

Connecting Through Faith:  
*An Analysis of Friendship in Dalhousie and Kings Religious Societies*

by

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## **Abstract**

In Canadian society today, there is a growing problem of university dropouts and deteriorating mental health conditions in university students with a leading cause being loneliness. This qualitative sociological study explores faith-based student societies as a context for friendship making among university students to examine whether organized social faith-based clubs provide students with an environment where they can develop friendships and a sense of belonging. The research findings align with Emile Durkheim's analyses of the sacred in religious communities and highlights how important relationships in these societies are to both personal and spiritual development. Additionally, this research uses the theoretical influence of Georg Simmel and Danny Kaplan to understand how university student religious societies are socially organized and how interactions are influenced by the objective and subjective culture that surrounds the society. Participants felt that their Christian societies at Dalhousie and Kings helped them find social and personal identify, develop their religious beliefs through group ritual ceremonies, and help build an internal sense of belonging. This research points toward a future where universities will have the proper resources to help illuminate the transcendent power that friendship holds, by examining how it is found in for university students in social clubs organized based on religion.

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## **Introduction:**

### Understanding the Importance of Friendship

Strong friendship networks are vital to personal development and success (Rayle & Chung, 2007, pg.33), and in sustaining social connectedness and a sense of belonging (Allan, 1998, pg.120). But friendships are difficult to find in times of change and disruption, such as leaving home or the Covid-19 pandemic. Today's university students face these changes in social conditions more than most, particularly with the move back to in-person learning. An increase in social anxiety and self-doubt makes it more difficult for students to adapt to new social realms (Walters et al., 2022, pg.844). This often makes it more difficult for students to discover new and positive friendships. To adapt, people may seek friendship in communities they already belong to, such as religious communities. Universities are home to many student-based societies and social clubs that help individuals find these friendships. Many of these are formed based on shared belief and common interest. In most cases, students organize these groups themselves with support from student unions, but some are brought forth by universities themselves. Many societies, especially those rooted in religious belief, use their shared identity as a tool to create new, positive friendships. This exploratory qualitative sociological study explores faith-based student societies as a context for friendship making for university students.

This qualitative sociological research explores whether organized social clubs based on shared faith provide students with a space to develop friendships and a sense of belonging, and if they do, how they make it happen. This research aims to answer the questions: *how does shared religious belief shape friendship-making at university?* As well as the questions of, *how is friendship valued within university religious societies* and *how do the friendships made in religious student societies influence members sense of belonging at university?* This fills a gap in

knowledge, because although we know considerable amounts about the value of friendship for university students, and studies of friendship within religious communities, there is little work that looks at friendship in faith-based university societies.

This research can have important implications. It points toward a future where universities will have the proper resources to help support and appreciate the importance of friendship within universities. There are lots of reasons why students might be lonely – they might be far from home or facing negative consequences from the Covid-19 pandemic. Loneliness can influence their mental health and academic success. This makes the research important as it addresses the growing problem of university dropouts and the deteriorating mental health conditions that university students face today, and it foregrounds the transcendent power that friendship holds, by examining how it is found in organized religious communities.

## Theoretical Framework

### The Social Role of Friendship

In the past few years there have been many ways such as the Covid-19 Pandemic, war, or other recent widespread social phenomena, that have caused large changes in the social realm and has directly influence friendship making for everyone. To address these issues, many have emphasized the importance of technological and alternative forms of interaction and relationship building (Gelzini, 2012, pg.524). Research in the past few decades has shown how in times of social and economic uncertainty, the importance of valuable relationships in people's lives are made even more prominent. It's particularly clear in the experience of young adults and people who are moving to new places and having to make new friendships (Gelzini, 2012, pg.525). In his 2012 research, Gelzini explains how in classical studies, friendship was found to be treated

as a very important relationship to both the state and the citizens within, but in the present day, friendship is often overlooked by the state and at risk of becoming a “source of stress and anxiety” (Gelzinis, 2012, pg.525). The research in this study will expand on Gelzinis’ findings and show how the way people think of friendship has changed over time but the importance of friendship has not (Gelzinis, 2012, pg. 548). Further, this can reveal why friendships are still important for people today and where people can seek meaningful friendships out.

Friendships are defined by a voluntary relationship with another person, with both people sharing a reciprocated trust, care, support, and intimacy that makes their relationships equal and long-lasting (Gelzinis, 2012, pg.528). Friendships come in different forms, some in pursuit of pleasure or gain, others built off of external pressures, but a very important form of friendship is found in relationships built on “goodness” (Gelzinis, 2012, pg.531). As Gelzinis points out in his 2012 study, friendships based on goodness are highly valuable relationships and have been proven to have a positive impact on the well-being of whole communities. Positive and deep relationships take time to develop, but are often characterized by trust, intimacy, and shared passions or beliefs. Research has shown how valuable friendships can be, but also how they take on different forms that change how people value them. From this, it will be important to analyze places where University students are able to find and develop positive forms of friendship and how these friendships can make an impact on their personal development and in maintaining good mental and physical health.

### Classical Connections

Friendship has always stood as one of the most important types of relationships in people’s lives. For some, friendships can even hold a similar value as familial relationships. Many people find their friendships through the communities in which they are members. History

has shown that religion can be used in society to influence the unity of social communities in the world (Durkheim, 1915, pg. 27). Durkheim's work (1915) uses an examination of religions to understand the way that religions represent collective representations of society through collective effervescence. Religion is a tool that is used in explicit and implicit ways to shape individuals' beliefs and actions, influencing the way they behave and interact with the surrounding world (Durkheim, 1915, pg. 429). This is because as Durkheim says, "the idea of society is the soul of religion" (Durkheim, 191). With faith being a tool that helps people make connections with one another, Religion acts as a social condition that further reinforces social solidarity in communities. This affects the ways people approach friendships and the ways they value friendship. Durkheim saw that different religions have different views on what aspects of their faith are sacred and what are profane. Sacred things represent aspects of people's lives deeply connected to their spiritual development and personal faith, and the profane in people's lives is the contrary (Durkheim, 1915, pg.62). Taking some cues from this work, this further study examines whether members of Christian societies at Dalhousie see their friendships as sacred things associated with their relationships with God or if their in-group relationships represent the profane.

Simmel's work studying social relationships and social interactions was important to this research as he saw society grounded in experience and knowledge as well as the needs and desires of people. Simmel further describes how people constantly gain these desires and needs from the influence of others around them (Simmel, 1950, pg. 6). This could further have implications on how members of these societies decide what aspects of their lives are sacred and what are profane and how these decisions are influenced by the religious communities and family they are surrounded by. Social interactions in group communities involve actors taking on



different roles in society and these roles are influenced by the shared goals and beliefs among group members, evidently seen in religious communities (Simmel, 1950, pg. 14). Simmel (1950) noted how “religious behavior” is not only dependent on “religious content” but it is also a “human form of behavior” reliant on various forms of motivations (pg. 15). Further, Simmel (1950) was able to shine light on the way shared faith and belief “assures” people of the “intrinsic norms” in society (pg. 56). This can help understand the way respondents approach social interactions within the community different from ones outside of the community and further depict the different social roles they might take on within the social realm. This can further help depict not only the different roles people play in relationships within religious societies but also what role these relationships play in people’s lives and how they are valued.

### The Value of Friendships

Friendship is a relationship that can last through an “entire life span” and plays a vital role in sustaining social connectedness in life (Blieszner, 2019, pg.1). Friendships create a feeling of connectedness as they help people face loneliness, provide emotional support and companionship through mutual interests, and offer a sense of personal belonging (Blieszner, 2019, pg. 3). Work like David Hunt’s (2013, pg.1) reveals how in recent decades research attempted to “open the flow of friendship” in society by helping people rethink how to be friends. In recent years, many problems, such as Covid-19, have contributed to the creation of stressful environments that people have often found themselves in (Hunt, 2013, pg.34). These environments have caused disruptions to social connectedness and friendship, which has further led to a fear of sociability and social activities, and a widespread realization of how important friendship is to building a healthy and full life (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 57). People are

examining their beliefs about friendships which help show how personal belief, whether it is spiritual or not, is proven to be a powerful tool used for creating new friendships and strengthening old ones (Hunt, 2013, pg.14). Past research has clearly shown how further research needs to continue looking at new and healthy ways to discovering positive friendships in the constantly changing social sphere of society.

