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COMING TO CHRIST: NARRATIVES OF PRAYER AND EVANGELISM FROM BORN-
AGAIN CHRISTIANS IN ATLANTA

by

BRANDON BLEDSOE

Under the Direction of Emanuela Guano

ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted with a Southern Baptist congregation in Atlanta, this thesis analyzes members' experiences of becoming born-again Christians and their engagement with prayer to explore the affects that permeate the practice of developing a personal relationship with Jesus.

INDEX WORDS: Anthropology, Religion, Evangelism, Southern Baptist, Church, Prayer, Affect

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BRANDON BLEDSOE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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AGAIN CHRISTIANS IN ATLANTA

by

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Georgia State University

May 2013

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the congregation members of Moreland Heights Baptist Church, with special thanks to Pastor Randy and the members of the congregation who sat down to share their testimonies with me. My goal in setting out to get my MA and conduct this research was to grow intellectually. Their names (and the name of their church) may have been changed for this publication, but they welcomed me into their family with the hope that their stories can provide a greater understanding of their culture and change lives. It is my hope that this thesis does justice to both of our efforts.

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I would like to acknowledge the endless patience and valuable guidance that my advisor, Dr. Emanuela Guano has shown me over my time with the Georgia State University Anthropology Department. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable insights, literature suggestions, and comments that Dr. Faidra Papavasiliou and Dr. Jennifer Patico have contributed during the course of my research. The entire faculty and student body in the Georgia State University Anthropology department have given me suggestions, feedback and support over the past three years, and much of the process of finding my ultimate research question has come from what they have told me they found most interesting about my research. My family and my parents have been supportive of me (most of the time) since birth, despite protests from my parents about continuing with graduate studies. My friends have kept me sane during the whole process. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Isa Blumi in the Georgia State University History Department for motivating me to think critically about the world around me and exposing me to ideas that I might not have otherwise pursued.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

At 10:30 on a Sunday morning in an eastside neighborhood in the city of Atlanta, the congregation of the Moreland Heights Baptist Church stands as the worship team begins to play one of its most frequently played worship songs, “The Stand” by Hillsong United. The worship team is responsible for the music at the beginning of the worship service, and is led by Daniel, a white male in his early twenties who plays the guitar parts for the songs. A three-piece vocal ensemble and a drummer, the latter of whom is encased in a sound-dampening booth constructed on the right side of the altar, accompany him. The music lasts for about the first twenty minutes of the service, and during the musical performance, latecomers file in and join in singing, hand-raising, and praying silently at their seats as the music plays. During one of the musical interludes, Daniel plays an extended guitar part as the associate pastor’s wife, who is in the vocal ensemble, reads a passage from the Book of Matthew before continuing on to the next verse of the song. One latecomer is William, an African-American male in his 50s who arrives in his T-shirt and blue jeans. Several members of the congregation shake his hand or give him a hug as he walks toward his normal spot near the front of the seating area in the sanctuary, and he begins to sing along immediately after settling into his spot. As the music concludes, Pastor Randy invites William up to the altar and sets up a chair for him to sit down. “Many of you know that William’s wife has been sick and battling cancer for some time,” Randy says. “This past Thursday evening, she went home to be with the Lord.” I recall that I have just seen her in church with William two weeks prior to this Sunday, and that she was wearing an oxygen tank at the time. Pastor Randy speaks about William’s wife a bit more, and then invites the entire congregation

up to the altar to pray over him. The entire congregation gets up, and forms a deep circle to lay hands on William's shoulders and bow their heads as Pastor Randy begins leading with a word of prayer:

Lord, please give William the strength to continue on, and give him the strength to minister to his family, as the children and grandchildren could certainly use your strength, Lord, you know it more than anyone.

After Randy's word of prayer, another member of the congregation begins with another prayer:

Lord, you have deemed it time to take one of your children home. Although William is hurt, he knows that it is part of your plan, and that she is not suffering anymore. And Lord, he knows that one day, when it is time for you to call him home, that he will be reunited with her.

Many more members of the congregation offer a word of prayer, and this process continues on for about another twenty minutes. Some of the people praying have never met William's wife, but they are offering a word of prayer and condolence in the belief that it will strengthen William through his time of need. After some silence, everyone returns to their seats and the pastor discards his planned sermon, or *message*, in favor of talking about the power of prayer. Throughout this discussion, Randy continues to refer to how the congregation just gathered around William to lift him up. Congregation members interject with calls of "Amen!" "Yes, Lord!" and "Preach it!" At around noon, the pastor issues an open invitation for anyone present to come up to the altar:

If you've got something weighing on your heart that you need to pray about, or maybe you need to share a word of testimony with us, or maybe you're ready to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior. I grew up in the church, my father was a deacon, and until I was fifteen years old I thought that religion was the path to heaven. And it wasn't until I was fifteen years old that I realized that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was the only way to save my soul, and that I was ready to give my life over to the Lord.

Daniel returns to the altar to play some instrumental music as some of the congregation members kneel on the altar and pray silently.

Evangelism takes many forms in our current society. The term *evangelism* comes from the Koine Greek word *euangellos*, meaning “good news” (Brackney 2009: 203). During the Protestant Reformation, the German word *evangelische* was used to describe any church that doctrinally affirmed the priesthood of all believers (Brackney 2009: 203). But in many peoples’ experience, the message that evangelical Christians preach can hardly be considered “good news.” One needs only to step outside of a classroom at Georgia State University to hear some independent street preacher shouting a hellfire sermon at passing students, while wearing clothing with bold, provocative slogans about the wrath of God. Being exposed to environments like this, it becomes easy to base general views of evangelical Christians on the behavior of the most visible individuals. However, a deeper and more hands-on engagement with actual evangelical, or “born-again” Christians is necessary to develop a greater, more anthropologically sound, understanding of evangelical Christian groups.

In this thesis, I examine how members of a small Southern Baptist congregation that meets within Atlanta city limits construct their identities and conduct their everyday lives. My research focuses primarily on how the members of the congregation conceptualize what it means to be a born-again Christian, and what they consider their evangelizing mission to be. I explore how the cultural environment in which the individual situates himself influences how he practices his faith. I focus on what led the individual to decide to become a born-again Christian, and how this particular way of life influences the way that the individual forms her own identity in comparison to others around her who may not have “accepted Jesus” or who practice a different form

of Christianity than herself. I argue that born-again Christians are affected by their personal relationship with Christ on a visceral level, and that the intensity of the affects experienced by the born-again Christian are key to understanding why the believer feels compelled to share her experience of Christ's love with others.

Defining and Debating Born-Again Christians

In examining this question, I first looked specifically at what anthropological literature has dealt specifically with Southern Baptist and evangelical Christian populations. Perhaps the most widely cited recent work is Susan Harding's (2000) work on Jerry Falwell and the churches closely associated with Liberty University. Harding (2000) examines the use and power of language in fundamentalist discourse. However, Harding focuses almost entirely on the leadership of the church in her ethnographic research. Many of her observations have helped shape aspects of my research and some of the ancillary questions that I would like to explore. Harding accounts her personal experience with the sermons and church functions, informed primarily by her own perspective as an outsider. Actual congregation members are absent from this study, which is entirely valid based on her research question – Harding explicitly states throughout the book that she is interested in exploring the use of language.

