Research and Science TODAY
www.rstjournal.com

OPEN ACCESS

Section: *Social Sciences and Humanities*
Issue: *2/2026*
Article number: *26.2026*

DOI
https://doi.org/10.38173/RST.2026.2.5

From New England to Indiana: Religious Mobility and the Expansion of Universalist Christianity Across the American Frontier

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Received: *21 June 2026*
Revised: -
Accepted: 19 October 2026
Available online: 19 October 2026

Suggested citation
A. Lazăr. "From New England to Indiana: Religious Mobility and the Expansion of Universalist Christianity Across the American Frontier", Research and Science Today, vol. 2026, no. 2, art. no. 26.2026, pp. 1–10, 2026, doi: 10.38173/RST.2026.2.5

Abstract
The expansion of Universalist Christianity in the United States was closely linked to the broader process of westward migration that transformed the American religious landscape during the nineteenth century. Emerging from the theological developments associated with James Relly, John Murray, and Elhanan Winchester, Universalism evolved from a predominantly New England movement into a frontier denomination that accompanied settlers into the Old Northwest. This study examines the relationship between religious mobility and the spread of Universalist Christianity across the American frontier, focusing on the state of Indiana as a case study. Drawing upon denominational records, contemporary publications, and historical data concerning local congregations, the article reconstructs the development of Universalist communities in Indiana from the early nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century. Particular attention is given to missionary activity, institutional organization, denominational networks, and patterns of community survival. The analysis demonstrates that while Universalism achieved remarkable success in disseminating its message through itinerant preaching and migratory networks, it proved less successful in establishing durable institutional structures. The Indiana case reveals a broader paradox of frontier religion: rapid expansion often coexisted with organizational fragility. As a result, the cultural influence of Universalist ideas ultimately exceeded the institutional longevity of many Universalist congregations.

Keywords: *American Christianity; Christian Universalism; Indiana; Frontier Religion; Universalist Church.*

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of American Christianity during the nineteenth century cannot be separated from the broader phenomenon of westward migration. As Nathan O. Hatch has argued, the opening of the frontier fundamentally altered the religious landscape of the United States by weakening traditional ecclesiastical structures and creating opportunities for new religious movements to emerge and compete for adherents [1]. Similarly, Sydney E. Ahlstrom describes the American frontier as a dynamic environment in which denominational identities were constantly reshaped through migration, mobility, and institutional adaptation [2]. Among the religious movements that benefited from these conditions was Universalism. Emerging from the theological developments associated with James Relly, John Murray, and Elhanan Winchester, Universalism challenged prevailing doctrines of eternal punishment and gradually developed into one of the most significant alternatives to Calvinist orthodoxy in early America. As Russell E. Miller observes, the movement expanded beyond its New England origins through a combination of itinerant preaching, voluntary association, and frontier settlement [3].

Although the origins of American Universalism have received considerable scholarly attention, the expansion of the movement into the Old Northwest remains comparatively understudied. Yet, as Ann Lee Bressler notes, the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable geographical transformation of Universalism, as ministers and settlers carried its message into newly established communities across the Midwest [4]. The state of Indiana offers a particularly valuable case study for examining this process. Positioned at the intersection of migration routes linking New England, Ohio, and the western territories, Indiana became one of the principal laboratories of frontier Universalism [3].

This article examines the relationship between religious mobility and the spread of Universalist Christianity across the American frontier through the example of Indiana. Drawing upon denominational records, contemporary periodicals, and historical data concerning local congregations, it argues that the success of Universalism in Indiana depended largely upon migratory networks, itinerant ministry, and institutional flexibility. At the same time, these same factors contributed to a persistent fragility that prevented many communities from achieving long-term stability. The Indiana experience therefore illustrates a broader paradox of frontier religion: the mechanisms that facilitated expansion often undermined institutional permanence.

FROM NEW ENGLAND TO THE FRONTIER: THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN UNIVERSALISM

The emergence of organized Universalism in the United States was the result of a broader theological development that challenged traditional Protestant understandings of divine judgment and eternal punishment. Although concepts of universal restoration can be traced to earlier periods of Christian history, the movement acquired a distinct institutional identity only in the eighteenth century through the efforts of figures such as James Relly, John Murray, and Elhanan Winchester. As Russell E. Miller notes, American Universalism did not arise as a completely new theological system but rather as a synthesis of various currents that converged around the conviction that God's salvific purpose ultimately embraced all humanity [3].

