

Commentary: QAnon: The alternative religion that's coming to your church

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(RNS)—It's a rough time to be a pastor. An election year, national racial unrest and a global pandemic each challenged the usual methods of ministry. Taken together, many church leaders are facing the traditional post-vacation ingathering season with a serious case of burnout.

But there's another challenge pastors I spoke with say is on the rise in their flocks. It is taking on the power of a new religion dividing churches and hurting Christian witness.

Mark Fugitt, senior pastor of Round Grove Baptist Church in Miller, Mo., recently sat down to count the conspiracy theories people in his church are sharing on Facebook. The list was long. It included claims that 5G radio waves are used for mind control; George Floyd's murder is a hoax; Bill Gates is related to the devil; masks can kill you; the germ theory isn't real; and there might be something to Pizzagate after all.

"You don't just see it once," said Fugitt. "If there's ever anything posted, you'll see it five to 10 times. It's escalating for sure."

The rise of QAnon

Conspiracy theories—grand narratives that seek to prove powerful actors are secretly controlling events and institutions for evil purposes—are nothing new in the United States. But since 2017, a sort of ur-conspiracy theory, QAnon, has coalesced in online forums and created millions of

believers. “To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion,” wrote Adrienne LaFrance in *The Atlantic* in June.

Named after “Q,” who posts anonymously on the online bulletin board 4chan, QAnon alleges President Donald Trump and military officials are working to expose a “deep state” pedophile ring with links to Hollywood, the media and the Democratic Party. Since its first mention some three years ago, the theory has drawn adherents looking for a clear way to explain recent disorienting global events.

Once the fascination of far-right commentators and their followers, QAnon no longer is fringe. With support from Trump and other elected officials, it has gained credibility both on the web and in the offline world. In Georgia, a candidate for Congress has praised Q as “a mythical hero,” and at least five other congressional hopefuls from Illinois to Oregon have voiced support.

One scholar found a 71 percent increase in QAnon content on Twitter and a 651 percent increase on Facebook since March.

QAnon shared by church goers

Jon Thorngate is the pastor at LifeBridge, a nondenominational church of about 300 in a Milwaukee suburb. In recent months, he said, his members have shared “Plandemic,” a half-hour film that presents COVID-19 as a moneymaking scheme by government officials and others, on Facebook. Members also have passed around a now-banned Breitbart video that promotes hydroxychloroquine as a cure for the virus.

Thorngate, one of the few pastors who would go on the record among those who called QAnon a real problem in their churches, said only five to 10 members are actually posting the videos online. But in conversations with other members, he’s realized many more are open to conspiracy theories

than those who post.

Thorngate attributes the phenomenon in part to the “death of expertise”—a distrust of authority figures that leads some Americans to undervalue long-established measures of competency and wisdom. Among some church members, he said, the attitude is, “I’m going to use church for the things I like, ignore it for the things I don’t and find my own truth.

“That part for us is concerning, that nothing feels authoritative right now.”

Lack of trust in sources of truth

For years in the 1980s and '90s, U.S. evangelicals, above nearly any other group, warned what will happen when people abandon absolute truth—which they located in the Bible—saying the idea of relative truth would lead to people believing whatever confirms their own inward hunches.

But suspicion of big government, questioning of scientific consensus—on evolution, for example—and a rejection of the morals of Hollywood and liberal elites took hold among millennial Christians, many of whom feel politically alienated and beat up by mainstream media. They are natural targets for QAnon.

There’s no hard data on how many Christians espouse QAnon. But Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, noted distrust of mainstream news sources “can feed a penchant for conspiracy theories.”

A 2018 poll from the Billy Graham Center found 46 percent of self-identified evangelicals and 52 percent of those whose beliefs tagged them as evangelical “strongly agreed that the mainstream media produced fake news.” It also found regular church attendance (at least once a month)

correlated to believing mainstream media promulgates fake news (77 percent compared with 68 percent of those who attend less regularly).