Friendship takes on many forms, and different friendships can withstand different levels of conflict that can be the result of various social factors caused by changes in social settings or personal lives (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 56). Friendship is often a relationship that “represents a flexible and de-territorial kind of communal relationship” that can be “mobilized easily” depending on individual circumstances (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 31). Friendships are forms of relationships that are “constructed retrospectively at a particular point in people’s lives”, making it very hard to depict how friendships may develop at an individual level and within large group settings (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 109). In times of community-wide change, such as the pandemic, or individual change such as a move away from family, friendships are proven to play an important role in holding people and communities together (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 109).

William Rawlins (1992, pg.166) studies the variations and tensions found within friendship. Understanding not only the different ways friendship can be found, but also the tensions within friendships caused by disputes based on a variety of different things such as varying beliefs or opinions, differences in personal and social development, geographical moves, and more (Rawlins, 1992, pg. 196). This is important to understand the personal struggle people must go through to find friendship and what are times in people’s lives when they experience this struggle the most. As studies have previously mentioned, these can come in many forms such as

during a geographical relocation or changes in social settings (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 56). University students must “negotiate” choices about education, livelihood, civic involvement, recreation, and more to create friendships and discover the true significance of these relationships once they move into a more independent lifestyle in university (Rawlins, 1992, pg.4).

The implications of Rawlins (1992) research and others such as his are important when considering the serious risk university dropouts represent in Halifax and around the world (Morelli et al., 2022, pg.1). The greatest predictors of dropouts among university students are often self-efficacy and motivation which were heavily damaged by the Covid-19 pandemic due to its negative influence on friendship making for students (Morelli et al., 2022, pg.7). Often these are also affected by an individual's sense of belonging and belief in one's own skills and abilities. Apart from large scale social dilemmas, this is also a difficult aspect that international students must face a lot more often than others and leaves students with an overarching “feeling of failure” (Morelli et al., 2022, pg.8). Research found friendship as a major tool to fight against these personal and social identity issues that students faced in university and an essential part of helping students have a meaningful and impactful experience at university (Morelli et al., 2022, pg. 8). Furthermore, this highlights how important it is that students are able to find healthy and positive support systems in their lives in university and how the communities they are a part of help them find this support.

Research in the past has evidently shown that anxiety continues to increase in people during times of sudden change, particularly in changes to working environments (Walters et al., 2022, pg.855). These sudden changes can be brought up in many ways such as a geographical

move for students, or even in recent years being seen in the shift back into the social realm after long periods of social isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The past years have had a substantial influence on individuals' learning experiences based on their level of "concentration, engagement, ability to learn, and the self-worth" they are finding within their learning (Walters et al., 2022, pg.843). Transitions in social settings at a large scale can influence an individual's experience and wellbeing in their new setting, as well as with the success and personal development they are able to find there. This is due to the way these changes not only influence an individual's routines and engagement, but also their social relationships and the way they interact with and develop relationships with others (Walter et al., 2022, pg.855). It is important to research the ways in which people can counteract against these issues and find the ways in which they are able to fight back against the negative impacts that social transitions have on students' well-being and offer these students support.

### Friendship in Organized Groups

Studies such as Kaplan's (2018) support the idea that friendship is not just developed between small groups but can be constructed in a larger group setting. Kaplan (2018, pg.3) researched collective identity and solidarity in social clubs with an approach that was influenced by the work of Emile Durkheim. This research was done with the goal of creating a better understanding of the value and diversity offered in friendships provided by social clubs and organizations. Kaplan (2018, pg.33) discovered that membership in social clubs has a distinct relationship with friendship, using it to provide people with a sense of belonging and "civic attachment". Kaplan proved this through identifying solidarity as an "impersonal relationship between strangers", "extension of sociability" and a "by-product of identity" (2022, pg.761).

Each of these offer a way of showing how solidarity emphasizes shared interests, group participation and the cooperation of joint projects that can have a lasting impact on an individual's personal development. It is reasonable to suppose that religious communities can function in a similar way as settings for friendship.

Positive social relationships found within universities are found to be important for helping students adjust to their new university environment (Morelli et al., 2022, pg,7). The easier it is for students to adjust to their new social setting and find positive ways to cope with feelings of loneliness, the easier it is found for them to achieve higher levels of academic achievement (Morelli et al., 2022, pg.8). These personal relationships are often important for members because they stand as reasons for attending classes, for gaining desires to avoid negative consequences, for helping convince each other to stay in university, and for many other unique aspects of a student's university experience that influence an individual's motivations for success (Morelli et al., 2022, pg. 2). Peer relationships can function as a "protective factor", a "tool" for the "moderation of relationships between academic success and depressive symptoms", and to help individual's gain necessary "self-regulation strategies", all of these help students achieve academic success and maintain positive mental health while at university (Morelli et al., 2022, pg. 3). Friendships are vital in helping students not only find success in university but also have a positive social experience and develop their mental health.

Past research of the first-year experience and the perceptions of university by future students suggests that students place a high value on social connections in terms of 'fitting in' and belonging at university (Read et al., 2018, 14). Nevertheless, research recently has gone against the common conception that friendship is an individual and personal experience and has now found that friendship dynamics at university are determined by the social identities and

social positions of everyone involved (Read et al., 2018, pg. 3). Research has also found difficulties faced by off-campus students in terms of social mixing; these are students who are more likely to struggle to become members of friendships groups and the majority are ethnic minorities (Read et al., 2018, pg. 4). Further research needs to analyze if socially unequal aspects of friendship are highlighted when we look at the dynamics of popularity and the formation of cliques at university and how they are found within organized societies.

### Friendship in Religious Communities

There are many different forms of official and non-official religions in society today, ranging in popularity based on geographic location. Official religions provide followers with ethical guidelines, cultural expression, institutional organization, and authority that help build a joint community of believers (McGuire, 2008, pg. 17). Individuals can also convert to or join these official religious institutions, but both are influenced by where an individual is born and their access to other religious groups. Non-official religions are represented by a set of shared religious and quasi-religious beliefs that may not be recognized or controlled by official organized groups but provides a community with a strong engagement in spiritual practices (McGuire, 2008, pg. 167). Research has found that many different official religious groups are full of people with diverse religious backgrounds and different beliefs (McGuire, 2008, 186). Past studies have missed the hybridity between religious identity and commitment, and it is important to further study what the goal of religious commitment is, and how religious communities aim to help people discover personal identity through an environment of belonging and friendship. Furthermore, as McGuire (2008, pg. 185) identifies, people have often been able to relate within these communities due to their shared commitment to their religion and the shared goals they have in their lives that are based around their religious beliefs. This can help

unveil how the friendships religious people have with people who share the same beliefs, commitment, and goals, are valued by them differently from secular relationships where the undercurrent of these shared beliefs, commitments, and goals are missing. No matter the form religious belief takes on in society or in an individual's life, belief evidently influences social interaction and friendships.

Jessica Hardin's 2019 work researched friendship in organized groups through an ethnographic study of Samoan Pentecostal churches and found that ritualized friendships are “informal but essential forms of relationships” (Pg. 150). These friendships helped with individual and personal development as well as with the growth of the church. These friendships are found in many layers, one being the mentorship present when new converts are introduced into church communities where members of the church will take them in as mentors providing escalating forms of care and obligation. Spiritual practices within churches often were seen by Hardin (2019) to be “modeled by peer socialization practices” that can help people with a feeling of “repair” through helping converts restore their feeling of identity (pg.150).

In Hardin's study (2019) there was also a discussion of the initial disruption in social and personal experiences for people newly converted to a religion and further the care work provided by these religious communities to help these people build friendships and help provide them with a path to a positive future (Pg. 157). For Hardin (2019), the community she studied showed how conversion and their religion can “help people get better”, but to truly feel the “full healing power” of their faith one must “engage with the community” and form in-group relationships with these people so they have others to “grow their faith alongside” (pg.158).

As discussed earlier, Durkheim (1915) wrote that religion has been used to create and unite communities based on the foundations of shared belief. Durkheim (1915, pg.76) further

examined the way that religions are found to be collective representations of society and essentially a social aspect of life that bind communities together. Similarly, Simmel (1950, pg.191) later observed that religion influences social interactions and questions whether these influences have a positive or negative effect on the value and importance that these friendships have for religious people. To see if these relationships are valuable, it is important to identify and understand how religious groups think about their social interactions by observing their recruitment and social networking.

