good question', 'I'm torn', 'I'm struggling with it' and 'I think you're gonna have some people who say yes and some people who say no'.

**4.2.2. We don't need this.** When discussing beliefs about internal behaviour, participants increased their use of absolute language lacking qualifier words and phrases, for example, I think, maybe. C2 used this type of language when discussing their distinctions from Catholicism: 'We're attached to the faith and we don't need this intermediary; we don't want the intermediary'. This was also directed at fundamentalism: 'We won't go to a fundamentalist stance, that's one thing this church doesn't have with our particular denomination'. C1 used this absolute language when discussing the success that their ONA designation brings: 'We're relevant. We've adjusted to the times. We still respond to the challenges that we face'. This certainty and lack of indecision came with time. In discussing the rules of the congregation, one C1 participant noted, 'the longer that you're here the more you just sort of get it, because of the people that you're with and the things that you do'.

## 4.3. Belief specificity

An additional category uncovered in coding related to the specificity of belief. When beliefs were externally oriented, they tended to be broad. These beliefs were abstract, unclear, open to interpretation, vague, unexplained or non-distinctive. When beliefs were internally oriented, however, they tended to be narrow. These beliefs were specific, differentiating, delineated and involved strategic implementation.

### 4.3.1. Everything's open

When participants from both congregations espoused beliefs about how *newcomers* or *visitors* should behave in church, they did so broadly: 'We will give [them] guidance and everything, but things are open. I mean, everything's open'. Participants were proud of the vagueness with which they outlined beliefs about newcomer behaviour: 'We don't have specific rules, and [some people] struggle with that'. Thus, newcomers were given flexibility in what they did at church. A C1 participant noted, 'It may come down to, you know, what your purpose is for coming to church ... depending on what you get from the program, what you get out of the sermon, the music'. A C2 participant noted, 'We have been able to offer these newcomers a variety of things to choose from to feel welcome'.

C1 participants agreed that it is important to allow newcomers to express themselves in the way they feel most comfortable: 'If they hide themselves in a corner of a pew somewhere, then perhaps you wait awhile before you try to

**Table 2.** Quoted core beliefs of participants from each congregation

Congregation	Noted beliefs
Congregation 1	'Jesus', 'Be nice', 'Love all', 'Work hard', 'Care about each other', 'Feed the hungry', 'The Golden Rule', 'Forgiveness', 'Acceptance', 'An all-loving God', 'Having faith in humanity'
Congregation 2	'Jesus', 'Being loving', 'A God who loves you', 'The Golden Rule', 'A loving God', 'Grace', 'Forgiveness', 'Peace', 'Compassion', 'Understanding', 'Nonviolence', 'The worthiness of every individual', 'Mutual respect'

approach somebody like that'. They agreed that room must be given to newcomers: 'They may be just kind of in an observational mode'. Thus, there was an acceptance of a variety of external circumstances that may lead to different expressions of worship: 'For a lot of people it's kind of a very private, you know, spiritual thing. And maybe they're there to, you know, spend that hour connecting with God and not so much with other people'. This was echoed in C2: 'Sometimes I definitely have a sense that [newcomers] want to remain anonymous: "Don't talk to me."' C2 focused on the need for newcomers to feel 'comfortable'.

This was also noted in the discussion of core beliefs. When asked to outline what they considered to be core religious beliefs, participants from both congregations primarily discussed broad beliefs about how to treat other people. These beliefs are noted in Table 2 and included abstract ideals of being nice or loving, following the Golden Rule and respect. Many were not unique to a religious context, for example, hard work and understanding. None of these were given specific definition or outline. One C1 participant noted with pride that the congregation's very mission statement was 'vague'.

This is further illustrated in espoused beliefs in God and Jesus. The name, 'Jesus', was mentioned an average of seven times in each FG session. Very few of these references, however, included any specific mention of what this meant. Instead, most references were quotations from mission statements or historical statements. For instance, C1 quoted from the ONA statement that mentions 'the gift of Jesus Christ'. C2 quoted from its own mission statement 'to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ'. No follow-up or explanation was offered in these cases.

**4.3.2. Don't shoehorn me.** Although beliefs about proper behaviour for newcomers were broad, beliefs about proper behaviour for existing members was decidedly narrow. Both congregations had beliefs that led to specific behaviour prescriptions for existing members. For C1, this belief was about their ONA designation. For C2, this was a belief in the faults of strict regulations seen in fundamentalism and Catholicism.