Conspiracy theories affecting the church

Jared Stacy said the spread of conspiracy theories in his church is particularly affecting young members. The college and young adult pastor of Spotswood Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, Va., Stacy said some older members are sharing Facebook content that links the coronavirus to Jeffrey Epstein and secret pedophile rings. He says his and other pastors' job is to teach conspiracy theories are not where Christians should find a basis for reality.

"My fear ... is that Jesus would not be co-opted by conspiracy theories in a way that leads the next generation to throw Jesus out with the bathwater," Stacy said, "that we're not able to separate the narrative of taking back our country from Jesus' kingdom narrative."

Others are concerned the theories will become grounds for more mistrust. "Young people are exiting the church because they see their parents and mentors and pastors and Sunday school teachers spreading things that even at a young age they can see through," said Jeb Barr, the senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Elm Mott outside Waco. He said conspiracy theories are "extremely widespread and getting worse" among his online church networks.

"Why would we listen to my friend Joe ... who's telling me about Jesus who also thinks that Communists are taking over America and operating a pedophile ring out of a pizza restaurant? ... Why would we be believed?"

But Barr and other pastors I spoke with are reticent to police church

members' social media conduct. Instead, they try to teach broader principles. "Christians are meant to be agents of hope, to be peacemakers; the Bible says we're not to be quarrelsome," said Barr. "We're not to be the ones spreading fear and division and anger."

Barr also teaches critical thinking skills and encourages his members to read "boring news." He will recommend news sources that are credible.

Combating conspiracy theories

But teaching media literacy isn't enough, precisely because QAnon thrives on a narrative of media cover-up.

Fugitt said it's not effective to tell conspiracy spreaders what they are sharing online is false. "Nobody joins a cult. I don't think anybody shares a conspiracy theory either because they believe it's truth." Rather, he tries to address the dehumanizing language of QAnon theories that equate certain people with evil. History is replete with examples of where such language can lead.

"I can't hate another person, but boy if I can make them less than human, that's the Crusades, that's Jewish persecution throughout history, that's racial issues hand over fist there."

In a fraught political moment, the pastors I spoke with worried taking on QAnon, by addressing politics directly, would divide the church.

QAnon as a religion

But QAnon is more than a political ideology. It's a spiritual worldview that co-opts many Christian-sounding ideas to promote verifiably false claims about actual human beings.

QAnon has features akin to syncretism—the practice of blending traditional Christian beliefs with other spiritual systems, such as Santeria. Q explicitly uses Bible verses to urge adherents to stand firm against evil elites.

One charismatic church based in Indiana hosts two-hour Sunday services showing how Bible prophecies confirm Q's messages. Its leaders tell the congregation to stop watching mainstream media—even conservative media—in favor of QAnon YouTube channels and the Qmap website.

And it's having life-and-death effects: It's hampering the work of anti-sex trafficking organizations. The FBI has linked it to violence and threats of violence. And its adherents are downplaying the threat of COVID and thus putting others' lives at risk.

The earliest Christians contended with syncretism in the form of Gnosticism, which blended elements of Greek philosophy and Zoroastrianism with Christianity, emphasizing the good-evil spirit-flesh divide as well as secret divine knowledge (Greek: *gnosis* is "knowledge"). Early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian battled Gnostic ideas, rejecting them as heresy.

At a time when church leaders are having to host digital church and try to meet members' needs virtually, the idea of adding "fight heresy" to their to-do list might sound exhausting. But a core calling of church leaders is to speak the truth in love. It's not loving to allow impressionable people to be taken in by falsehood. Nor is it loving to allow them to spread falsehood and slander to others.

"Conspiracy theories thrive on a sort of cynicism that says, 'We see a different reality that no one else sees,'" said Stacy. "Paul says to take every thought captive—addressing conspiracy theories is part of that work."

Katelyn Beaty is a former managing editor of Christianity Today and the author of A Woman's Place. The views expressed are those solely of the

author.