Many religions use shared belief as a foundation for the relationships they build inside the communities where other organized groups across society put less emphasis on developing the beliefs shared within their group (Adams & Allan, 1998, pg. 167). This is influential for members of religious communities as friendships are “contextually embedded” and the ways in which they are “organized, their content, and the boundaries implicitly placed around them”, are all influenced by the characteristics of the individual and the social context they find themselves in (Adams and Allan, 1998, pg. 183). Belief-based communities and groups often provide a platform for understanding different ways to think about friendships in organized groups and large social settings such as universities and provide their own ideas on how friendship should be valued and understood (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg. 108).

Religious belief in its different forms influences social interactions in many aspects of people’s lives but is not the only determining factor for religious people when they seek out new friendships within or outside their spiritual communities (McGuire, 1997, pg.101). Despite the variation in religions across the world, all are built on foundations of social practices and connectedness. For example, in “born again” communities, spiritual practices are “modelled by peer socialization” that uses “prayers and ritualized friendships to mark the performative



moments in people's lives and create a radical break from their past lives" (Hardin, 2019, pg. 151). Deriving from this, we might expect religious societies on campus to play a key role in students' transition to university life, and in the formation of friendships at university. It is valuable to analyze the ways religion does influence people's social interactions and how a shared belief can influence friendship making for people with a heavy devotion their faith.

### Filling in the Gaps

This qualitative study of a Dalhousie University and Kings religious student societies will explore how organized social clubs based on shared faith provide students with a space to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. Past research has discussed the importance of friendship for personal development (Blieszner, 2019, pg.14), the connection between friendship and organized groups (Hardin, 2019), and the ways religious communities reinforce friendship within their societies (Durkheim, 1915). This research aims to fill the gaps of past research by exploring how social faith-based groups influence the social settings for friendship making at university. This will also fill the gaps in research in understanding how friendships within religious communities are treated and valued by community members and what function these friendships play in their personal development and social identity.

### Methods

The study population is university students who are members of a faith-based student society at Dalhousie University. I ended up with a sample of interviewees from the Christian Outreach Society, Kings Chapel, and Power to Change society. Any member of these societies was able to participate as long as they were a student. I aimed to conduct 8-10 semi structured interviews but only was able to complete 5 as I had difficulty accessing updated contact

information for societies, and numerous people agreed to participate but canceled their interviews and did not agree to reschedule.

These semi-structured interviews will be presented through a credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable research process that will collect data in naturally occurring situations and environments (Bryman & Cramer, 2005, pg.16). Choosing this method will help break the research question into specific questions that will help come to create connections between the participants experiences and this research's goal of discovering how religious faith influences friendship in university (Kirby & Mckenna, 1989, pg.65). Participant observation will play a minimal role in this study and will not be incorporated in the data collection process of this study but direct observation of the society can provide a further understanding of the social environment of the society, the groups dynamics, and the key values they reinforce (Kirby and Mckenna, 1989, pg.150).

### Plans for Recruitment

I have undertaken all of the recruitment through reaching out to individuals across religious societies at Dalhousie University and the University of Kings College. I successfully got in contact with the Christian Outreach Society at Dalhousie, the Power to Change society at Dalhousie and Kings, and the Kings Chapel (Appendix A and Appendix B). I attended an event ran by each society and discussed the study with the group members and started to recruit participants with whom to conduct the interviews based on the recruitment script in Appendix B. Recruitment was also influenced by the discussion I had with the societies leader(s) before the event as I used that time to ask them the most respectful way, they wanted me to approach

recruiting participants. Many of the participants of this study were gained after they had reached out to me directly through the email, I provided them at the group meeting.

As previously mentioned, the participants of this research were split between three Dalhousie and Kings Christian societies. The first was the Dalhousie Christian Society where I interviewed two students. The next was the Power to Change Christian society with students from both Dalhousie and Kings, where I interviewed one student. The final society incorporated into this research is represented by interviews with two students who are wardens or student leaders at Kings Chapel.

To seek out the involvement of these societies I sent an initial email to the Catholic Christian Outreach student society and later reached out to the Power to Change society and Kings Chapel (see Appendix A and Appendix B). I approached three student societies in case one of them was not willing to participate but was able to recruit a diverse population of participants from each one. Each one of these societies expressed similar and unique opportunities for analyzing the experiences of university students within Christian based societies at Dalhousie and Kings. As the majority of the detail about these societies was discovered upon visiting their event, what was known is each were societies built on, but not limited to, people with a shared belief in Christianity. But they ranged in group size, in the events they ran, in the environments they would perform their spiritual practices in, and in their involvement and commitment in the community. When I attended their events, I gave prospective participants in the study preliminary information about the research such as the topic of the study and the time commitment and why I am pursuing this research and further opened the opportunity to explore different questions they could have about the research which could help me further learn how it relates to their experiences.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were asked to answer a series of questions in a semi-structured interview format that took approximately thirty minutes to an hour to complete. The research instrument for the study is an interview guide (Appendix D). Interviews were audio recorded on my iPhone and transcribed into a word document and further Nvivo 12 which was later used for the integration of coding.

Qualitative data analysis started with a verbatim transcription of the recorded interviews. I then coded and analyzed the interview data according to themes in the literature and discovered new concepts and themes not yet identified in the literature review. Data in this research will be coded as coding helps create a more systematic analysis that avoids jumping to premature conclusions and protects the confidentiality of my participants (Jackson, 2001, pg.201). The interpretation of qualitative data using the chosen methods will be the best way to understand both the unique and collective experiences of the participants.

The themes in the literature will be used to analyze the data to discover how their experiences at university has been altered by their commitment to their society, what influence different forms of social interactions inside and outside of their religious communities have on their lives and how their friendships are influenced by the social identity they feel as members of their societies (Kaplan, 2022, pg. 763). This research will also help identify the way religious societies may approach friendship as either the sacred or profane (Durkheim, 1915, pg. 63) by examining what the friendships made within the society mean to the respondents and how they value these relationships in their lives. Further this will help discover what it means for students

to have a space to create friendships with people who share their faith and want to continue to grow their faith with others.

### Ethical Consideration

This study meets the TCPS2 definition of minimal risk in that the risks are no greater than those the participants would face in discussing these topics in their everyday lives. A potential discomfort from this research could arise from participants potentially revisiting upsetting memories in their lives when discussing their past experiences with friendships or their religious beliefs. If any participants seemed upset at any point during the process (hesitant, crying, angry), I asked if they were okay and reminded them at any point they could skip the question, take a break, or stop completely. I also asked if they would like me to delete any of the information that has already been recorded. Only I know the identities of participants. It is possible that participants will share details of their participation among themselves, or with others who are not members of the student society. I will not disclose to any participant or member of the society the identities of other participants in the study.

Questions in my interview guide are open ended and allow participants to guide the topics covered (See Appendix D). I did not push on topics my participant seemed reluctant to discuss. All participants were informed about the study's subject matter and topics of the interview prior to the interview. Additionally, all information about the participants and their relationships within the student society, and any other identifying information, was not reported to avoid identification of any of the society's members. There may be a risk to privacy for participants as members of the student society may be able to guess each other's identities. Participants will be informed of this possibility during the process of obtaining informed consent.

These methods present limits to the potential research. Being a qualitative study with a small number of members points to the difficulties caused by small sample size and the inability to understand the experiences of a larger and more diverse range of individuals. As well, these samples focusing on -semi-structured interviews leave way to the interviews by impacted by individual bias as the respondents' answers can be shaped by their feelings towards their society as a whole rather than their experiences with the people within the society. This can be both positive and negative and should be counteracted with the types of questions being asked in the interview guide and the use of multiple people from societies to gain a grander insight. Despite the limitations these methods provide the best opportunity to understand the unique and collective experiences of religious students at Dalhousie and Kings who are members Christian societies and how these experiences could have implications on future students.