Among the earliest influences was James Relly, whose theology emphasized the ontological union between Christ and humanity. Relly argued that the redemptive work of Christ was universal in scope and that all human beings participated in the benefits of salvation through their incorporation into Christ [5]. Although his writings remained controversial, they

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exercised a profound influence upon John Murray, who would become the principal architect of organized Universalism in North America [3].

Murray arrived in the American colonies in 1770, bringing with him the theological convictions he had acquired through contact with Relly's circle in England. His subsequent ministry in New Jersey and Massachusetts transformed Universalism from an isolated theological position into an organized religious movement. The establishment of the Gloucester congregation represented a decisive milestone in this process. According to Miller, Gloucester functioned as the institutional nucleus of American Universalism, providing a stable community from which the movement could expand throughout New England and beyond [3].

Alongside Murray, Elhanan Winchester contributed significantly to the theological diversification of early Universalism. Unlike Murray, whose emphasis rested primarily on the certainty of universal redemption, Winchester developed a restorationist model that preserved a temporary role for divine judgment. Punishment after death was understood not as retributive and eternal but as corrective and ultimately restorative [4]. Through his preaching and writings, Winchester helped establish a broader theological framework that would influence later debates within the Universalist movement [6]. The contrasting trajectories of Murray in New England and Winchester in Philadelphia also show how preaching and doctrinal controversy could generate distinct forms of communal organization [7].

The transition from a collection of independent congregations to a recognizable denomination occurred gradually. The adoption of the Winchester Profession in 1803 provided an initial doctrinal basis for cooperation among Universalists while preserving a considerable degree of theological flexibility [3]. This balance between institutional organization and doctrinal openness proved particularly important as the movement expanded beyond New England during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Universalism possessed several characteristics that would facilitate its westward expansion. It relied heavily upon itinerant preaching, encouraged local initiative, and operated through relatively decentralized organizational structures. These features allowed Universalist ministers to adapt quickly to the realities of frontier life and to accompany the migratory movements that were reshaping the American republic. As Ann Lee Bressler observes, the movement's institutional flexibility made it especially well suited to the fluid social conditions of the expanding frontier [4]. Consequently, the history of Universalism after 1800 became inseparable from the broader story of American migration toward the West.

RELIGIOUS MOBILITY AND THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

The westward expansion of Universalism formed part of a much broader process that reshaped the religious geography of the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Historians of American religion have repeatedly emphasized that the frontier was not merely a geographical space but a social and cultural environment characterized by mobility, institutional fluidity, and intense denominational competition. Nathan O. Hatch argues that the democratization of American Christianity was closely connected to the migration of settlers beyond the Appalachian Mountains, where traditional ecclesiastical structures often proved incapable of maintaining their former authority [1]. In these circumstances, religious movements that relied upon voluntary association and itinerant ministry enjoyed significant advantages.

Universalism was particularly well positioned to benefit from these developments. Unlike denominations dependent upon established hierarchies or extensive educational

institutions, Universalist communities were often organized around local initiative and traveling ministers. As Russell E. Miller observes, the movement's early expansion depended less upon centralized administration than upon networks of preachers who followed the migratory routes of American settlers [3]. Consequently, the history of Universalism after 1800 became increasingly intertwined with the history of westward migration itself.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created the legal framework for the settlement of the Old Northwest and opened vast territories to migration from New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and the Mid-Atlantic states [2]. As populations moved westward, they carried with them not only economic aspirations but also religious affiliations and theological commitments. Universalist ideas traveled along these same routes, often reaching frontier communities through informal networks long before stable congregations were established. The movement's expansion therefore reflected a combination of geographical mobility and religious adaptation.

The first major center of Universalist activity beyond New England emerged in Ohio. During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, Ohio became an important meeting point between eastern religious traditions and frontier society. According to Miller, Universalist ministers regarded the state as a strategic gateway to the American West, from which missionary efforts could be extended into Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and other developing regions [3]. Ohio consequently functioned as the principal bridge connecting the movement's New England origins with its western expansion.