C1 had a strong belief in its ONA designation, and although the designation itself is meant to drive the focus outward, it became a means of narrowly defining internal behaviour. For instance, although newcomers were given the freedom to be shy or standoffish, *members* were expected to be social. C1 participants talked disparagingly about members who sat in the balcony, calling them 'people who wanted to be as far from the holy of holies as they could get'. Participants noted that 'they hide in the balcony ... they're regular, they're members but they don't come to coffee'. Another participant lamented that 'there are times when you have a very established congregation, you know, you're just very comfortable in what you do and you don't always greet the person next to you'. One participant noted that

[the pastor] has said week after week – I don't know if he's singing it now – 'If you don't know somebody, stick your hand out there and say hi, my name is,' and I think that's something we have to work at.

When focused internally, C2 had one specific guideline for behaviour – to be left alone to think what they want: 'I really feel like I'm learning to be a good Christian because I want to be a good Christian – not because somebody's telling me this is the way to be that way'. This was noted in their reasoning for not becoming an ONA congregation: 'I think that we would have our own version of an internecine war or struggle'. One participant noted, 'Don't shoehorn me into something ... my spine – what I have left of a spine – would stiffen right up if somebody's forcing me'. They argued that they were, indeed, open, but the ONA designation was merely a 'technicality' that could cause issues: 'It's not wise to sort of sit out there and be a lightning rod for things, right?' They also noted other congregations that had split due to the ONA designation.

This is in stark contrast to their desire that newcomers see them as a place where everyone is 'open and willing to listen about others' perspectives'. When discussing previous members – rather than newcomers – who had 'different

thoughts', they encouraged these members' 'search for another church'. They also suggested of these members: 'Maybe their own inner faith is just not working', and they trivialised these members' decision to leave:

I've heard all kinds of stories from where, you know, the music was too traditional or too progressive. I mean, if somebody doesn't feel comfortable or doesn't find a reason, they're gonna seize on whatever annoys them a little bit.

When one member recalled a discussion with someone outside the church who had differing views, there was a greater sense of understanding: 'Not that she agrees with everything that I do, but it's educated her. It's opened her eyes to, just a different philosophy'. Referring to conversations with those outside the church, another participant noted: 'I think sometimes those kinds of conversations are very interesting to get people to open up about their own religious beliefs or their own belief system'.

## 5. Discussion

This study found that internally directed beliefs – those about people, events and processes within the congregation – were filled with more bias, and were held with higher certainty (RQ1). Existing literature suggests that bias for internal information closes an organisation off to information outside of it [24]. Existing literature also suggests that increased certainty and narcissism closes an organisation off to information outside of it [36,37]. The study also uncovered belief specificity as an additional variable characteristic of beliefs that are open or closed. Thus, it is possible to conclude that internally directed religious beliefs are more likely to be closed off to external information.

Participants discussed four separate beliefs most often, and these beliefs were primarily about behaviour. This included beliefs about

- Relevancy of other religious traditions;
- Superiority of one's chosen tradition;
- Behaviour of newcomers;
- Behaviour of members.

Following these beliefs throughout the paths to information stance in Figure 1, each belief tended to have the same characteristics of a given path. Table 3 outlines the path that each belief tended to follow. Beliefs about the relevancy of other religious traditions and how newcomers should behave showed low bias, low certainty and were defined broadly. These beliefs can be placed on Path 1. The literature suggests that these beliefs should be more open to the influence of information external to the congregation. They are also more likely to change. Beliefs about the superiority of one's chosen tradition and the behaviour of members showed high bias, high certainty and were defined more narrowly. These beliefs can be placed on Path 2. The literature suggests that these beliefs should be less open to the influence of external information and less probably to change. This has important implications for churches, as the lack of change in beliefs can lead to a nonresponsive organisation unable to achieve its objectives.

### 5.1. Specificity

The uncovering of belief specificity is another important contribution of this study. In addition to the variables noted in the literature, externally oriented beliefs tended to be broadly defined and internally oriented beliefs tended to be defined narrowly. The finding that narrowly defined beliefs are more likely to be closed to external information is supported by the existing literature.