Harding (2000) states that the focus of her research is “fundamentalist” Christians. This is particularly interesting, as segments of Jerry Falwell's school of evangelism have embraced the term “fundamentalist” as accepting the Bible as literally true (Harding 2000: xv-xvi). However, many scholars have observed that Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Christian populations have become intertwined to a degree since 1925, in the post-Scopes milieu, and particularly since the 1960s,

culminating in an explosion of membership with Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority movement and Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign (Harding 2000, Rosenberg 1989, Luhrmann 2012.a). Michael Warner (2008) has called this conflation a "pan-Christian alliance." The Southern Baptist Convention's decision to update the Baptist Faith and Message in 1925, 1963, and 2000 supports that these have, at the least, been times in which the moral environment in which the organization operates has undergone change. However, conflating all of these vastly different traditions of Christianity is something often done by outsiders – and all too often, by academics – and often these "alliances" are loose, at best. It is important to consider that while membership in evangelical denominations in the U.S. has exploded in the period since 1960, membership in mainline Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterian Church have decreased by as much as 50 per cent (Luhrmann 2012.a: 311). These statistics suggest that many U.S. citizens are looking for a more intense spiritual experience.

Older ethnographic research directly on Southern Baptist populations comes from Ellen Rosenberg (1989). Rosenberg provides a well-researched historical background to the Southern Baptist Convention as an organization. Ethnographically, however, her research is quite dated and her theoretical analysis of religion is drawn from a cultural evolutionary perspective (Rosenberg 1989: 10). More recently, Tanya Luhrmann has conducted ethnographic fieldwork on several Pentecostal congregations associated with the Jesus People movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and her research is designed to explain the personal relationship with Christ to non-Christians and outsiders (2012.a: 1).

The most recent anthropological work on Southern Baptists has almost entirely been limited to studying the dynamics of megachurches, either stateside or international. Panels at the 2010 and 2011 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association that were sponsored by the Society for the Anthropology of Religion were almost entirely limited to ethnographic studies of megachurches, often evangelical churches in areas such as Indonesia or Korea. The exact attendance threshold for a megachurch has been the subject of much debate, but the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (n.d.) places the membership threshold at 2000. With a regularly attending congregation size of anywhere from 30-50 individuals, the site that I have selected certainly is not a megachurch by any of these definitions. I hope for this research to elucidate a different dimension of the experience of Southern Baptist practice – the experience of the “community church” – than the current literature provides.

Religion and Epistemology

In reviewing the literature relevant to my research, I have concluded that I must first define the relevant terms of discussion. Talal Asad (1993, 2003) has proven particularly informative in understanding religion as a category of anthropological inquiry. Drawing on commentary of Sherry Ortner’s (1984) influential work, one of Talal Asad’s (1993) main points of departure from his predecessors, such as Clifford Geertz (1973[1966]), conceptualizes the nature of what actions, symbols, and practices constitute religion as temporally fluid and subject to change based on social and cultural factors of the environment in which the religious group is situated. Actions, symbols, and practices, as Asad (1993) notes, vary and change over time. Other authors (Harding

2000, Rosenberg 1989) have contributed to understanding what those particular actions, symbols, and practices that constitute Southern Baptist culture include.

Religion as an anthropological category of study has seen significant transformation over the years. Early in anthropology's study as a discipline, Emile Durkheim (1915) focused on the social aspect that arose from the rites and symbols associated with religious practices in groups. Clifford Geertz (1973[1966]) had a more individualized approach to religion that focused on the relationship of symbols to their meanings. More recently, Talal Asad (1993, 2003) has argued that these definitions of religion rely on elements of practice that are no longer currently practiced and are the product of recent discourse and interrelation with secular modes of ascertaining truth.

Early anthropological theorists argued that religion could be seen as an alternate epistemology with varying paths to truth-claims (Durkheim 1995[1915]: 15). Many of the recent debates about religion across disciplines largely focus on religion in terms of the public sphere in modernity (Habermas 1989; Connolly 1997; Hirschkind 2006; Taylor 2007), or on the role of secularization as a phenomenon of modernity (Connolly 1997; Hirschkind 2006; Cannell 2010; Asad 2011). While these debates are informative in elucidating the circulation of ideas and culture within a population with varying religious backgrounds, as Luhrmann observes, the very thing that makes the experience of God so intensely personal and real to evangelical Christians is the result of an adaptation to skepticism in belief throughout modernity, making God "hyperreal" to the believer, or what she has termed the "epistemological double-register" (2012.a: 301, 2012.b: 378).

Affect, Effervescence, Constructed Liminality, and the Heart

In developing the community experience of religion, Emile Durkheim argued that the excitement of the passions in ritual practices was an expression of “effervescence” (1995[1915]: 218). Effervescence, as Durkheim argues, is the bridge between disparate realms of the real and the metaphysical (1995[1915]: 238). Durkheimian notions of effervescence can accurately explain the group dynamic in a church worship service, but if congregation members see continuous prayer on a personal level with God as the building block of their faith, then affect and emotion would be informative concepts to consider.

An anthropological approach to affect, as Richard and Rudnycky (2009: 61) argue, is conceptually richer approach than emotion, as affect “indexes intersubjective relations” and “suggests relations practiced *between* individuals rather than experiences born by sole individuals.” In taking an affective approach to the Baptist practice, I hope to see how the “acceptance of Jesus into one’s heart” shapes and informs the morals, ethics, discourses, practices, and priorities of the members of the congregation.

Brian Massumi (2002: 23) explains the autonomic processes of affect as a reaction to an *image*. Massumi (2002: 24) has identified two major levels of identification that bridge the gap between the content and effect of an image: *qualities* (or qualifications; Massumi uses the terms interchangeably) and *intensity*. Intensity, Massumi explains, is the level of identification that equates with affect (2002: 27). Intensity accounts for the autonomic processes of the body, such as heartbeat and breathing (Massumi 2002: 25). Qualifications, on the other hand, engage a “conscious-autonomic mix” (Massumi 2002: 25). The difference between emotion and affect, Massumi argues, is that emotion is qualified and affect is unqualified (2002: 28).

It is through Massumi's view of autonomic processes of affect that the study of religion would benefit most directly. Affective religious practices, in other words, should be approached as a state of *being* and not a series of conscious behaviors. The autonomic role of affect in religion, however, should not be confused with involuntary behavior. Agency has a role to play, as well. Asad's observations on the authentication of agency argue:

One does not have to subscribe to a full-blown Freudianism to see that instinctive reaction, the docile body, and the unconscious work, in their different ways, more pervasively and continuously than consciousness does. This is part of the reason why an agent's act is more (and less) than her consciousness of it. (1993: 15)

Massumi informs much of Hirschkind's (2006) approach to studying the role of affect in religious practices. Hirschkind's view on affect is informative as it illustrates how the individual becomes a site of sensory discipline and "pious relaxation" as the words of the speaker facilitate an "opening of the heart" (2006: 68), which he defines as a dimension of ethical affect.