The development of Universalism in Indiana must be understood within this broader regional context. As the movement expanded throughout Ohio, itinerant ministers increasingly crossed into neighboring territories, preaching in newly established settlements and organizing small groups of believers. The early history of Universalism in Indiana was therefore closely linked to missionary initiatives that originated in Ohio and to migratory networks connecting the two regions. As contemporary Universalist records indicate, religious leaders in Ohio already recognized the presence of substantial numbers of sympathizers and believers in territories further west during the 1820s [8].

Migration from New England played a particularly important role in this process. A number of settlers arriving in Indiana brought with them familiarity with the Universalist message associated with John Murray and the Gloucester community. Some families maintained direct or indirect connections with early Universalist circles in Massachusetts, thereby facilitating the transmission of theological ideas from the Atlantic coast to frontier settlements [9]. In this sense, westward migration represented not merely the movement of populations but also the movement of religious identities, doctrinal commitments, and denominational cultures.

The importance of itinerant ministry cannot be overstated. Throughout the early nineteenth century, Universalist preachers traveled extensively across frontier territories, often covering hundreds of miles in order to reach isolated communities. Their activities reflected a missionary strategy adapted to frontier realities: rather than waiting for institutional structures to develop, ministers established personal connections, organized temporary gatherings, and encouraged the formation of local religious societies [4]. This pattern would become particularly visible in Indiana, where the growth of Universalism depended heavily upon a small number of energetic missionaries whose influence extended across multiple counties and states.

By the 1820s and 1830s, the movement had progressed beyond the stage of sporadic missionary activity. The establishment of regional associations and conventions signaled the emergence of a more stable denominational network throughout the Midwest. These institutions sought to coordinate missionary efforts, strengthen communication among isolated

congregations, and provide a measure of organizational coherence for communities scattered across the frontier [10]. Such developments prepared the ground for the emergence of Indiana as one of the most significant centers of Universalist activity in the American West.

INDIANA: A FRONTIER LABORATORY OF UNIVERSALISM

The development of Universalism in Indiana represents one of the most significant examples of the movement's westward expansion during the nineteenth century. Situated within the Old Northwest and shaped by continuous waves of migration from eastern states, Indiana provided favorable conditions for the establishment of new religious communities. As scholars of American religion have noted, frontier regions frequently functioned as spaces in which denominational identities could be reconfigured and alternative theological movements could gain influence more easily than in older and more institutionally stable environments [2]. Within this context, Universalism found an opportunity to move beyond its New England origins and establish a durable presence in the American Midwest.

The earliest manifestations of Universalist influence in Indiana appeared during the territorial period. Settlers arriving from Massachusetts and other regions of New England brought with them familiarity with the theological ideas associated with John Murray and the early Universalist movement. Among those connected to these migratory networks was Winthrop Sargent, whose family maintained links to Gloucester, Massachusetts, one of the principal centers of early American Universalism [11]. Consequently, the spread of Universalism into Indiana should not be understood simply as missionary expansion but also as a process of cultural and religious transmission facilitated by migration.

At the same time, Indiana witnessed the emergence of several religious experiments that reflected broader tendencies toward spiritual innovation on the frontier. One notable example was the Rappite community established in 1813. Although not formally connected to organized Universalism, the Rappites developed a religious worldview that emphasized divine restoration and reflected certain themes that were also present within contemporary Universalist discourse [12]. Nevertheless, the influence of this community remained relatively isolated and did not significantly contribute to the institutional development of Universalism within the state.

More direct influence came through the activity of itinerant missionaries associated with the expanding Universalist network of Ohio. Among the earliest pioneers was Abel Morgan Sargent, who belonged to circles influenced by John Murray and the Universalist community of Gloucester. By 1807 he was already active in Ohio, and his missionary efforts later extended into Indiana, where he spent the final years of his ministry [13]. Through preaching tours and personal contacts, Sargent helped establish some of the earliest foundations for Universalist expansion in the region.