**Table 3.** Paths of each primary belief discussed by participants

Belief topic	Path from Figure 1
Relevancy of other religious traditions	1 – open stance
Behaviour of newcomers	1 – open stance
Superiority of one's chosen tradition	2 – closed stance
Behaviour of members	2 – closed stance

Bates' [50] four modes of information seeking help illustrate this finding. Searches can either be directed or undirected, and passive or active. Because narrowly defined beliefs provide specific guidelines, it is probably that any information seeking done about these beliefs would be directed by these guidelines. It is also probably that such a search would be passive – unless an immediate need to defend a belief is present. Thus, the search around narrowly defined beliefs would fit Bates' [50] definition of *monitoring*:

We maintain a back-of-the-mind alertness for things that interest us, and for answers to questions we have.

Because the narrow focus is about internal behaviours, the information of interest to individuals is probably to be from the inside. External information will probably not be considered relevant. Thus, even if individuals in these organisations come across external information related to their beliefs in the course of their everyday lives, they are less probably to actually see this information as relevant – and thus be influenced by it in any meaningful way – because they are primed to pay attention only to specific information. These narrow beliefs equip individuals with 'pre-planned question[s]', from a 'previously identified source' [51], and that source is the organisation itself. This is a central component of small worlds, in which information is produced within the same place in which it is used [24].

The consequences of this are clear. For instance, C1 strongly believed in their designation as an ONA congregation, and the definition of what this meant was decidedly narrow: members should be social, shake the hands of new people, not sit in the balcony and so on. One could certainly see a situation, however, in which a member's social anxiety makes it difficult to fulfil this narrow set of behaviours, causing them to seek out other ways to be welcoming. However, information about social anxiety would probably not be considered relevant as it falls outside the narrow behaviours noted in this belief. Analysis showed that those not fitting this narrow belief were ostracised, creating an environment in which a *Welcoming* congregation stopped being welcoming to those who become members. This may be an instance of a rational irrationality, however, in that this is viewed as worthwhile despite perceived consequences [23].

## 5.2. Open and affirming

Although this study is primarily concerned with the general characteristics of belief, specific beliefs concerning explicit openness to the LGBT community are worth noting due to the unique ONA designation in the UCC church and the frequency with which these issues were noted in discussions. The FG data show that both congregations were on Path 2 with two different beliefs about this designation. This seems odd given that both congregations are affiliated with the same denomination. A closer look at the rationale for the bias, certainty and specificity of these ONA beliefs, however, reveal some important findings.

Congregation 1 hired an openly gay pastor before they applied for, and received, the ONA designation. It is probably that this focused discussion about the issue inward. This became part of their identity, as noted in discussions of 'our church' in conjunction with discussions of their ONA designation. This leads to a narrow expectation of how members should behave, and a disparagement of non-ONA congregations. With something so integral to their identity, the rigour with which this belief is held seems reasonable. However, a questioning of even core beliefs does not equate with a change or rebuttal of them. Rather, it can lead to a subtle restatement of them in a way that increases how the external environment understands them, strengthens connections to organisational mission and strategy, and ensures that the belief does not become stale and entrenched.

Congregation 2 was not ONA, yet still held their beliefs about not becoming ONA with the same Path 2 vigour. They argued that no denomination should 'shoehorn' them into anything, and that the designation was not worth its divisive potential. Given the high awareness of splits in other congregations over this issue, however, this vigour also seems reasonable. However, being closed off to positive stories of ONA churches causes the same possibilities for this belief to become stale and not match their changing environment. They had no stated belief against the LGBT community, and so they would be better served to allow the questions of ONA designation to surface. It is possible that the designation is not merely the 'technicality' they think it is.

## 5.3. Practical solutions

One goal of this study was to provide practical solutions for increasing the openness of beliefs to external information (RQ2). This is, of course, assuming that religious congregations want this flow of external information. Some Christian congregations may see openness to external information as being too heavily influenced by *the world* (Colossians 3:2, NIV). However, these solutions will help those wanting to bring knowledge to the point of use [9]. It was already noted

that the mission statements of each congregation support a desire for openness to external information. It is also important to reassert that the goal of this openness to information is not that this information necessarily changes belief. Instead, it is a suggestion, based strongly in literature on Systems Theory and Complex Adaptive Systems, that this, openness leads to greater external awareness, adaptability and success. This is not necessarily to say that churches should want to change core beliefs to meet a changing environment, but that this changing environment might help them better articulate or define these beliefs so that this environment is more understanding of them.