Some of the central themes that born-again Christians talk about are "God's love," "the love of Christ," "God's presence," and "walking with God," sometimes all used interchangeably in the same sentence. Affect is strong as a mode of inquiry in examining the born-again experience because, as Seigworth and Gregg note, it emerges from "muddy, unmediated relatedness and not some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements," and that "it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs" (2010: 4).

Liminality is also important to consider in the practices of these congregation members. Victor Turner (1967: 94) defines liminality as the "state of transition" between one structural space in society and another. This transition, Turner argues, is

facilitated by *rites de passage* that initiate an individual into another structural position in society as a mechanism of separation (1967: 94). Liminality has been explicitly incorporated into seminary curricula, as Pastor Timothy Carson (2003: 60) argues that rebirth in Christ is a liminal moment, and that Christians develop a *communitas* with those who led them to Christ.

Thanatological and eschatological narratives within sermons would be important in considering “this world” as a liminal space before “going home to be with Jesus.” The process of salvation can also be seen as liminal. The consideration of saved believers – separated by the *rite de passage* of believer’s baptism as being “born again” – places non-saved individuals in a space in which they have not yet “come to Christ.” Therefore, I argue that liminality in the context of this church, and in the context of Carson’s (2003) application of liminality in preaching, is best understood as a *constructed* liminal space.

In her own work on evangelical Christians, Tanya Luhrmann has observed that congregants are not converted by words alone, but rather by learning to conceptualize an intimately personal God (2004: 518). Luhrmann refers to this relationship as “metakinesis” (2004: 522). Luhrmann borrows the term metakinesis from the discipline of dance criticism, as the term is used to describe how a dancer uses her body to convey emotions (2004: 519). A metakinetic state, as Luhrmann defines it, might be “when God gives you peace, speaks to you outside your head, when you feel that He carries you down to the altar” (2004: 525). The point in metakinesis is to make God real to the individual. Metakinesis might be the infusion of the “Holy Spirit” into the congregation’s prayer, or the practices of worship music, or the altar call. Two dimensions of metakinesis that Luhrmann differentiates between are “falling in love

with Jesus,” which she considers an emotional state, and “walking with the Lord,” which she considers a general worldview (2004: 523).

While Massumi’s (2002) and Luhrmann’s (2004) earlier work would seem to primarily lend itself to the psychological processes associated with religion, Luhrmann’s (2012.a, 2012.b) newer work directly examines how her informants develop their relationship with Christ in their hearts. As previously mentioned, Hirschkind (2006) has observed the “opening of the heart” as an important part of the sensory experience of religion and the constitution of ethical affect. The common meta-narratives of “accepting Jesus into your heart” and “being born-again in Christ” is one that many televangelists, street preachers, and public religious commentators do share with the Moreland Heights congregation. Thus, the role of the “heart” in guiding practice of the born-again experience will be important to consider.

Historical Background of the Southern Baptist Convention

Moreland Heights Baptist Church is affiliated on a national level with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention was established in Augusta in 1845, following a regional split in the American Baptist Church (Rosenberg 1989: 32). The story goes, as children in Georgia schools are still frequently taught, that the split was over Southern Baptists advocating slavery and Northern Baptists wanting no part of slavery. In her research on the history behind this split, Rosenberg (1989: 28) recalls that the issue was not that simple, and that most documentation suggests that four out of every five abolitionist organizations at the time and a roughly proportional membership rate was a Baptist organization located in the South. Further, the “Resolution on Negroes,” adopted at the first meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention

in Augusta, Georgia in May 1845, reads simply, “RESOLVED, That the Board of Domestic Missions be instructed to take all prudent measures, for the religious instruction of our colored population” (SBC n.d.e.). Many abolitionists within SBC leadership who saw slavery as a reality that did not appear to be leaving in the near future saw evangelizing to the slave population and creating disciples in them to be a way of tempering the harshness of slavery (Rosenberg 1989: 28-29). Regardless of how the organization emerged, missionary projects have made the SBC a global presence now, and since the 1960s there has been serious consideration within the organization to change the name to reflect that global presence, with Great Commission Baptists being the most recent suggestion of the SBC Name Change Task Force (SBC n.d.f.).

The document that guides SBC-affiliated churches is the Baptist Faith and Message. The Baptist Faith and Message was first adopted by the SBC in 1925, with significant revisions to the statement in 1963 and 2000. It should be stressed that this document *guides* churches, as the preamble to the Baptist Faith says of these principles in all three versions:

- (1) That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, viz., repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- (2) That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.
- (3) That any group of Baptists, large or small, have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.
- (4) That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.

(5) That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life. (SBC n.d.d.)

Moreland Heights Baptist Church itself has further deemed it appropriate to draft a Constitution and By-Laws by which to govern the church. In the most recent version of this document, adopted by a quorum of members following a Sunday service in December 2011, the church states that it accepts the 2000 version of the Baptist Faith and Message. The pastor has informed me that some of his colleagues maintain the 1963 version of the Baptist Faith and Message as the guiding statement of faith for their churches.

The Southern Baptist Convention advocates the autonomy of individual churches, stating that:

We recognize that in the New Testament there was no centralized ecclesiastical authority over the churches that forced the churches into any form of compliance. There was encouragement, exhortation, and admonition, but there was never enforcement. We strongly adhere to that principle. Jesus Christ is the head of the local church - we are not. Each church is responsible before God for the policies it sets and decisions it makes. (SBC n.d.b.).

By allowing churches to set their own policies and make their own decisions, individual churches are left accountable to the community in which they are located, and in the SBC's vocabulary, accountable to God.

Situating the Community Church

Moreland Heights Baptist Church held its first service in a tent revival in 1927 at the site of its current location. The neighborhood in which the church is situated is on the eastern side of Atlanta just within the city limits. Shortly after its first service, the founding members of the church had a building erected the next block over and the

church met in that building until the early 1940s, when the congregation grew too big for the building to accommodate them anymore. At that time, the church broke ground on its current campus, located on the site of the original tent revival. In the early 1950s, the church grew to a membership of more than 1500 and the campus was expanded to build a larger sanctuary and a five-story annex of classrooms and offices. It was at that time that the church became the looming, brick building with a tall white steeple and stained glass windows at the bend of the street that it remains today. The area surrounding the church is a mixed income and mixed race neighborhood, with whites making up a slight racial majority and affluent households taking a slight income level majority. Much of the neighborhood still retains a large amount of greenspace; and trees line the streets in front of large, well-maintained houses, many of which look like faithful restorations of the original 1920s and 1930s architecture. There is also a strong presence of homosexual households in the neighborhood.