## **Analysis and Findings**

### **Understanding the Environment of the Participants: Dalhousie and Kings Christian Societies**

The Dalhousie Christian society often adopted people into their program through their connection to different churches across the world. They are a group in transition. Covid-19 led to them becoming a much smaller group, but they continue to try to grow their community back to what it was through their church and the society fair. According to its participants, the Dalhousie Christian Society highly values the shared experience of Christ. This shared experience brings them together as a unifying influence; a shared experience and collective pursuit of a healthy Christian life. When asked about this experience, group member Basil described it as “feeling Christ in the things we do and finding ways to let his light shine through us”. This speaks to how the members of these societies often shared personal goals and values that were focused on a

development their religious beliefs and increasing the role that their religion plays in their lives. The participants from the Dalhousie Christian society, Nancy, and Basil, described the core values of the society as “putting God first in everything” (Nancy). This included having trust in God and believing that he has a plan for people and to achieve his plan one must be living a life of genuine kindness and compassion with a willingness to serve others selflessly. These were values that the participants brought into every part of their life and played a pivotal role in their social interactions, including the love and forgiveness of friends. This discovery directly supports the analysis of social interactions by Simmel (1950, pg. 15) and his expression of how social interactions and communities are determined by the objective and subjective cultures around them and this proves how religious culture is heavily influential.

The next society I analyzed was the Power to Change Society which was made up of Dalhousie and Kings students who shared a belief in God and the Christian Bible or who wanted to learn more about Christianity. They recruit primarily through messages around campus dispersed through posters, legal graffiti, and emails, while also holding one on one talks with students around campus. Through their advertising and discussions, they often recruit based on the questions of “who do you think Jesus is?” and “what do you think the point of life is?”. The participant described the goal in their recruitment being to “help start to understand the spiritual climate on campus and open up hard conversations about Christianity and different kinds of philosophy that can maybe change group members desire to know Jesus better and change some part of their lives going forward”.

Carol plays a major role in her society and has been a member throughout her four years of university. A major role she plays is as she described in “helping people in the group in one-on-one situations and being there for any one of the members who could need help whenever

they might”. Above all else she discussed the groups value for “coming to God as they truly are”, and “encouraging people to be their true authentic selves.”. For Christians, she says that “they believe the best way for them to achieve this can be through the continuous pursuit of Christ”. In a secular nature, this is can be understood through research such as Jessica Hardin’s (2019) that shows how devoted members of religious communities will often rely on the spiritual practices and ritual ceremonies they undertake to help “repair and develop” their personal, social, and spiritual identities (pg.158). To make this clearer in looking at the Power to Change society, according to Carol, they “see God as the light of the world, and they want to let his light shine through them”. Making the “pursuit of Christ” representative of members trying to present themselves for who they truly are and bring happiness and good to themselves and the social and physical world around them. These ideas all reveal how they value truth in their society, and how their interactions are determined by the fact that they do everything they do based on the idea that they are being judged by God and build a deep internal desire to be genuinely good.

The final society I had researched was the community in Kings Chapel. I had interviewed two of their student leaders or “wardens” who both aim to show the positive influence Christianity can have on people’s lives despite them experiencing “hesitancy” from people on campus they speak to about their faith. They ascribe this difficulty as due to “fears of judgment based on conservative values” present in some forms of Christianity that have been around in society across History. They are often involved in charity work around the province, including, cooking meals for Halifax elementary schools to be shared with families lacking the means to provide their kids with lunches every day. Both participants reported that rather than recruiting, they aim to grow and be a place where people can always go. They have a few standard methods of bringing new people in such as hikes in beautiful areas around Halifax which often includes a



cliffside communion, they have weekly services and meetings as well as a choir, and three times a year they have retreats that were described by the participants as some of their most cherished memories with the chapel. Representing the important of their spiritual practices and ritual prayers and how much they rely on sacred group events for the development and growth of relationships within the society.

Both participants found that they were influenced to join by the chaplain and his persistence in offering them opportunities with the chapel. They were also offered support from the chaplain if they needed it, and for both these moments and their relationship with him stood as very impactful for them when they were starting their education. Both participants found they needed the chapel for different reasons at different times in their university careers. But both expressed ideas relating to past research on how social clubs are able to provide people with a sense of belonging and civic attachment (Kaplan, 2018, pg. 34). Both participants reported that they have been able to rely on the community in the chapel through loss of family members, illnesses diagnosed to loved ones, struggles with faith or with school, and when facing the difficulties of finding positive relationships in their lives at university.

When asked about group values, one participant Dwayne said, “the constant values of intentionality and patience are constantly being reinforced and we bring those into interactions with each other and in our everyday lives and make sure we have positive intent with everything we do as a group or by ourselves”. The participants from the chapel clearly identify how through a mix of social events, charitable work, and spiritual practices, the chapel aims to provide an environment for students to not only grow their faith and values but also have a circle of support and care that people can depend on. This finding is important when focusing on past research such as Morelli and colleagues 2022 research that highlighted the importance of support systems

for people's lives and particularly students' lives and this shows how Christian societies such as the Kings Chapel are able to provide students with a support network that help them develop a sense of belonging and personal confidence.

### The Identity Struggles of First Year University Students

A major aspect of this qualitative research study is understanding how students find friends and adapt to a university setting when they start their degrees, and to analyze how important these friendships were for their wellbeing and sense of belonging. All but one of the students came from a very religious family and all had been devoted to their Christianity since a young age. Basil, a member of the Dalhousie Christian society, described her family as "missionaries and very conservative Christians". She lived all around the world and in predominantly highly conservative areas. This caused her many problems with her identity as an openly queer woman and influenced the way she was able to be open with other Christians. This also effected how she initiated herself into the Dalhousie society once she moved here: "coming to Dalhousie's more progressive society started to make me really question my faith and find out who I was pursuing my Christianity for". But considering this, her religion and church was still very important for her settling into to her new social setting. In fact, the church she is a part of has branch in Halifax. "My church is kind of like a group of churches spread out across the world and there is one in Halifax that was connected to my church at home and they kind of like run of the Christian society at Dalhousie". This is important when understanding the shared struggles that were identified by both Nancy and Basil as well as many other international students where they struggle to become members of friendship groups and social communities

and how influential connections from home can be for these students such as a connection through one's church (Read et al., 2018, pg.16).

A struggle that Basil expressed that past research such as Hardin (2019, pg.159 [notes]) had shown was with the expectations of religious commitment by family members:

“There was a kind of expectation from my parents to join the society like I didn't really choose to do it myself, but it honestly really helped me have kind of like a family I could rely on while I am out here” (Basil).

With the struggles she was having with her faith and new-found identity in her new country she found the society helpful as it was less of a commitment than her previous church which allowed her to “pursue my Christianity in the way [she] wanted to and at [her] own pace”. Basil was an example of somebody who was able seek new friendships and discover their personal and social identity (Kaplan, 2022, pg. 760) through her church despite her struggles with her faith. Finding access to the society helped her settle in socially in her new country and city and also have people she could rely on whenever she needed help and provide her with a reliable system of support which expresses the value these societies can have for international students (Morelli et al., 2022. Pg.8).

Nancy was another participant from the Dalhousie Christian society, and she came from a home and family that she said was “devoted Christians” for her whole life. She moved from Antigua to attend Dalhousie. She found that as an international student it was very difficult for her to develop new friendships and join different social groups: “I would call myself somewhat of an introvert and I struggled to reach out and find new people to interact with and sometimes I felt that people might judge me or think of me different because of my faith”. Research has

expressed that others have had similar experiences as her when facing these social struggles and often this leads people like her to devoting more of her time and energy into her religion to find more Christian people she could relate to (Read et al., 2018, pg.14). She did this by attending more group prayers, bible studies and by becoming more involved in her Church and in her society by helping organize social and ritual events. This helped her feel less isolated at university which reflected past research that shows how friendships based on shared connections such as an ability to relate to one another through faith, is largely influential in helping people develop their social identity (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg.109).

For Nancy, she sought out the society in a time of confusion and struggle and it has been a way for her to surround herself with a community of people that shared her main values and beliefs and people that she knew would help her maintain her focus of achieving the goals she prioritizes in her life. The Dalhousie Christian society helped both participants feel as if they were not alone in their journey through university and help them find a community of people they could rely on through their shared faith. Rather than providing friendships based on pleasure and escape, they offered relationships based on love, support, and connection.