Another important figure was Timothy Bigelow, who became one of the first resident Universalist preachers operating in the Ohio–Indiana area. Although Bigelow was not directly associated with Murray's original circle, he worked within a broader intellectual environment increasingly receptive to religious liberalism and criticism of traditional Calvinist doctrines. Together with other itinerant ministers, he contributed to the dissemination of the Universalist message among frontier settlers and helped create a network of sympathizers that extended across state boundaries.

The growth of these missionary efforts became increasingly visible during the 1820s. By 1821 the Northern Ohio Universalist Association was already referring to the existence of substantial numbers of believers and sympathizers living further west, including in territories associated with Indiana [14]. The establishment of the Universalist Convention of the Western States in 1826 marked an even more significant stage in the institutional development of the

movement. Bringing together communities from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and neighboring regions, the convention represented the first serious attempt to coordinate Universalist activity across the expanding frontier [15].

The central figure in the early history of Indiana Universalism was undoubtedly Jonathan Kidwell. Originally associated with Methodism and later influenced by the Disciples of Christ movement, Kidwell eventually embraced Universalist theology through his own study of Scripture. After settling in Indiana in 1826, he emerged as the principal organizer of Universalist activity in the eastern portion of the state [16]. His missionary efforts were remarkable both in scale and effectiveness. Traveling across seven counties in Indiana and nine in Ohio, Kidwell preached to frontier communities that often lacked any permanent ecclesiastical structures. According to his own estimates, the number of Universalists in the region increased from approximately two hundred individuals at the time of his arrival to nearly two thousand within only a few years. During the same period, five new church buildings were constructed, demonstrating the rapid growth of the movement [16].

Kidwell's success reflected broader patterns characteristic of frontier religion. Rather than relying upon centralized institutions, Universalism expanded through personal networks, local initiative, and missionary mobility. The movement's ability to adapt to frontier conditions enabled it to establish communities across a wide geographical area despite limited financial and organizational resources. At the same time, this reliance upon charismatic individuals and voluntary association would later contribute to the institutional fragility that characterized many Universalist communities in Indiana.

3.1. Print Culture, Public Debate, and Institutional Consolidation

The expansion of Universalism in Indiana was sustained not only by itinerant preaching but also by the emergence of denominational print culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, religious periodicals played a crucial role in connecting geographically dispersed communities, disseminating theological arguments, and reinforcing denominational identity. Historians have repeatedly emphasized that the growth of American voluntary religious movements depended heavily upon newspapers and journals capable of maintaining communication across vast distances [1]. For Universalists in the Midwest, this function was fulfilled by *The Star in the West*, one of the most influential religious publications in the western states.

Established in 1827 by Jonathan Kidwell, D. D. Hall, and Samuel Tizzard, *The Star in the West* quickly became the principal Universalist periodical serving frontier communities throughout Ohio and Indiana [14]. Initially published in Ohio and later transferred to Philomath, Indiana, the journal reflected the growing importance of Indiana within the broader geography of western Universalism. More than a simple denominational newspaper, it functioned as an instrument of theological education, organizational coordination, and community formation. Its pages contained sermons, doctrinal discussions, reports from local congregations, announcements concerning conventions, and correspondence from itinerant ministers working throughout the region [14]. The significance of the journal becomes particularly evident when viewed within the context of frontier conditions. Many Universalist congregations existed in relative isolation and were separated by considerable distances. Under such circumstances, periodicals provided one of the few mechanisms through which believers could maintain a sense of participation in a larger religious movement. As Ann Lee Bressler has observed, nineteenth-century Universalist print culture served not merely to disseminate information but also to construct a shared denominational consciousness among scattered communities [3]. The relocation of *The Star in the West* to Indiana therefore symbolized the state's growing importance as a regional center of Universalist activity.

The increasing visibility of Universalism also generated stronger opposition from competing Protestant denominations. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Universalist ministers regularly encountered criticism from Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian preachers who regarded the doctrine of universal salvation as incompatible with biblical teaching and potentially harmful to public morality [8]. Such disagreements frequently developed into formal public debates, which became an important feature of religious life on the American frontier.