There are approximately 50 registered, active members of Moreland Heights Baptist Church, and at a typical Sunday service one can expect to see 30 or 40 members present. The size of membership of this church allows most members of the church who want to function in a leadership role of some description or another to be able to do so. The congregation itself is largely middle-aged to senior citizen age, although there has been a recent influx of more children and youth from the neighborhood. The recent availability of human resources and available space has led the children's and youth leaders to establish a new preschool and community outreach center in the building's annex. I was surprised that there weren't more married couples or families in attendance; many members are the only ones in their family who currently attend this particular church. The racial makeup of the church is mostly white, but barely –

approximately 60 per cent white, by my estimate – also represented in the membership are African-Americans, an African family, a Haitian family, and a couple of Hispanic families.

It is important to consider that Moreland Heights is an urban-located church congregation of 50 people that meets in a building that was designed to accommodate 1500 people when it was erected. While Rosenberg (1989) and Harding (2000) discuss at length the drives during the 1980s to increase tithing and missions income for the SBC and individual SBC churches, the financial component of membership drives – at least for the immediate future – for this church center primarily on maintaining enough income and volunteer manpower to keep the church functioning. Furthermore, the building houses aging fixtures, including “Bessie,” the vintage boiler system used to heat the worship center. Currently, the church emphasizes its membership as a “Multi-cultural, multi-generational church family” in inviting neighborhood residents to come worship at their facility. In chapter 5, I will go into further detail of some of the longer-attending congregants’ experiences during the period when the church was an all-white church, and how the members of the church perceive their outreach efforts in the present day.

Within the SBC tradition, there are two ordained positions: pastors and deacons. Individual churches set specific qualifications for pastors and deacons, but these two positions are restricted only to men (SBC n.d.a.). Women are encouraged to seek and hold active leadership positions in the church according to the Baptist Faith and Message, and in this particular church, women occupy virtually every leadership position in the church besides pastor and deacon, including youth director (shared with her husband), children’s programs director, church administrator, and the “Women of

Worth” ministry that organizes community outreach events. A common description of an ideal woman – often used in the context of describing a woman’s roles as a wife or mother – is a “Proverbs 31 woman,” referring to the passage in scripture that features a poem on the wife of noble character. Of note is that the church’s own constitution and by-laws contains gender-specific language on the qualifications of pastor, but not deacons. I have not yet observed an instance where a woman attempted to submit herself for deaconship.

The church is led by the senior pastor. The senior pastor is the primary source of guidance for the members of the church. Randy, the senior pastor is a single man in his late thirties who has church leadership experience, to varying degrees, in congregations throughout Georgia and Kentucky. Second in command to the senior pastor is an associate pastor, Michael, an African-American bible college student in his mid-twenties with dreadlocks. Michael came to the church in spring 2012 with his wife, and both Michael and his wife are in the vocal ensemble for the worship service. Michael also teaches a Bible study class focused on inner-city missions, which I will discuss in chapter 6. Larger churches have many associate pastors and often each associate pastor is assigned a target group to minister to – couples, youth, singles, or people in their 30s being among some possible examples. There is a significant degree of influence that the “lay leadership” has in the church. Lay leadership is affirmed in one of the SBC position statements, “We affirm the priesthood of all believers. Laypersons have the same right as ordained ministers to communicate with God, interpret Scripture, and minister in Christ's name. That is why the Convention requires strong lay involvement on its boards” (SBC n.d.c.). The lay leadership consists of positions such as the body of deacons, a children’s minister, a youth minister, and a community outreach minister.

Deacons are the church's "elders," and according to the church's constitution and by-laws, "They are to engage in the fellowship of worship, witness, education, assistance, counsel, relief and ministry. The Deacons shall be elected by the church upon the recommendation of the Deacon body, and will serve indefinitely." In practice, the deacons' most common tasks include leading prayer groups, organizing prayer requests, collecting the offering at the weekly service, filling in to do things like lead the worship service whenever the normal person is absent, and leading Sunday school.

There are a number of informal and contextually fluid titles that the congregation members use. Members are almost never referred to by their last name, unless one is referring to a household (i.e., the Smiths). "Brother" and "Sister" are the most common honorific titles, and are most often used with elders of the church (i.e. Brother Sam or Sister Louise). "Miss" is occasionally used in lieu of "Sister," although I have yet to hear "Mr." be used in lieu of "Brother." Deacons and pastors will occasionally have the title accompany their name, although this phenomenon is significantly more common for the pastors – and the chairman of the deacons, a white male in his early 80s, will be referred to as "Deacon Pete" about as commonly as he is called anything else – Pastor Randy often calls him "Pops." Even in this instance however, "Brother," or simply referring to the individual by his or her first name, is more common than accompanying the individual's name with his or her title. For the purposes of this thesis, I have attempted to replicate the style that each individual's "character" is referred to most frequently, but again, the use of these titles is often arbitrary and fluid.

Methodology

Ethnography is the primary tool of research that I used during my time with the Moreland Heights congregation. In conducting this research, I primarily utilized the qualitative ethnographic methods of participant observation and informant interviews. Some ethnographic textual support, such as Biblical text and text from other prominent figures in religious life, has also been examined. However, as Sherry Ortner (1984) and others have argued, the primary focus of analysis is in what the population is doing, or as Ortner puts it: “practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance” (1984: 144). Ethnography’s contribution to studying religions, as Talal Asad (1993: 6) argues in his engagement with Ortner, should therefore emphasize fieldwork rather than conceptualizing the population as inherently different and foreign to European and North American academic circles.

The participant observation component consists of personally attending regular Sunday worship services, Sunday school classes, bible studies, prayer meetings, dinners, and any other church functions. By utilizing this methodology, I will illustrate to the best of my ability the experience of a casual, curious observer coming off the street and beginning the process of entering into the “church family.” I observe the ways that congregants physically engage in worship services, the actual content of the pastor’s sermons, and the interaction between the pastor and the congregation before, during, and after the sermons.

One of the issues that comes with studying a population is the issue of reflexivity and the balance of power between the researcher and the participant (O’Reilly 2007: 64). The issue that I found with relying heavily on Harding’s (2000) and Rosenberg’s (1989) work to answer my research questions primarily stemmed from each author’s

omission of the voices of actual congregation members from their respective studies. While a portion of my research focuses on my personal church experience, my position as a researcher limits my ability to fully engage in the experiential and affective component of religious practice to the degree that members of the Moreland Heights congregation do.

Early on in my fieldwork, it became clear that participant observation alone would not be enough to tell the story of this congregation. After spending some time getting to know the ins and outs of the congregation and developing personal relationships with some of the members of the congregation, I began seeking out participants and conducting one-on-one informant interviews with congregation members. Although I have sat down for conversations with the pastor about some of his personal theological views, and the reader will see some quotes from his Sunday sermons, I have not sat down with the pastor for an on-the-record interview. I will attempt to de-emphasize the language of the church leadership that Harding (2000) and others have made the focus of their writing in favor of emphasizing how the members of the congregation experience what they are taught about the Bible. The informant interviews illustrate the involvement and experience within the church of people more who have been more ingrained in the Baptist culture than myself. The questions that I asked congregants were semi-structured in nature, and many of the questions were designed to be open-ended, and often led to more specific, targeted questions. The informant interviews that I conducted ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length. I sought input from the senior pastor and other members of the congregation in developing a question set for the interviews. In designing my interview questions, I attempted to consider the unique priorities and issues of concern to the members of the

congregation. For this reason, much of the ethnographic content of this thesis will be quotes from these interviews – a chance for the members of the congregation to speak on the topics that are important to the members of the congregation, in their own words.