Carol was a member of the Power of Change society and came from a Christian household that she said, “gave her the opportunity to pursue her Christianity however [she] wanted to”. This led to her truly committing to her faith as she got older as she felt she had to do it for herself and led to her needing a place to develop her faith once she arrived at university:

“Once I came University and was on my own, I thought, who was I doing this for? And If I was going to continue to pursue my Christianity and grow my relationship with God, I needed to start doing this for myself”.

She explained how as a Christian there are certain things that she felt as though she was “called to live by and do” and struggled to find new and deep friendships with people who she felt she “could be negatively coerced by or influenced into doing things that go against what [she] believe[s] in”. But despite her religious convictions being strong and informing almost everything she does, she was still able to discover friends both within and outside of her religion.

Coming to Kings from across the country, Carol found that the most important thing for her establishing herself there socially was finding people she, “could be able to create deep connections with and those people in which I feel I can ask the hard questions with and be comfortable with messing up around them”. She found the society helped her find herself in the way people were really encouraging and it has been a community of people trying to “build each other up” and create a relationship that entails an “intention to share their experiences with Christ”. This directly relates to the sacred in her life and how these relationships have a deep connection to personal identity due to them being built on the foundations of shared belief (Durkheim, 1915, 62). This also shows how the interactions she has within the group are directly determined by the objective and subjective culture that surrounds the society and how she uses these influences for her advantage in developing deeper connections to other members and gaining a deeper commitment to her ritual prayers.

Despite her being able to find other meaningful relationships outside the society, she found the ones she made in her society to be more important for discovering who she was becoming. As she developed in the new social setting of university, she was able to build a bond with the other group members that meant she could rely on them to help her mental health. This shows not only the unique relationships that can come from people who share a common belief,

but also the environment the community provides for them as a place of questioning, thinking, reflecting, helping others and themselves, and developing individually and as a group.

As previously stated, there was two participants in this research from Kings Chapel. Both were wardens that had gained significant responsibility since they have joined. One of the wardens, Dwayne, grew up deeply connected to Christianity as his dad was a pastor and later a theology professor. Most of his friends growing up came from church or Christian summer camp. The move to university was difficult for him and he struggled to understand where he stood with his religion after being left to seek it out himself moving far away from home:

“My first week at University I had a lecture that made me totally rethink what I believed in and made me start to question my faith entirely and lose my commitment to my Christianity for the first few years of my time at Kings.”

This pause in his commitment ate at him until the chaplain of Kings Chapel reached out to him and helped him find his path “back to Christ”. When he started to become uncertain about who he was and the future ahead of him, he found the Chapel was a safe place for him to go and find answers to his questions.

Eventually, he found himself more connected to his faith than he had ever been. He discovered new friendships in university through his residence and classes, but he still struggled with his feeling of identity and felt his initiation into the Kings Chapel was very important for finding himself again. He found a lot of this through the social roles that the society offered and the influence that mentorship had for him. Reflecting Jessica Hardins (2019) work, mentorship played a dominant role in the society, and he found in instrumental in as he said, “having others that [he] could go to be cared for or for insight or to ask questions to and the older [he] got the

more [he] wanted to make sure [he] provided that for new members coming in” (pg.151). The chapel began to be a place he could rely on and a place where he shared common responsibility and mutual trust, and it continues to play a significant role in his mental well-being and development. This shows the path these societies provide for students questioning their faith, and for people like Dwayne they can provide an environment for people to connect to their religion and find out what it means to them.

The other warden/student leader interviewed in this research was Rosemary who had grown up with atheist parents and found herself discovering and pursuing her faith by herself from the age of 4:

“I started going to church with my friend when I was 4 after having questions about death and not being able to find answers that I was happy with. I fell in love with it and kept going with them and even on my own and after some years I asked my parents to let me get baptized when I was 12.”

She came into university as she described as an “introverted person”, and she stated having “had a really hard time finding “deep and impactful relationships” in her life. She found Kings a very small program that was very beneficial for finding and developing friendships, but she still needed to find a church where she could continue to grow a deeper connection to her faith and learn more about God, and how others experience God. She came upon Kings Chapel on her first day at Kings and found herself getting involved getting more involved the more she began to miss home:

“There was also a time in my first year when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and it was really hard for me being so far away. Sometimes I felt maybe even mad at God

for this happening to her and me having to be here, but I started to attend more services and meeting with the Chapel and I found so much love and support they truly saved me and kept me here and hopeful”

She was able to lean on own her faith as well as the other members of the chapel to help come to terms with what was going on. The role she played in the chapel was instrumental in helping her gain a sense of belonging within university and help develop her self-confidence and social identity. It helped her understand and control the emotions she was enduring, and it helped her get through the distance up until her mother’s recovery. The society helped her settle into her belief into a different way than she had in her past experiences in her life and helped her build some of her most amazing memories and get through some of the toughest times of her life. The roles she played and the role the society plays in her life are representative of past work on religious communities in understanding how these relationships have a large impact than out of group relationships on her personal development and social identity and how these relationships represent agreements of mutual care, “love, and support” (Hardin, 2019, pg.157). Rosemary had the society not only help her discover her religious identity but also the social identity she continues to grow and relied on the society to be there when she needed them.

An important identity struggle noted in two of the interviews came with participants discussing their experiences with their gender. Two of the participants were members of the LGBTQIA2+ community and they both found hesitation in fully opening their identities around Christian communities. One of the participants had felt that their experience had been difficult growing up in highly conservative communities and still found some of the same struggles in her



new community in Halifax; they found it risky to be able to come out to the other Christians as well as opening up about their background, despite her friends in the society being kind people:

“The people in the society are very nice people but growing up there have been many times I have been around other Christian people or families who have supported some really conservative ideas that make me unsure if they would accept me for who I really am...”.

Another openly bisexual participant in the study found that it made her experience more unique. Since she arrived at the Kings Chapel, she has found that she had been able to form deep connections and not have to hide any part of herself any more: “I find at Kings the chapel is a lot more progressive than my church back home and I really never have to worry about showing myself for who I really am with the society members as I did at my church in BC”. This reflects the ways in which other participants find the culture of university a more progressive place that is more welcoming of everyone, but they are still hesitant within Christian communities. This represents the influence that objective and subjective culture has on participants social interactions and how their religious cultures influence their interactions both within and outside of their religious societies by depicting the participants norms and social identities (Simmel, 1950, pg. 191). When looking at the two experiences it shows that there are Christian societies available and welcoming for people no matter their background, gender, and sexuality, although they must be open about it in their discussions and advertising to help eradicate people’s fears. But despite this, in religious societies there is a clear influence that religion has on an individual's ability to interact with others and present their authentic selves.

Continuing to Pursue Religion in University

For all the participants, once they came to university it was both very important and a reason of concern for finding a place to pursue ritual prayer and ceremonies and find others to continue to learn and develop their faith alongside. For Basil, she found herself connected through the society through her church and has found herself continuing her pursuit of her faith in a different way than she grew up with. With the society she follows her religion through weekly services, bible studies when she can, trips to tourist destinations in the Halifax area as a group, and home meetings where they would enjoy dinners, prayers, and songs together. She found herself practicing less of her faith in her personal life, “I find myself now not attending church every week, reading the bible by myself, and doing further charitable work around the community”. Because of this, she found it important to have the society to maintain her spiritual connection and a safe space to find friends to grow her religion with. The society has provided her with a type of environment where she feels she has more control over her commitment and develop her faith the way she wants to and is not having her faith controlled and determined by her parents or others as past research has showed to be a vital risk to youths in religion (Hardin, 2019, pg.159).

Even though Nancy was also a member of the Dalhousie Christian Society, her intentions with the society were slightly different. As she got older and more intentional, she found herself becoming more committed to her faith in God and trying to bring her faith into everything she does in her life. “Once I was able to fully devote myself to my walk with Christ, I was able to be truly saved”. She uses the bible studies, prayers, and services to continue her pursuit of Christ and find people to learn more about Christ and share their experiences of Christ together. Nancy recently attended a conference where Christian societies across Canada came together. She says, “this really helped reinforce and reassure myself that there are lots of others on this path with

us”. For Nancy and many of the other participants, pursuing their faith held a lot of value in their life for both their personal and social identity but also for their well-being. Across all of these cases, these are young people who are able to choose their paths when it comes to religion, and they have chosen to continue what they called a “relationship” with “Christ” or “God” by joining and becoming an active part of an on-campus religious society.