One of the most significant examples occurred in Indianapolis in 1830, when Jonathan Kidwell engaged in a public theological debate with the Methodist minister Edwin Ray. Contemporary accounts indicate that the event attracted considerable attention and was attended not only by clergy and laypersons but also by members of the Indiana legislature [3]. The prominence of this debate demonstrates that Universalism had become sufficiently influential to demand a public response from representatives of more established denominations.

These controversies reflected broader theological tensions within nineteenth-century American Protestantism. Critics frequently accused Universalists of undermining moral discipline by rejecting eternal punishment. Universalist ministers responded by arguing that authentic Christian morality should be grounded in divine love rather than fear [15]. The debate therefore extended beyond questions concerning the afterlife and touched upon competing understandings of human nature, divine justice, and religious authority.

At the same time, Universalism continued to develop its own institutional structures. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Indiana possessed an extensive network of congregations, associations, and ministers. Evidence of this growth can be found in a guide published in Indianapolis in 1849, which reported the existence of twenty-nine Universalist ministers, fifteen church buildings, fifty-five religious societies, ten associations, and a state convention [8]. The same source also noted the publication of two denominational periodicals, indicating the increasingly sophisticated organizational framework that supported the movement.

These figures reveal the remarkable progress achieved by Universalism within only a few decades. Although the denomination remained significantly smaller than Methodism or Baptism, it had succeeded in establishing a stable institutional presence throughout much of Indiana. More importantly, it had transformed itself from a missionary movement dependent upon itinerant preachers into a recognizable denominational network capable of sustaining regular worship, publishing religious literature, organizing conventions, and participating in public theological debate. Nevertheless, beneath this apparent success lay structural weaknesses that would become increasingly visible during the second half of the nineteenth century.

EXPANSION WITHOUT CONSOLIDATION: COMMUNITY GROWTH AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY

The trajectories of individual congregations reveal the concrete realities that lie behind the broader statistical patterns. Several of the earliest Universalist communities established during the expansionary decades of the 1830s and 1840s disappeared within only one or two generations. Greenville (1836), High Banks (before 1836), Independent (1833), Liberty (before 1836), and Laconia (before 1836) belonged to the earliest wave of Universalist expansion in Indiana, yet none survived beyond the nineteenth century. Likewise, a significant number of congregations founded during the missionary boom of the 1840s – including Bono (1843), Columbus (1843), Covington (1843), Franklin (1843), Prairieton (1843), Rainsville (1843), and Thorntown (1843) – had disappeared from denominational records by 1872. These

examples suggest that the establishment of a congregation did not necessarily imply the creation of a durable institution. Rather, many Universalist societies remained deeply dependent upon local demographic conditions and the continued presence of a small number of committed families [8].

This pattern is consistent with broader observations concerning frontier religion. William Warren Sweet notes that the religious frontier was characterized by extraordinary institutional fluidity, where churches frequently emerged, flourished, and disappeared in response to shifting settlement patterns and local economic conditions [17]. Similarly, Nathan Hatch argues that the democratization of American Christianity encouraged rapid religious expansion but often produced unstable organizational structures dependent upon charismatic leadership and voluntary participation [1]. The Indiana evidence appears to confirm these observations. At the same time, a smaller group of congregations demonstrated remarkable institutional resilience. Anderson, originally organized in 1841, was reorganized in 1896 and dedicated a new church building in 1916 before remaining active in 1940. Comparable patterns can be observed in Indianapolis, Madison, Logansport, Muncie, Pendleton, Richmond, Salem, and Huntertown, all of which survived well beyond the initial frontier period [8]. Significantly, several of these communities endured not through uninterrupted continuity but through repeated reorganization. Indianapolis, for example, underwent reorganizations in 1853 and 1884 before dedicating a new church building in 1894, while Manchester experienced reorganizations in both 1855 and 1868. Such cases indicate that institutional adaptability often proved more important than numerical growth alone.

The contrasting histories of Crawfordsville, Lafayette, Terre Haute, and Vevay further illustrate the challenges faced by Universalist communities. Crawfordsville, organized in 1843 and provided with a church building in 1844, required reorganization in 1895 before eventually disappearing. Lafayette experienced successive revivals in 1850 and 1868 but ultimately sold its church property in 1898. Terre Haute maintained a visible Universalist presence throughout much of the nineteenth century, constructing a new church after 1865, yet its building was sold in 1902. Likewise, Vevay, one of the oldest Universalist centers in Indiana, dating from 1826, survived long enough to erect a church building in 1895 before that property was sold in 1916 [8]. These examples reveal that even relatively successful congregations often struggled to maintain institutional continuity across multiple generations.