The interviews themselves were roughly analogous to what the members of the congregation refer to as their testimony – beginning with a personal history and background, and proceeding to investigate the circumstances and situations that led them to become believers in Christ. I then also asked them questions about how they share the Gospel with others around them and their thoughts on evangelism, and their answers allowed me to notice some of the common themes and topics that many of them discussed and the issues and terms that became part of the regular vocabulary of the congregation members. The actual congregation members who agreed to sit down with me for informant interviews were some of the more prominent members of the church – these are some of the first people who will greet you on your first visit to the church. One of the reflexive issues that I have become aware of is that some of the prominent and visible members of the church were not interviewed, either due to scheduling reasons or simply due to me not knowing them all that well. The informants who did interview with me are all active in the church, however.

Mary, a white woman in her mid-30s who recently relocated to Moreland Heights from a megachurch in Florida, is the new community outreach minister in the church. Her husband is in the process of attempting to relocate from Florida to Atlanta to join her, as she is completing a Masters program in Church Planting and Missions through Liberty University and establishing the Center for HOPE, a community outreach program initiated by the church that I discuss in Chapter 6. Deacon Pete, a white male

in his early 80s, is the chairman of the deacons and has been a member of the church since the early 1960s. He was raised at his grandparents' house in rural Georgia during the Great Depression, and served in the U.S. military during the Korean War. Mark and Lisa, a married couple now in their 60s, were the directors of the youth ministry in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Mark is a retiring structural engineer and Lisa works for a graphic design firm. The couple remains active in Moreland Heights as “prayer warriors,” a term I explain in Chapter 3. The reader met William in the opening paragraphs of this thesis. In addition to these five people being pillars of the Moreland Heights “church family,” I felt that their backgrounds, experiences, and the time that they have spent with Moreland Heights reflected a good representation of the different types of lives that led the members of the congregation to decide to become born-again.

When I first began developing the questions that I wanted to research, most of the congregants, including the pastor, were hesitant to provide feedback. This phenomenon probably occurred out of a mutual “nervousness” that we are speaking with completely different vocabularies. However, as I attended more services and spent more time with the members of the church, I became more attuned to the priorities of specific individuals, and this rapport has been extremely useful in modifying my questions to reflect the priorities and concerns of the congregation itself.

Eighteen months passed from the first Sunday service that I attended until the last one-on-one informant interview was conducted. While the timeframe that I will be working does not compare to the length of time that many of the congregants have been attending the church, it has afforded me enough time to get to know individual congregants on a more personal level – to get to know them well enough to be able to pick out the idiosyncrasies in their speech, their jokes, and more basically, how they talk

about their work and their relationships. I also wanted to conduct fieldwork on a long enough timeframe that they would “forget that they are being researched” and “act naturally” (O’Reilly 2007: 61).

The limitation that this particular approach provides lies in the fact that I was not invited to attend service by a member of the church. At one sermon, the pastor cited a statistic that 34 per cent of American respondents in one survey would attend church if they were invited. Sources and methodology for this quoted survey notwithstanding, the truth is that many of the new members and visiting members that have come to the church since I began this research were invited to attend by an active, full-fledged member of the church. The power of this type of statement to motivate the members of the congregation to actually invite friends to come worship with them is something worth noting in this project, and the language of the church leadership to invoke this type of invitation is one of the valuable observations that Harding (2000) noted extensively throughout her work.

I was fortunate that selecting an actual site to study was rather simple for this project. I searched for a church that was a member to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), due to the topical controversy of the organization emerging from the departure of former U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton from the organization in favor of the newer Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) over policy issues. Although the SBC is claims the most numerous membership of any religious denomination in the U.S., it is often portrayed as one of the most politically radical denomination (Brackney 2009: n.p.). I sought an English-speaking church, as most of the SBC-affiliated churches in the area were Spanish-speaking. When I found the church that appeared like it fit all of my criteria, I attended one Sunday service. I immediately discovered that the congregation

was rather small. The small size of the congregation meant that I was spotted quickly as a “newbie,” and several different congregation members immediately came over to talk to me. From the very beginning of this research, I was open and clear to each individual to whom I introduced myself about my intent to research there.

I spoke to the senior pastor and the associate pastor after the first service that I attended, and they both expressed great interest in the project. I then scheduled a time to meet the senior pastor for coffee later in the week to discuss what I intended my project to entail, including a general frame of the research question and how I would conduct research, and to verify that he was willing to allow me to conduct research with his congregation. As we left that meeting, the senior pastor expressed great enthusiasm, and agreed to grant me permission to conduct research. Since that time, we have met periodically to discuss the progress of the project, and how the research should be conducted moving forward.

Fortunately my attempt to involve myself with the congregation was relatively straightforward, and I was welcomed enthusiastically by many of the members. I was overt about my intentions of study and goals with the congregation, and I had introduced myself to most of the regularly attending congregation members by the second week of my fieldwork. Most of the congregation members at the time that I began my fieldwork were middle-aged or senior citizens, but these individuals portray themselves as always welcoming and always happy to see “young people.” Since that time, there has been an explosion in membership to the children’s (primary school and younger) and youth (middle and high school) ministries, and the adult membership of the congregation has grown steadily. One of the first concerns that I made myself aware of was that their enthusiasm towards working with me on this research may have been

out of a genuine concern to see me “saved” and to become part of the “church family.” I was explicitly overt with every church member to whom I introduced myself that I will be doing research, and at the very least many of them have expressed interest in the questions and issues that I will be exploring and have expressed interest in reading the ultimate findings of the project. Many of the congregants have expressed that they feel like Baptists sometimes get a “bad rap” in the media and would like to do what they can to contribute to a greater understanding of Baptist culture by outsiders.

Early in my time attending the church, I identified a key informant as ethnographers such as O’Reilly (2007) recommend, or more accurately, I met an individual who was enthusiastic about introducing me to the more prominent members of the church. I will call this man Sam. Sam was extremely helpful in helping me adjust to the church environment in a quick, timely manner. Unfortunately, by the conclusion of my fieldwork, Sam had been absent from church activities for an extended period of time and I was unable to schedule an interview with him.

During worship services, I have attempted to maintain a consistent demeanor that conveys respect for the members of the church and their beliefs, but reinforces the fact that my research requires me to keep a certain distance in my participation in services. There are very few hymns that I know – most of the ones that I do know are restricted to hymns that I have heard sung at family funerals, or hymns that were on the Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard hymn music records that were produced during that period in the 1970s when all the big country music acts were trying to reach Christian audiences. Much of the music performed during worship services is more contemporary “Christian pop” worship music. I stand for the music when they ask the church to stand, but I do not sing along or raise hands in praise as many of the members of the

congregation do. You may occasionally see me tapping the pew with my hand to the timing of the music, out of sheer curiosity to understanding the composition of worship music – when I was learning to play the banjo a couple of years ago, the hymn “I’ll Fly Away” was one of the finger-picking exercises in the instructional booklet that I bought along with the instrument. However, since worship music and multimedia is often used to set the “mood” for a particular worship service, I have chosen to utilize some of the works that are often incorporated in church worship services as epigrams to chapters and subchapters of this thesis for the same reason: to set the “mood” of that section. Since the worship service engages a variety of senses, I would like to invite the reader to be near a computer or other source of on-demand music when reading this thesis, and to look up a version of these songs on your favorite Internet music listening provider (they are all available on YouTube).