Carol left home for university and realized she had to start pursuing her religion not for her family or others but for herself: “through lots of thought I decided God was what I believed in and who I wanted to live by and from there have stayed true to that in everything I do”. The society has grown to play a huge role in her life and helps her in continuing to live her life “based on the good that Christ does for her,” and to discover what being a Christian truly means for her. Often time she finds some of the most impactful moments in her university life for her is the deep conversations about how and why they believe in their faith and use hard passages to wage their Christianity; “everyone in the society is there because they want to know Jesus more or because they want to talk about Jesus more and focus on how they pursue him”. Reflecting more of the sacred connection she found in the in-group relationships and how important they were for her personal development. For Carol she uses the society as an opportunity to further the development and engagement of her Christianity discover what being a Christian truly means for her.

The wardens at the Kings Chapel both expressed a different experience with their faith as they entered university and found solace in the Chapel in different ways. Once Dwayne arrived at Kings, he found himself lost in his beliefs and stepped away from his pursuit of Christ for two years before re-engaging himself into his faith through the chapel,

“The chapel has grown to be one of the most important parts of my life and the thing I put the majority of my time and energy into even after barely being involved for two years and it's not a big part of the social fabric of his life”.

The chapel is what he believes to be his most significant responsibility and the most fulfilling part of his life as it is the site of a lot of his learning and growth, and it shows him how much more he still has to learn. Coming back into his religion after breaking away allowed him to figure out how he wanted to embark on his journey of Christ and helped him gain a more holistic understanding of his faith. Through a much richer liturgy and large social engagement Dwayne found the chapel offered him the space to focus on the things he wanted to focus on in his religion and bring good to his community through his faith. “The chapel was always there for me in whatever way I wanted it to be and the Father’s persistence was a main reason I knew I could rely on it”. The chapel has become a place he can not only rely on socially but also spiritually and help him pursue Christ in a way he is passionate about.

Rosemary on the other hand found herself relying on her faith in the early years of her time at Kings and has taken on lots of responsibility in the chapel the more she got involved. As the warden she said, “I handle all the non-spiritual aspects of the day-to-day lives for present members and future members and also really just be there for all of them when they need”. She has been finding that her following of Christianity has become a lot more public since joining the Chapel and finding herself for the first time following along this journey of Christ with people around the same age as her which has been very impactful in helping her relate with them, “The closer I have become with different people in the chapel the closer I feel I am getting to God and it helps having people in similar times of their lives as me feel these experiences with God in the

same way”. All the things she does in the society, from the small weekly activities to the large trips, relate to her religious life and help her gain a deeper devotion and connection to her faith. These are sacred (Durkheim, 1915, pg.36) relationships to Rosemary and the social roles she takes up within she plays within the group and some that she cherishes most in her life (Kaplan, 2018, pg. 10).

### The Familial Connection and Social Identity Found Within These Dalhousie and Kings Christian Societies

The most important theme discovered across these interviews came in understanding what type of relationships the people in these societies share with one another. Particularly, analyzing what these relationships mean to the participants and the role they play in their lives. As hypothesized through the literature review this research was expecting to see these relationships be representative of friendships, but upon finishing the interviews it became evident that these relationships were different, they were more.

Basil and Nancy had both described the Dalhousie Christian Society as being a group of individuals they could rely on. Many of the trips they went on together not only helped them grow their spirituality but also “grow our relationships together and bond together because it felt like a more progressive environment where I could be freer than I was able to in my church growing up” (Basil). She finds the society is a place for her to “work on [her] growth, both mentally and spiritually, and it's where [she] can go when [she's] feeling in need of guidance or people [she] can lean on”. Her friends outside of the community are where she finds more of her fun and pleasure and the profane in her life. But she also found that relationships with people who share a strong faith, even if it is not the same Christianity as hers, helps her relate and bond

with others in a way she can't with her non-religious friends and can rely on those people in times of spiritual and self-doubt and in supporting her in her personal growth.

Nancy found a similar familial connection with the society and found it much easier to form meaningful connections with people in the society as they shared a common belief with her, "Finding people who shared the same beliefs as me and same goals as me made it easier to make new friends than it had been". In just a few months the society has become "her family away from home" and found they changed her life for the best. The Dalhousie Christian society helped both participants feel as if they were not alone in their journey to become more deeply connected to God and rather than help them form friendships based on pleasure and escape, they offer relationships based on love, support, and a shared commitment to God.

Carol found a familiar experience with the Power of Change society where the bonds made with the members within the group mimicked a familial relationship more than a friendship. Rather than being people she goes to for escaping the hardships of life it has been a place for her to confront them. The society provided her with people she could have "serious real-life discussions with" and "lean on in times where [she] feel[s] lost or am struggling or am just in need to be cared for". This was seen in the first two relationships she formed with members of the society where they grew immediately close upon discovering their shared faith. Carol now lives with these two fellow members she first met and considers them some of the closest people in her life.

"These two girls are some of the most important people in my life and are truly family to me at this point and we have done a lot together based on our faith like starting bible studies and open prayers around campus"

Carol found these relationships a lot different than the ones she had with friends outside of the society because they did everything based off of this goal they shared together. Similar to Nancy and Basil, the relationships within the society stood as relationships of sacred nature with a mutual love, support, respect, appreciation, and devotion to one another and to their faith.

The participants involved in Kings Chapel expressed very similar experiences despite their society being much larger. Dwayne made lots of friends when he first came into university both in and outside of the chapel and grew closer bonds with members of the chapel in his more recent years as he has become more committed to the community. Within the Chapel he finds “an undercurrent of a certain understanding or common goal that I don’t often find in people elsewhere in my life”. He finds it adds “depth and reliability” to these relationships which differs from the friendships he makes outside of the society. This has made his experience within the society deeply significant and as he moves from relationships as a friend and mentee into a leader and mentor, he finds the relationships more meaningful to his personal growth and mental health as is supported in past research (Hardin, 2019, pg.150) and finds the members of the society to represent a family for him to depend on at Kings.

This feeling of connection in Kings Chapel was further expressed by the other warden Rosemary who described “a very close and family-like relationship” with people within her religious communities “across her whole life”. From a young age she had a woman who belonged to her church who took her under her wing and eventually once she was baptized became Rosemarie’s godmother: “This is the type of woman who took her own brooch off her chest after I complimented it and told me it could be a reminder of her while I was in Halifax”. This is feeling of family with group members is something she has been able to find with members of the chapel as well,

“The people in the Chapel have grown to be some of my favorite people in the world despite the differences we have, and I feel so fortunate to be able to share my encounters with God in my everyday life with them and it is one of the safest more caring places I have available to me right now”

In times of fatigue or suffering she can always confide in the group, and they will always comfort her and promise her their prayers and express a shared and mutual love that she finds to be a constant in the social realm of the society.

For someone like Rosemary, she finds that the chapel offers her people with a similar commitment to a loving and deep connections in their relationships that she doesn't find with friends she has outside of the chapel. To others and to the community there is a shared love, safety, care, respect, and passion between the members of the chapel that help her discover a new and deeper understanding of what friendship really means to her. This makes the relationships in the chapel some of the relationships she cares about most in the world and one of the most important parts if not the most important part of her university experience. She finds the people within the society offer different humor, different understandings, and a very philosophical and theological relationship and as much as friendships to her don't rely on a shared belief, they are helpful for her in forming deep connections. For her the chapel is a home, and as she said, “the people are the family I chose and not a family I was given”.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative analysis sought out to discover how can shared religious belief influence friendship-making at university and how is friendship valued within these societies? This let us ask how do the friendships made in religious student societies influence members sense of



belonging at university? This research revealed how respondents felt that their Christian societies helped them discover themselves and find meaningful friendships in times of identity struggles when arriving in university. These friendships support past research in finding that the friendships within the society create a feeling of connectedness and provide people with emotional support and companionship through mutual interests and a joint sense of belonging (Blieszner, 2019, pg.2). The members also reported the societies as beneficial for helping them find friends and other people in their community that they can share their religious experiences with and develop their faith alongside. These friendships were also valuable in helping the respondents discover a feeling of social solidarity and identity at university and build an internal sense of belonging that helped them in developing and repairing their own personal identities (Hardin, 2019, pg.158).