The geographical distribution of surviving churches also deserves attention. Communities that remained active into the twentieth century were more frequently located in larger towns, regional commercial centers, or areas connected to expanding transportation networks. By contrast, many congregations established in small rural settlements disappeared as migration patterns shifted and local economies declined. Such findings support Ann Lee Bressler's observation that Universalist expansion was often easier to achieve than long-term institutional consolidation, particularly in frontier environments where denominational resources remained limited and ministerial support was intermittent [4].

Consequently, the Indiana experience reveals a fundamental paradox of frontier Universalism. The movement's remarkable success in establishing congregations across the state was accompanied by a persistent inability to secure institutional permanence. More than eighty percent of the identified communities ultimately disappeared, despite the denomination's considerable missionary achievements. The evidence therefore suggests that the same conditions that facilitated Universalist expansion – mobility, decentralization, flexibility, and voluntary association – also contributed to its long-term vulnerability [3].

CONCLUSION

The history of Universalism in Indiana offers a valuable perspective on the relationship between religious mobility and denominational development in nineteenth-century America. Originating in the theological and ecclesiastical environment of New England, Universalism expanded westward alongside the broader movement of settlers who transformed the social and religious landscape of the United States. The movement's arrival in Indiana was neither accidental nor peripheral. Rather, it formed part of a larger process through which religious ideas, institutions, and identities crossed geographical boundaries and adapted to the realities of frontier life.

The Indiana experience demonstrates that Universalism possessed many of the characteristics necessary for successful expansion in a frontier environment. Its reliance on itinerant preaching, voluntary association, local initiative, and flexible organizational structures enabled it to establish communities across a rapidly developing region. Through conventions, religious publications, and sustained missionary activity, Universalism became an identifiable and influential component of Indiana's religious landscape during the nineteenth century. At the same time, the evidence examined in this study reveals the limits of this success. Although the movement spread rapidly and established a substantial number of congregations, its institutional foundations often remained fragile. Many communities depended upon a small number of leaders, limited financial resources, and the continued vitality of local frontier settlements. As demographic patterns changed and denominational competition intensified, a significant proportion of these congregations gradually disappeared. The contrast between the impressive geographical reach of Universalism and the relatively low survival rate of its institutions highlights one of the central tensions of frontier religion.

In this respect, Indiana serves as a particularly instructive case study. The state illustrates how religious mobility could function simultaneously as a source of strength and vulnerability. The same flexibility that enabled Universalism to expand into new territories often hindered the development of stable and enduring institutional structures. Expansion was achieved with remarkable effectiveness, but consolidation proved far more difficult. Consequently, the history of Universalism in Indiana reflects a broader pattern observable in many frontier religious movements, where rapid growth frequently coexisted with organizational instability.

The Indiana case also invites a reconsideration of how the success of a religious movement should be measured. While many Universalist congregations disappeared, the theological themes promoted by the movement continued to circulate within American religious culture. Ideas emphasizing divine love, religious tolerance, the rejection of eternal damnation, and the hope of universal reconciliation gradually entered broader theological discussions and influenced religious communities far beyond the boundaries of organized Universalism.

Ultimately, the story of Universalism in Indiana is not simply a narrative of expansion and decline. It is a history of migration, adaptation, religious innovation, and cultural influence. By tracing the movement from its New England origins to its frontier manifestations in Indiana, this study has shown that religious mobility was both the principal engine of Universalist expansion and one of the factors that limited its institutional longevity. Although the movement never became a dominant force within American Protestantism, it contributed significantly to the diversification of the religious frontier and left a legacy that endured long after many of its congregations had disappeared.

Author Contributions: The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work and has approved it for publication.
Funding: This research received no external funding.
Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study.
Informed Consent Statement: The manuscript does not contain identifiable personal data
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are included in the manuscript.
Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

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