The collection plate has presented me with probably the most personally awkward ethical consideration, as university officials would classify monetary contributions as a conflict of interest. I have instead developed an approach of “zero-sum” to contributions to the church. Whenever my presence or participation incurs extra cost to the church that would not be experienced under normal operation, I contribute the amount of displacement. An example of this type of contribution would be when the church ordered copies of *The Purpose-Driven Life* for one of the sermon series; I contributed the cost of a copy of the book. At potlucks, I always bring a dish to share if I plan to eat. There was even one potluck that I discovered I would be unable to attend, but as I had already begun to cook my dish, I dropped it off at the church earlier in the day for the attendees to enjoy that evening. During our periodic meetings over coffee to discuss the progress of the research, the pastor insists on paying for my

beverage, but in return I have given him books, such as Luhrmann's (2012.a) most recent book, that I thought that he would find interesting. The question of contributions has certainly proven to be my greatest challenge as a researcher, but I feel that the zero-sum approach has been the best method to minimize the impact of these challenges.

A number of ethical measures have been put in place to protect the privacy of the participants in the research. The actual name of the church has been changed to Moreland Heights Baptist Church. The names of all participants in this research have been changed for their privacy. Since I am researching a small congregation, the background of many of the participants would be immediately obvious to many of the other church members. One of the reasons that I wanted to choose a small congregation was because, as the pastor has said before in a sermon, "Everyone knows everyone's business, and everyone can tell if you weren't in church last Sunday." I have allowed the informants whom I interviewed to review their contributions before they are published and bring to my attention and request omission for any issues they find with the context that I am providing their comments.

My involvement in the congregation for a period of 18 months cannot compare to the depth of involvement that some of the congregation members who have been involved in the church since the 1950s and 1960s have experienced. However, when I explained my project to the members of the congregation, on more than one occasion I got the response, "Maybe this will give me a chance to share my testimony with your professors or whoever reads this." Hearing them say that gave me an interesting idea for designing the ethnographic portion of this thesis – writing as a narrative of cultural immersion. For that reason, I am juxtaposing the worship songs and other multimedia with extended quotes from the testimonies of the congregation members. The idea is to

emphasize to the reader what type of experience one would likely have if he or she walked into this church or met one of the congregation members in a community event or public space and began getting to know these people.

CHAPTER 2 – COMING TO CHRIST: THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

“BORN-AGAIN”

*So I'll walk upon salvation
Your Spirit alive in me
This life to declare Your promise
My soul now to stand*

*So what can I say?
What can I do?
But offer this heart O God
Completely to You*

*So I'll stand
With arms high and heart abandoned
In awe of the One who gave it all*

*So I'll stand
My soul Lord to You surrendered
All I am is You (from *The Stand*, contemporary worship song by Hillsong
United)*

As membership in the evangelical denominations of Christianity have continued to grow in number over the past five decades, the concept of being a “born-again” Christian has become more common to hear in the English lexicon in Europe and North America. The members of the Moreland Heights Baptist Church congregation identify as born-again Christians. Members of the congregation come from a variety of backgrounds prior to their entry into the “church family.” These backgrounds encompass not only a variety of religious backgrounds, but also various income levels, racial identities, and countries of origin. Some members grew up in an environment where they were “unchurched,” a term that members of the congregation use to describe people who were not raised in a Christian environment.

Mark and Lisa were both raised in Christian environments as Southern Baptists. Mark's mother and brother later lapsed as churchgoers and his mother began watching televangelist programming. Mark describes being born-again:

A lot of people don't understand what it really means; to me it means that I have accepted Jesus Christ as my savior, my lord and savior, I believe that he is the son of the living God, and it gives me a way to communicate with my father, who is in heaven, our supreme being. But really what it does is it allows me to be forgiven because I cannot meet expectations of every single person. I mean, every single person on the face of this earth is going to sin at some time, if not every minute, or every hour. I mean you're going to do things that are going to make people mad, you're going to look at somebody in the wrong way or something like that, but it gives you the freedom to live life because you are forgiven. It doesn't give you the freedom to sin, don't get me wrong, but it gives you the freedom of being forgiven of your sin.

The first part of Mark's explanation is the part of being born-again that one will often hear described in the worship service, in Christian publications, or in the Baptist Faith and Message. But the second part of explanation exemplifies the direct engagement with a person, both physically and spiritually, that accepting Christ entails. Speaking in lay terms, Mark acknowledges that all people are sinners in the eyes of God, but by acknowledging that one is a sinner and surrendering his body and his mind to God, he is forgiven of that sin and can conduct his life.

Mary was raised in a non-Christian household. She describes her upbringing as "Irish Catholic, but mostly to keep in touch with the Irish roots." She became interested in the occult at sixteen, and reports that by the time she was nineteen she was a high priestess in Irish Celtic druidism. She found herself in an abusive marriage in her early twenties and nearly died in a domestic abuse situation. When Mary speaks about her relationship with God, she often intertwines the discussion with the tangible and the metaphysical aspects of her experience with hardship, and this informs her observations

when speaking with other individuals. Mary recalls that during the period of her life that her struggles were most cumbersome:

I cried for help from everybody I could, but nobody would help me. And it wasn't until a woman who ended up telling me about the love of Jesus Christ through a series of meetings and things and just showing me unconditional love, no matter what I said. Because at the time I hated Christians; I hated the church, everything. But no matter what I said, she just was unconditionally loving, and supportive, and stood beside me through some of my darkest times, and kept telling me about the love of Jesus Christ. And I guess it was about, now, sixteen years ago at Easter, she ended up sharing that I could have a personal relationship with God, and that all I had to do was basically to understand and to accept that he was God, that he created me, that he loves me, that he wanted a personal relationship with me, and for me to just surrender everything; the way I thought life should be – just to surrender that, and I did.

Mary believes that instrumental to developing a personal relationship with God is the understanding that he will speak to each individual in different “voices:”

And you're not alone; you don't have to be alone, because the Bible – everybody thinks you have to have a scholar; have a degree or a seminary degree to understand the Bible, but all the Bible is is love letters to us written by God, and he used many many different voices to be able to speak to us, which is so important because each one of us is unique and different, and each letter of the Bible; each part of the Bible speaks in a different voice that speaks to a different person's heart.