Moreover, the participants expressed a familial bond that they formed with other members of their societies and felt a form of sacred and unique connection to them. The findings in this research indicate how the friendships found within the Christian society align with Emile Durkheim's analyses of the sacred in religious communities. This was reflected in this research as respondents found they treated the relationships within the society in a more spiritual matter than other relationships in their lives. Treating these relationships more spiritually is representative of how the participants expressed a common goal of growing their individuality and personal strength through their faith, and how they felt a different level of comfort and connection to others who shared the same goals. One participant supported this directly when saying these relationships were “important parts of their religious life” where the relationships they pursue outside of their society were more aspects of their secular life.

This research supports research that has been done in the past that describes how friendships are constructed retrospectively, and patterns for future friend-making are reflective of the desires and needs that people are pursuing in their lives and the social settings they find themselves in as the respondents in this research show that the friendships they create and value sacredly are ones built off of their desires to grow their spirituality and their need to be surrounded by others who support them in this process (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, pg.109). These were desires and needs that often were shared universally within the society and were influenced by the objective and subjective culture that surrounded the participants and were instrumental in determining the nature of their social interactions (Simmel, 1950, pg. 249). This reflected the work of Danny Kaplan and Georg Simmel in not only the way the participants expressed the unique nature of social interactions they encounter within their societies but also in how these societies are organized and the unique roles participants would take up in these social settings as well as the unique role the society played in their lives.

This research was limited to strictly Christian societies even though the experiences of the participants can have indications outside of Christian based communities. The participants offered a diverse range of experiences, but a larger sample size would be beneficial for gaining more insight on how relationships made within the society influence members in unique and different ways.

Further research could use the implications of the study to expand onto analyzing the ways organized groups of non-popular spiritual beliefs and quasi-beliefs can be beneficial for students and how these societies potentially offer a community of people who connect and relate to one another based on their beliefs. It can also be important to understand the difference in inner group relationships between non-popular and popular religious societies. Further studies

could also use the implications of this research and the treatment of the sacred to analyzing how people identity and discover what relationships are sacred in their lives. As well, this research pointed out the potential identity struggles of LGBTQIA2s+ within Christian communities and further work can be done to find a place that helps these students find answers to their questions and be given support. Even if it's with societies that are already in service, what this research shows it that faith-based societies are often there for everyone and give people a system of love and support built on nothing more than shared values and belief.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment email to Dalhousie Christian Society and Power to Change Society

Good afternoon (Name censored due to confidentiality),

My name is Geordie Sumner, and I am a fourth-year student at Dalhousie doing Honours in Sociology. For my Honours research, I want to study how shared religious belief can influence friendship-making for university students. Specifically, I am looking for a faith-based student society that would be willing to participate in interviews with me discussing their experiences with friendship and their religious beliefs. I am reaching out to you in the hopes of finding potential participants for interviews in the coming couple of weeks and seeing if you have any recommendations for getting access to students active in the chapel. Please feel free to contact me or pass on my information at any time, my Dalhousie email, [gr640164@dal.ca](mailto:gr640164@dal.ca), will be the best way to contact me. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Geordie Sumner  
B00834467

### Appendix B: Recruitment email to Kings Chapel

Good afternoon Dr.Ingalls,

My name is Geordie Sumner, and I am a fourth-year student at Dalhousie doing Honours in Sociology. I know Dr.Diamond has passed along my information but I wanted to get the opportunity to reach out to you myself. For my Honours research, I want to study how shared religious belief can influence friendship-making for university students. Specifically, I am looking for a faith-based student society that would be willing to participate in interviews with me discussing their experiences with friendship and their religious beliefs. I am reaching out to you in the hopes of finding potential participants for interviews in the coming couple of weeks and seeing if you have any recommendations for getting access to students active in the chapel. Please feel free to contact me or pass on my information at any time, my Dalhousie email, [gr640164@dal.ca](mailto:gr640164@dal.ca), will be the best way to contact me. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Geordie Sumner  
B00834467

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Project title: Connecting through Faith: *An Analysis of Friendship in Dalhousie and Kings Christian Societies*

Lead researcher: Geordie Sumner, Dalhousie University, [gr640164@dalhousie.ca](mailto:gr640164@dalhousie.ca)

Supervisors: Dr. Martha Radice, Dalhousie University, [martha.radice@dal.ca](mailto:martha.radice@dal.ca) & Dr Karen Foster, Dalhousie University, [karen.foster@dal.ca](mailto:karen.foster@dal.ca)

### **Introduction**

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by me, Geordie Sumner, a fourth-year sociology honours student at Dalhousie University. Choosing whether to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below will tell you what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do, and any benefits, risks, inconvenience, or discomfort you might experience.

If you have any questions about this study, you're welcome to discuss them with me using the email address provided above, or in person when we meet. Please ask as many as you like at any time.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this study, I want to examine the formation and value of friendship within your student society. Specifically, I aim to look at the way shared religious belief influences friendship making in university. For this study I will be interviewing different members of the Dalhousie and Kings Christian societies. In these interviews, I will ask you questions about how your experiences at university, with your faith, and within your society have impacted your ability to find positive friendships at Dalhousie and in other times of social change in your life.

### **Who Can Take Part in the Research Study**

You may participate in the study if you are a student at Dalhousie University and a member of the Christian society.

### **What You Will Be Asked to Do**

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete one interview that will take about an hour. The interview will be conducted in a private and quiet space on the Dalhousie University campus. I am happy to wear a mask during the interview if you wish. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your religious beliefs, membership in your Christian Society, and your experience with friendship making at university and elsewhere, all of which you may answer or skip as you choose.

### **Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts**

Participating in this study might not benefit you but we might learn things that will benefit others.

This study will be a minimal risk study. There may be some discomfort associated with participating in this study. The interview questions will ask you questions about your experience with friendship and with your religious beliefs which may possibly bring up sensitive memories in your life. I will mitigate these risks by encouraging you to only give as much information as you feel comfortable, and by asking you if you wish to take a break, skip questions, or withdraw from the study completely. In addition, there is a small risk of loss of privacy as members of the student society may be able to guess each other's identities.

It is possible that you and I already know each other from classes or other events at Dalhousie. If this is the case, please be assured that it is your choice to participate or not and that your decision will not affect our existing relationship.

The information that you provide to me will be kept confidential, and will be de-identified, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only my supervisors and I will have access to it. The interview will be audio-recorded, and the recording will be stored on a password-protected, encrypted laptop, with a backup saved on OneDrive, a Canadian encrypted cloud storage service. I will transcribe the interview, removing identifying details, and the transcription will be stored on the password-protected, encrypted laptop. Once the interview is transcribed, I will delete the audio. A back-up of the transcription will be saved in OneDrive. The deidentified transcription and any associated notes will be destroyed exactly one year after my thesis is submitted which will be April 14th, 2024.

### **Compensation**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

### **How your information will be protected:**

Only I will know that you personally have participated in this research.

I will audio record the interview and transcribe it afterward. Once transcribed, audio files will be deleted. I will change all names to pseudonyms and alter or leave out any identifying details. Transcripts and the legend of pseudonyms will be kept in password-protected documents on my computer which only I have access to.

In my thesis, I will be using direct quotes from interviews. Quotes will have identifying information removed or altered to protect your privacy.

Transcripts and the legend of pseudonyms will be destroyed once the study is complete.

### **If You Decide to Stop Participating**

You are free to leave the study at any time until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023. After March 1st, it will be impossible to withdraw you from the study because I will already have incorporated the information you shared into my analysis. You may withdraw before, during, or after the



interview up until that point. If you decide to stop participating during the study, you can decide whether you want any of the information that you have provided up to that point to be removed or if you will allow me to use that information.

**How to Obtain Results**

If you wish, I will be happy to provide you with a copy of your transcript, and a copy of my thesis when the study is finished. You can obtain these results by emailing me at the email provided above or you can let me know during the interview. My thesis will also be publicly available on the Dalhousie Library website after it is completed.

**Questions**

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about participating in this study. You are welcome to contact myself, Geordie Sumner ([gr640164@dal.ca](mailto:gr640164@dal.ca)) or my supervisor, Dr. Martha Radice ([martha.radice@dal.ca](mailto:martha.radice@dal.ca)) at any time.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-3423, or email: [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca) (and reference REB file # 20XX-XXXX).