First, practitioners must focus *first* on reorienting the congregation to a greater external awareness. Sermons can make use of external narratives and stories to bring outside information in. Second, these beliefs need to be broadened, increasing the amount of external information considered relevant to them. This requires what Schein [52] called *cognitive restructuring*, part of which includes the realisation that a concept can have a broader interpretation than one assumed. This is necessary for certain learning anxieties to be overcome. For instance, C2 would benefit from a broadened definition of diversity. Instead of defining it as simply the ability of people to believe what they want and not be questioned about it – which closes them off to discussions that would bring outside information in – they could add debate as part of this definition. This would encourage the contribution of external information not currently present in the congregation and would help them become an open system [7] as they increase the flow of information [8].

Third, congregants need a healthy scepticism regarding even their core beliefs. Remaining sceptical about the universal ability of any one idea to solve everything is a hallmark of a ‘good idea practitioner’ [53]. A more thoughtful reflection on core beliefs will lower the level of certainty that closes them off to outside information. Senge [54] argued, ‘once we feel as if we have “the answer,” all motivation to question our thinking disappears’. When certainty is decreased, and this motivation to question is increased, more information will effectively be transferred in from the outside. This will make it easier to accept and deal with disconfirming information [29].

Finally, because participants were more open to external information about those beliefs that were externally oriented, both congregations would benefit from thinking more about the context outside of the congregation. This suggests an important finding: restructuring internal beliefs as external beliefs should make them more open. For instance, C1 should redefine their ONA designation – not as that which separates them from other congregations – but as something that adds value to their external community. This openness increases the likelihood that the definition of this ONA belief will change with changes in the community.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was limited to FG within two congregations of the same denomination. Extensions of these researches into other denominations or churches may affect the results. This study sought answers to questions about why certain beliefs become closed off to the influence of external information. The approach in this study was to analyse the beliefs themselves to determine their characteristics. Having already outlined from previous literature the characteristics of open and closed information behaviour [23,24,36], it was possible to place these beliefs on paths most probably to lead to one of these behaviours. Analysis confirms that the direction to which the beliefs focused – internal or external – had the largest influence on the apparent openness of individuals to external information about a core belief. The findings also suggest that progressive beliefs are not by definition open to information. Even beliefs about openness to other people turned into static assumptions about how this should happen. Thus, the progressive orientation of belief does not shield it from barriers to external information. As beliefs become more internally focused, they also tend to become more biased, held with more certainty and become more narrowly defined. This negatively impacts their openness to external information. The study also uncovered belief specificity as another key variable in the understanding of the interplay of beliefs and information, and it provided several practical solutions for religious practitioners hoping to increase the openness of their organisations to external information. The study provides important insights into a religious context that provide important extensions to how these contexts have been addressed in previous work [16]; yet, as a study of organisations more generally, these findings can be extended to other non-religious settings.

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## Appendix I

### Select focus group questions

- I want you to go out on a limb with me here and imagine that this group woke up on an island in the middle of the ocean. You encounter a group of people who live there. The people you encounter have no concept of religion or what it means.
- What would you say to them about religion?
- Let's say that you have talked with these people about religion and they have decided they *do* want to have a formal religion of some kind. They request help in drafting a document of main beliefs to help them get started.
- First, how do you develop these beliefs? What is the process?
- What are the main beliefs that should be included in this document?
- What happens if the islanders disagree?
- Are the statements non-negotiable?
- The island is visited by a large group of migrants from another island; you find that they have very different views about religion, which confuses the island's people because all they know about religion is what you told them. How do you approach this situation?
- As you are the new religious leaders of this island, are there any beliefs that would be problematic for these migrants to have if they wanted to move permanently to this island?
- What information would you point to in an effort to explain your belief document to these migrants?
- These beliefs that you created for the island people, would you take those as your own?
- How do you explain your beliefs to other people?
- I'd like to ask you a few questions about the United Church of Christ. If you go to the denomination's website and click on 'New to the UCC', you will be presented with four statements of belief. Are you aware of these? What are your thoughts about them? How would you explain these beliefs to someone outside of the UCC?
- What does it mean for a UCC congregation to be Open and Affirming?
- I want you to think about the various groups you are involved in here at the church. Think about a typical meeting of these groups. Are you ever surprised by things that are said or things that happen when these groups get together? What do discussions look like?
- What needs do your beliefs fill in your life?