

**Introduction:**

According to Anthony Hilder, a consultant to church leaders, core values answer the questions “Who are we?”, “What defines us?”, “What is important to us?”, “What are our non-negotiables?” They guide identity (who we say we are), our theology (who we say God is), and our activity (how we do what we do). They help people align their thinking and acting naturally and collectively to ways that contribute towards the church vision.<sup>1</sup>

This paper looks at the Core Values of Abundant Life Whippany, and three other churches from a menu provided by Logos University, to compare and contrast them. In order to understand and compare the church values, I feel it is important to look at each church and its background, as each is very different, and their histories and politics also may have an impact on their values.

**Abundant Life Worship Center of Whippany**

Abundant Life Whippany (ALWC) is a non-denominational church founded in 1991 as a part of Abundant Life Ministries International, and an outgrowth of Nutley Abundant Life Church in the late 1970’s. Nutley Abundant Life was originally part of the Assemblies of God, and went independent in the 1970’s. ALWC started as a house Bible Study in Livingston, NJ, conducted by Rev. Joseph V. Arminio. It eventually grew and moved to Whippany, NJ in 1999, where it now has approximately 600 congregants. Pastor Arminio went home to the Lord in June 2019, and is succeeded by Rev. Donnie Rosa, who was also a part of ALWC since its founding. The polity of the church is episcopal. It is important to note that ALWC has a multicultural and multinational congregation, reflecting the population of northern NJ. It has Spanish and Indian services and outreaches.

**Core Values:** (Defined by ALWC as a common code of living derived from the Word of God.)

- Integrity
- Truth
- Prayer
- Unity
- Love

**Willow Creek Community Church**

Willow Creek is a non-denominational Evangelical Megachurch, founded in 1975, in a northwestern Chicago suburb with an average attendance of 18,000 each week over 7 locations (pre-Covid 19 in February 2020).<sup>2</sup> It pioneered the “seeker” model of churches, which attempt to provide a “comfortable place” for the unchurched to learn about Christianity. Weekend services are hour-long presentations and artistic interpretations of the Gospel. Professional sound and stage equipment, contemporary music, drama and video are utilized. Critics argue the church waters-down the Gospel, lacking strong moral accountability and in-depth Bible study. Their congregation is mainly upper middle class baby boomers, and the church has active volunteer programs that engage in a wide array of activities including food distribution and overseas missions support.<sup>3</sup>

**Core Values:** ([www.willowcreek.org](http://www.willowcreek.org))

- Following Jesus – complete dependence on Him
- Loving People – everyone matters to God

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Hilder, *Developing Church Core Values Statements*, July 23, 2020, <https://anthonyhilder.com/developing-church-core-values-statements>

<sup>2</sup> *Willow Creek Community Church*, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willow\\_Creek\\_Community\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willow_Creek_Community_Church)

<sup>3</sup> Willow Creek Community Church, World Religions and Spirituality Project, <https://wrlrels.org/2016/10/18/willow-creek-church>

- Taking Next Steps – becoming, not arriving
- Growing Younger – elevating the next generation
- Being Authentic – bringing all of who we are

### Church of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene is a denomination that was founded as a series of mergers between various holiness churches, starting in 1907, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan-Holiness movement within Methodism. It combines episcopal and congregational polities to form a representative government.<sup>4</sup> As a denomination its demographics are 88% white, 2% Latino, and 2% Black. Also, ages 30-64 comprise 67% and over age 65 comprise 19% of their denomination.<sup>5</sup>

#### Core Values: ([www.nazarene.org](http://www.nazarene.org))

- A Christian People. We are united with all believers in proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- A Holiness People. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that restores us in the image of God and produces in us the character of Christ.
- A Missional People:
  - Our Mission of Worship. Worship is the highest expression of our love for God.
  - Our Mission of Compassion and Evangelism. Through its mission in the world, the Church demonstrates the love of God.
  - Our Mission of Discipleship. Discipleship is the means through which the Holy Spirit gradually brings us to maturity in Christ.
  - Our Mission of Higher Education. We are committed to Christian education, through which women and men are equipped for lives of Christian service.

### Thomas Road Baptist Church

Thomas Road Baptist (TRBC) is an independent Baptist megachurch in Lynchburg, VA, located on the campus of Liberty University, which it founded. TRBC was founded in 1956, by Rev. Jerry Falwell, who went home to the Lord in 2007, who was succeeded by his son Jonathan Falwell. It has an average weekly attendance of 9,000. It is affiliated with the Baptist Bible Fellowship International, a conservative Baptist denomination headquartered in Springfield, MO., as well as the Southern Baptist Convention by way of the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.<sup>6</sup> Baptist churches generally hold that no denominational or ecclesiastical organization has inherent authority over an individual church, and only relate to each other through voluntary cooperation.<sup>7</sup> I could not find any demographics data for the church, but found their 134 employee demographics are 69.1% White, 14.8% Black or African American, and 8.6% Hispanic or Latino<sup>8</sup>.