The experience of the born-again Christian of a different voice of God that is unique to her own relationship allows the believer to conceptualize God as a friend who is always with her. Through the Bible, God speaking to the believer in “love letters” that reinforce the believer's ability to conceptualize a God that understands her, and her own personal struggles; to conceptualize a God who speaks directly to her to express the love to her that she needs to embody in order to effectively minister to those around her and to share God's love with them. God's love and the experience of God's love should not be the same among any two believers, as Mary explains, because the goal in cultivating a personal relationship with God is to have an intensely personal relationship with him.

Mary's God expresses a different, uniquely personal love toward her that is different than the love that Mark's God expresses toward him, and different than the love that Lisa's God expresses toward her.

Deacon Pete's views on being born-again are perhaps the most theological in nature out of the people in the congregation with whom I spoke. Pete argues against the Catholic doctrine of infant baptism by citing scripture:

Baptists never have believed in an inbred religion. By that I mean – well, how should I phrase it – our Catholic brethren baptize babies when they're born. They go through that little ceremony, and they believe that that has an eternal effect on them. Baptists don't believe that. Baptists believe that you have to make a mature decision yourself as to whether you accept your faith. And that basic decision as a semi-adult, that's what you refer to as being born-again. And that basis comes from scripture, in the New Testament. It has to do with this Jewish fellow who was seeking a deeper spiritual commitment than he had as a Jew, in Jesus' day, and so he's discussing this with Jesus, and Jesus said, "You have to be born again. You have to make a conscious decision. Not what your parents did, but what you do." And of course there's a debate going on, "How can I enter my mother's womb and be born again?" [Jesus] says, "This is a different thing; this is of the heart." And it is, it's of the heart. It's not physical, it's spiritual.

Perhaps because William attends the same Sunday school Bible study class that Deacon Pete teaches, William cites the same scripture as Deacon Pete as his understanding of being born-again. William interprets the scripture to mean that being born-again involves "being changed on the inside" and making a commitment to yourself and to God to live your life as Christ lived his.

My understanding of being born-again, I would have to take my example from the Bible where Jesus was speaking to a guy that was a teacher of the law, whose name was Nicodemus, and he asked Jesus a question. And the question was, "How can a man be born when he's old?" And Nicodemus was asking Jesus the question; Jesus answered this question by saying that you must be born of the water and of the spirit. He first made an acclamation to Nicodemus and he asked him the question – he asked Nicodemus, "Are you, being a teacher of the law," which was the Jewish law, "You being a teacher of the law, you don't understand earthly things

how can you understand heavenly things?” This is what Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about, but my understanding of being born-again is being changed on the inside. You change your mind about how you want to do things and you basically base – or you try to base your actions on what you believe to be the truth about what the Bible teaches.

William’s understanding of being born-again focuses around how the individual interprets the truth about the Bible and Jesus. I find it interesting to juxtapose Pete and William’s interpretation of the same scripture – chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, for those readers following along at home – because as William says, “you try to base your actions on what *you believe* to be the truth about what the Bible teaches” (emphasis added). The purpose of having group Bible study in the Baptist church is to encourage direct engagement with the living Bible. This method encourages the individual to pray over specific Bible verses and how he or she should interpret the scripture and apply the scripture to his or her own life. Being born-again is the ideal spiritual state that the believer can experience in the physical world, and the spiritual journey that the believer embarks on when he chooses to walk with Christ is seen by the believer as a space in which he feels he can only do his best to do God’s work until he is “called home.”

“God Has a Plan:” Testing One’s Faith

Every member of the congregation has expressed that they do have doubts or trials about their faith at some point. Luhrmann has identified the current trend in evangelical experiences of Christ as being the result of what she calls the “epistemological double-register,” in which the affirmation of one’s faith in Christ is the result of encountering alternate, conflicting epistemological claims of God (2012.b: 378).

The born-again Christian’s experience of God involves tackling the doubt of God’s existence and having that doubt reinforce the faith of the believer. Mark describes the

experience of living through Christ as having “hills and valleys” in which one’s faith is tested. He gives the example of the loss of loved ones as one trial:

You do doubt your faith, but the way that you reinforce that is through prayer, and to let God talk to you. And he will reinforce you. Like when I lost my father when I was eleven years old. He died of a heart attack while we were on vacation, and about a month before that, I had lost my grandfather, who was my mother’s father. And I said, “What in the world? God, what are you doing? Where are you?” First my grandfather dies, and then my father dies, and I didn’t know what was going on. And I doubted at that time. But God came back and he said, “I have a plan.” It took years to get through that plan; my mother worked hard and put us through school and all that, but we kind of stuck together through it. We worked it out. But God was in there; I could tell God was in there. Because things would happen that would just fall into place. And he’s been doing that ever since. Every time we’re in a struggle, every time we come up against something that we feel like we can’t accomplish on our own, God shows us a way, or he provides a way for us to come out of it.

The trials that come with doubting one’s faith exemplify the engagement of affect in that the causes for doubting one’s faith do not have to be clearly defined. While some instances of doubt can be catalyzed by a specific event, the proximate location of doubt – and equally, affirmation, consideration, or any other cognitive state – in the power of Christ can be experienced for a variety of reasons and its boundaries – temporal, physical, metaphysical, emotional, among any other number of things – lies within the individual.

Deacon Pete attributes much of the affirmation of his faith to his military service. While he grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in a Baptist family and attended a rural church – his church met once a month and the deacons each contributed a dollar, and in the summers, a cured ham, to pay the pastor – he attributes his experience in the military during the Korean War to be much of what affirmed his faith in Jesus. “There aren’t too many atheists in a foxhole,” he says.

Luhrmann (2012.b) argues that evangelicals experience a “hyperreal” God, meaning that God is “realer than real;” God’s realness is affirmed to the believer by the skepticism of his existence. As Mark says, although he may doubt his faith at times, the way that he reinforces his faith is to “let God talk to [him].”

Being “Broken”

*All my life was full of sin when Jesus found me,
All my heart was full of misery and woe;
Jesus placed His strong and loving arms about me,
And He led me in the way I ought to go.*

*No one ever cared for me like Jesus,
There's no other friend so kind as He;
No one else could take the sin and darkness from me,
O how much He cared for me. (from *No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus*,
hymn by C.F. Wiegley)*

Members of the congregation often speak of Christ as “making them whole” or “filling a void” in their hearts. Mary describes how Jesus filled the void that she felt in her heart:

I had no hope, absolutely no hope, and I had no ability, as hard as I tried. I was a good student, I went to school overseas, and lived all over the world, I tried, I wanted to do big things, but I still had this void in my heart, this emptiness. No matter what I did, I couldn’t have peace, I couldn’t have joy, and I couldn’t live life differently, but when this woman shared the Gospel with me and I ended up accepting Jesus Christ as my lord and savior, I know in that moment, for me, it was so deeply personal that the way that I explain it for me is as if darkly glass shattered, and all of a sudden, all the things that she was telling me about love, I finally could see it; I finally could understand it. At the time I didn’t know what love was; I didn’t understand love, and when she was speaking it was like, “I don’t have to live in that same life. My life could be different.” Jeremiah 29:11 says, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you’ says the Lord, ‘Not plans for disaster but for your welfare, to give you hope and a future.’” And at that moment, I knew that, and I believed it [...] I knew that God loved me, and that he would not abandon me, and that he would never forget about me. And being born-again, part of it means that your spirit – and the Bible talks about that God takes the heart of stone and makes it into a heart of flesh. And for me that was very real, because I went from

being very hard and cold, to all of a sudden not only being able to feel love, but to actually give love [...] I realize that now that I am born-again, that if death was to happen to me, if something was to happen to me, and this physical life is over, my personal relationship with God does not. It continues. And if anything, the promise is that I will be forever with him. So, the born-again is the spiritual, and after this physical flesh is gone, then I'm still with the Lord, but the born-again also is I'm no longer trapped in the old way of living, and the old way of thinking. Now, I am a new person, and I can make different decisions; I have the strength and the power through God to be able to make those choices and to follow through with them too. For me, being born-again, is not just for the future, it's for now too, and it's a very powerful thing when you are born-again and when you realize that.