**Signature Page**

**Project title:** Connecting through Faith: *An Analysis of Friendship in Dalhousie and Kings Christian Societies*

**Lead researcher:** Geordie Sumner, Dalhousie University, [gr640164@dalhousie.ca](mailto:gr640164@dalhousie.ca)

“I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in one interview that will take approximately one hour, and that the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed and anonymously quoted. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

Name	Signature	Date

Name	Signature	Date

Please provide an email address below if you would like to be sent a copy of your transcript and/or a

copy of my thesis, and indicate which:

Transcript Yes No

Thesis Yes No

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix D: Interview Guide

Overview of what this interview will entail, permission to withdraw at any time, dates to withdraw from study, and consent to record audio.

#### Religious background and beliefs

- Tell me about your religious beliefs.
  - What part did religion play in your family, as you were growing up?
  - Was there a ‘turning point’ in your decision to belong to this religion as an adult?
  - What role does religion play in your life currently?
  - Where would you practice religion in your life before coming to Dalhousie? Do you still maintain connections with that group?

#### Friendship at Dalhousie in general

- How long have you been attending university at Dalhousie?
- Where did you live before coming to Dalhousie?
- How did you first find friendships when you came to Dalhousie? Where did you make new friends?
- Was it difficult finding new friendships when first arriving at Dalhousie? Why/why not?
- How do your new friendships affect your experience of university?
- Do you still maintain friendships from before Dalhousie?

#### The Christian society

- How did you come to join the Christian society? How did you discover the society and what made you join?
- Tell me about the society. What activities does it do? What activities do you join in with?
- Do you find your gender or ethnic, cultural, or racial background influences your experiences within the community?
- What are some of the main ways your society attempts to recruit new students into your society?
- What role does this society play in your life?
- How do you relate to the other members of the society?
- How is your belief shared and expressed differently in the university setting, compared with your religious community from before Dal?

#### The Christian society and friendship

- Have you found new friendships within your society? What kinds of things do you do together? Do you meet up outside of society events?

- Do you think your religious belief influences your friendship-making within your society?
  - If so, in what ways?
  - Does it influence your friendship-making outside of the society?
- If so, in what ways? Is this a positive influence or negative influence?
  - What are important personal values that are reinforced within your society?
  - How has your religion influenced your perception of friendship?
  - How important are the friendships for you that you have made within your society?
  - Is there a difference in the friendships you have with people within your society compared to the friendships you have with people outside of the society?
  - How do you find the friendships in your life are different when you and a friend share a common belief?
  - Would you recommend the Christian society to other Dalhousie students or future Dalhousie students that share your beliefs? Why?

At the end, if it hasn't come up, ask about where they live and with whom, and how they would describe their ethnic/cultural/racial background.

- How old are you?
- What is your gender identity, or what pronouns do you prefer?

**Conclusion** - consent check-in, ask to share my info with anybody you think might like to participate.

Appendix E: Research Ethics Board Approval



**Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board  
Letter of Approval**

December 12, 2022

Geordie Sumner

Arts & Social Sciences\Sociology and Social Anthropology

Dear Geordie,

**REB #:** 2022-6432

**Project Title:** How Shared Religious Belief Shapes Friendship-Making at University

**Effective Date:** December 12, 2022

**Expiry Date:** December 12, 2023

The Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Board has reviewed your application for research involving humans and found the proposed research to be in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. This approval will be in effect for 12 months as indicated above. This approval is subject to the conditions listed below which constitute your on-going responsibilities with respect to the ethical conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Megan Bailey".

Dr. Megan Bailey

Chair, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board  
Dalhousie University

## Appendix F: Research Ethics Board Final Report



Final report to conclude REB oversight

### A. ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

This report is ( <i>select one</i> ):					<input type="checkbox"/> An annual report		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A final report	
REB file number:	2022-6432							
Study title:	<b>How Shared Religious Belief Shapes Friendship-Making at University</b>							
Lead researcher (named on REB submission)	Name	Geordie E. Sumner						
	Email	Gr640164@dal.ca	Phone	(613)-720-4367				
Current status of lead researcher (at Dalhousie University):								
<input type="checkbox"/> Employee/Academic Appointment			<input type="checkbox"/> Former student					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Current student			<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain):					
Supervisor (if lead researcher is/was a student/resident/postdoc)	Name	Dr. Martha Radice (primary) and Dr Karen Foster (secondary), Sociology and Social Anthropology						
	Email	<a href="mailto:martha.radice@dal.ca">martha.radice@dal.ca</a> and <a href="mailto:karen.fosterr@dal.ca">karen.fosterr@dal.ca</a>						
Contact person for this report (if not lead researcher)	Name							
	Email		Phone					

### B. RECRUITMENT & DATA COLLECTION STATUS

Instructions: Complete <b>ALL</b> sections relevant to this study
Study involves/involved recruiting participants: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B1.</i>
Study involves/involved secondary use of data: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i>
Study involves/involved use of human biological materials: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i>

<b>B1. Recruitment of participants</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B1.1 How many participants did the researcher intend to recruit? <i>(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)</i>	8-10
B1.2 How many participants have been recruited? <i>(if applicable, identify by participant group/method e.g. interviews: 10, focus groups: 25)</i> a) In total, since the beginning of the study: <i>Interviews: 5</i> b) Since the last annual report: <i>Interviews: 5</i>	
B1.3 Recruitment for this study is: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or <input type="checkbox"/> on-going	
B1.4 Data collection from participants for this study is: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or <input type="checkbox"/> on-going	

<b>B2. Use of secondary data and/or biological materials</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B2.1 How many individual records/biological materials did the researcher intend to access? <i>(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)</i>	
B2.2 How many individual participant records/biological materials have been accessed? a) In total, since the beginning of the study: b) Since the last annual report:	

**C. PROJECT HISTORY**

<i>Since your last annual report (or since initial submission if this is your first annual report):</i>
C1. Have there been any variations to the original research project that have NOT been approved with an amendment request? This includes changes to the research methods, recruitment material, consent documents, study instruments or research team.  <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  If yes, list the variation here: <i>(You will be notified if a formal amendment is required)</i>

<p>C2. Have you experienced any challenges or delays recruiting or retaining participants or accessing records or biological materials?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain: I aimed to conduct 8-10 semi structured interviews but only was able to complete 5 as I had difficulty accessing updated contact information for societies, and numerous people agreed to participate but canceled their interviews and did not agree to reschedule.</p>
<p>C3. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>
<p>C4. Have any participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in this study?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>
<p>C5. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>
<p>C6. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>

#### D. APPLYING FOR STUDY CLOSURE

*Complete this section only if this is a FINAL report as indicated in section A*

<p>D1. For studies involving recruitment of participants, a closure may be submitted when:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> all research-related interventions or interactions with participants have been completed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> N/A (this study did not involve recruitment of participants)</p>
<p>D2. For studies involving secondary use of data and/or human biological materials, a closure may be submitted when:</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> all data acquisition is complete, there will be no further access to participant records or collection of biological materials
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A (this study did not involve secondary use of data and/or human biological materials)
D3. Closure Request
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I am applying for study closure

**E. ATTESTATION (both boxes *must* be checked for the report to be accepted by the REB)**

I agree that the information provided in this report accurately portrays the status of this project and describes to the Research Ethics Board any new developments related to the study since initial approval or the latest report.

I attest this project was, or will continue to be, completed in accordance with the approved REB application (or most recent approved amendment) and in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2).

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Appendix G: Detailed Participant Characteristics and Group Affiliation

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year at Dalhousie</b>	<b>Society</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Gender Identity and Pronouns</b>	<b>Predominant Themes</b>
Basil	20-25	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	Dalhousie Christian Society	South Korea, India, Zimbabwe, California	Female (She/They)	- Identity Struggles - Continuing Their Pursuit of Religion
Nancy	18-22	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Dalhousie Christian Society	Antigua and Barbuda	Female (She/Her)	- Identity Struggles - Familial Connection
Dwayne	20-25	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	Kings Chapel	Ontario, Canada	Male (He/Him)	- Identity Struggles - Continuing His Pursuit of Religion
Rosemary	20-25	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	Kings Chapel	British Columbia, Canada	Female (She/Her)	- Continuing Her Pursuit of Religion - Familial Connection
Carol	18-23	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Power to Change Society	Alberta, Canada	Female (She/Her)	- Continuing Her Pursuit of Religion - Familial Connection