#### Core Values: ([www.trbc.org](http://www.trbc.org))

- Commitment to Scripture
- Culture of Prayer
- Lifestyle of Worship
- Connection to Community

<sup>4</sup> Church of the Nazarene, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Nazarene](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nazarene)

<sup>5</sup> Members of the Church of the Nazarene, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/church-of-the-nazarene/>

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Road Baptist Church, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Road\\_Baptist\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Road_Baptist_Church)

<sup>7</sup> Congregationalist polity, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregationalist\\_polity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregationalist_polity)

<sup>8</sup> Working at Thomas Road Baptist Church, Zippa, <https://www.zippa.com/thomas-road-baptist-church-careers-1366132/>

- Heart for Serving

### Comparison

ALWC's Core Values are 5 Biblical principles that are a combination of ethical/moral and behavioral. The first two, Integrity and Truth, are ethical/moral, dealing with the individual's character, although Truth also applies to our position that the Word of God is the source of all truth, and should be our authority in everything we are and do. The other three are congregational values and priorities. They are not expounded upon in our website, although they are discussed in sermons every January, when Church's Vision is reviewed. They function as undergirding principles that guide everything we do as individuals and as a congregation. They originated from our founding Pastor and have been reaffirmed and carried forward since his passing, and were revisited and updated in 2021. They transcend culture, traditions, and ages, which is important as we are a multicultural church (probably more so than any of the others considered in this comparison), with a multi-generational congregation that attracts young and older people from various backgrounds, and these values have served us well over time. I personally appreciate that heading the list is Integrity. I have seen more than my share of church leaders fail ethically and morally through my Christian life, both in churches I've attended, and in large churches that have a lot of media exposure, some of which are in these other churches being compared herein. I am thankful that ALWC has been spared this type of embarrassment, and our leaders have been men and women of impeccable character.

To compare ALWC to the values of the other churches that look more like priorities, we can look at ALWC's Strategic Pillars, which are our priorities. These include Discipleship, Worship, Christian Education/Spiritual Development, Outreach, and People Development.

Willow Creek's four Core Values to me seem more like priorities than values. The first two, following Jesus and loving all people, are derived from Deuteronomy 6:5 and affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 10, and as such are addressed to individuals. The third one, becoming, not arriving, seems to be addressing discipleship and growth in Christ. The last one, elevating the next generation, is addressing congregational growth and legacy. Their Core Values do not address ethics or morality. As a very large megachurch with substantial media presence, the church has been criticized that it waters-down the Gospel, is lacking strong moral accountability and in-depth Bible study, that their services are entertainment, not worship, and finally, their founding Pastor had to step down due to moral failure.

The Church of the Nazarene is the oldest one studied herein, with a deep history in the Wesley-Holiness tradition dating back to the late 1700's. It is the most conservative of all the churches considered herein. The key emphasis of their theology relates to Sanctification, how Divine grace operates within the individual.<sup>9</sup> Their values can be distilled down to Holiness, Evangelism, and Discipleship. Their Core Values are Biblical, relating to who they are as a congregation. Individual churches within the denomination are mainly small, local or neighborhood assemblies that reflect the communities in which they are located, and their congregations tend to be older people.

Thomas Road Baptist has five Core Values that are all Biblically based, but also seem more like priorities than values. Their emphasis on Scripture, prayer and worship address both individuals and the congregation. Their list of values do not address any ethical or moral considerations. As a megachurch with a large media presence, TRBC has also had its share of public embarrassment when its founder suffered a very public moral failure.

I find it very difficult to consider comparing the Core Values of other churches to each other and to ALWC and assessing a value judgement to them. Core Values are developed by the Pastor and his

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<sup>9</sup> Church of the Nazarene, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Nazarene](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nazarene)

leadership team, and generally reflect his values, and the main doctrines of their church. Except for ethical/moral values, which should be universal (but in today's Western society sadly are no longer so), they are also shaped by the culture and community in which the respective churches are located. What are important to one church may be completely different to another, even in different churches in the same denomination.

After I drafted all the above, Landeric Pierre and I met with Pastor Vernon Outlaw to review and discuss the core values. Pastor Outlaw told us that after the loss of Pastor Joe Arminio in June 2019 and then the subsequent shutdown of face-to-face services during the Covid-19 pandemic, Pastor Donnie Rosa solicited the help of a church consultant who met with the entire Pastoral Team and undertook a thorough analysis of the church's Core Values to update them. The entire process consisted of many months of brainstorming and discussions, which yielded a consensus of the current Core Values and Strategic Pillars listed above. They also undertook an extensive SWOT analysis to develop strategies for the church to move forward and grow again. When Pastor Arminio passed away, some of the longest-term congregants left the church. Then the pandemic struck, and we had to close the building for 5-6 months, during which we were able to develop a strong social media presence and stream live/taped services on YouTube and FaceBook. We quickly developed a much larger web-based congregation of people from around the world. When we eventually gradually reopened for in-house Sunday Services, we had lost a significant number of our in-house congregants. The reasons varied. Some seniors with health risks did not want to risk catching Covid. Some probably would have eventually left as attrition normally occurs, but now had the opportunity to move to other churches and took it. Our in-house congregation was then very small. It was an opportune time to undertake the Core Values and SWOT analyses. The results speak for themselves. Our on-line media presence continues to grow, but more significantly, our in-house congregation has been steadily growing over the past 2 years, especially in the first quarter of 2022. We have growing communities of Indian and Spanish people, with regular monthly Services for each. We also have many different Community Outreaches, to local emergency services organizations, and to poor and homeless people in our area. Our Impact Groups are continually growing, providing opportunities for fellowship and outreach. As a result, neither Pastor Vernon or I feel the need to change or revise our church's Core Values.