Mary compares living without Christ to “surviving,” whereas she believes that living with Christ constitutes “thriving.” While salvation is an ultimate telos of being born-again in Mary’s experience, her day-to-day experience involves feeling loved by God, as reflected in the love that other people who have chosen to follow Christ exhibit toward her. William adds that a close engagement with the Bible is necessary to the experience of being born-again:

Being born-again, in my understanding of it is that it's the actual change of a spirit of a person; a change of your mind to try to adhere to living your life in as close of proximity as the Bible teaches. In other words, you want to align your life and your deeds up with how the Bible says you should because that's our “owner's manual” so to speak. It's what we go by.

So while born-again Christians are taught to make their God real to them, they are also taught that the Bible is their “owner's manual.” When Mary or another member of the congregation discusses an important moral or ethical dilemma that has required prayer for her to determine her stance on the issue, she cites the Bible verses that she referred to or prayed over, as evinced by her previously quoted reflection on Jeremiah 29:11 in considering her decision to accept Christ. Becoming born-again, therefore, engages one's affect by conditioning the body and the mind to pray to God and to engage directly with the Bible when approaching a challenge in one's life.

CHAPTER 3 – “HAVE A LITTLE TALK WITH JESUS”: PRAYER

*Well, you may have doubts and fears
Your eyes may fill with tears
My Jesus is a friend
Who watches day and night*

*Well, He's gonna keep you safe
He's the answer to my every prayer
Just a little talk with my Jesus
Gonna make it right*

*Have a little talk with my Jesus
Tell Him all about our troubles
He'll hear our famous cry
And He will answer by and by*

*Feel a little prayer wheel a-turning
You know, a little fire is a-burning
Have a little talk with my Jesus
Gonna make it right (from “Just a Little Talk with Jesus,” hymn by
Cleavant Derricks)*

In the English lexicon, the word *prayer* is used to describe a ritual or set of rituals in a variety of different religions and systems of belief. While it is linguistically convenient that the word can be used to describe an act that is practiced by a number of cultures, it seems that this arrangement has led to academics, particularly early anthropologists, assuming an a priori understanding of the act of prayer itself. This situation is problematic because the Southern Baptists' interpretation of prayer as an extension of the living God provides them with a unique personal, affective experience that deserves examination and analysis.

Some aspects of Southern Baptist prayer can indeed be seen as analogs to Jewish or Muslim prayer, or to any number of rites or rituals from other belief systems. Prayer in many of these traditions involves invoking or acknowledging the name and existence

of a higher power, often with the telos of thanatological salvation in mind. The Southern Baptist tradition is no different, as salvation is one aspect that influences prayer behavior. However, variation in practice from denomination to denomination, from congregation to congregation, and even from one individual to another warrant some explanation to the specific affective experiences induced by Southern Baptist prayer. It should be noted, as Asad (1993: 46) observes, that thanatological salvation is not necessarily a telos of prayer, as salvation is conceptualized quite differently now than it was a millennium ago. These commonalities are temporally observable.

The most distinct observable variance in the Southern Baptist tradition from the Roman Catholic tradition is the Southern Baptist rejection of liturgical rituals, such as the Eucharist, and the Southern Baptist penchant for eschewing prayers such as those found in the *Book of Common Prayer* in favor of direct engagement with God as influenced by scriptural interpretation of the Bible itself.

It is not uncommon for individuals or groups to cry while praying or participating in worship music services. Sometimes people will cry when they are praying over the loss of a loved one or over life-threatening struggles that they are experiencing, such as close loved ones struggling with alcoholism or drug dependency. Other times, people will begin crying during prayer out of experiencing the presence of God in their hearts. This experience can often be accompanied by exclamations of “Yes, Lord!” or “Praise Jesus!”

Perhaps due to the prevalence of prayer among other belief systems, congregants do not often encounter resistance when they invite others to pray with them early in the process of getting to know the person. Deacon Pete says that prayer is an “intensely personal” experience:

[Prayer is] an intensely personal thing; it's not just somebody out by Johnny in the boonies thing; it's an intensely personal thing. Let me give you an example, personally. I'm now 82 years old, and a few days past 82. And I go to bed some nights and I say, "Well, I had a decent meal. I got a nice, warm bed and it's cold out there tonight. And there are groceries in the house. There's a little money in the bank." This, that, and the other. And I just say, "Thank you Jesus." What I have is a blessing from him.

The subject of prayer can vary greatly, from commodity needs to personal or emotional struggles or hardship. The congregants are taught to address God and Jesus directly when they pray, and to talk about their problems and their prayer needs in their own words. Mary says that prayer is just a simple conversation:

If you've got a problem with a person, you communicate with them, and to me that's what prayer is, it's just talking to [God] everyday. All day. Every minute. Sometimes you have these serious formal prayers but mostly, I just talk to him all day long. And I don't really have times when I doubt, but I have times where sometimes I just feel so isolated and lonely, and I just sit alone with my Bible and just talk to God. And I don't know how to describe it, I just feel like I'm one with him.

Being "one with God" is a common feeling that members of the congregation report.

The relationship between God and the self reinforces the Baptist idea of the living God.

Mark says that:

A lot of people don't realize that God is alive every single second of our lives. And we ask for things, and we don't realize that he's providing the answers to us. That's the hardest part. Prayer is the biggest tool that God left us, on the face of the earth, because it is a way to communicate with him. We can intercede for others; he gave us that privilege, to intercede for others – unsaved, people in need, people with illness, and Lisa and I are both involved in intercessory prayer groups, and it allows you to see that working, because you see the prayers answered. It may not be the way you wanted it answered, but it is an answer.

Interceding and praying for others is interpreted within the community as a show of solidarity, and the comfort associated with knowing that others are praying for you exhibits a form of Durkheimian (1995[1915]) effervescence.

“Effervescent” Prayer

*Holy, Holy, Holy
Is the Lord God Almighty
Who was, and is, and is to come, yeah
With all creation I sing:
Praise to the King of Kings!
You are my everything,
And – I - will - adore You!
Yeah!*

*Filled with wonder,
Awestruck wonder
At the mention of Your Name
Jesus, Your Name is Power
Breath, and Living Water
Such a marvelous mystery
Yeah... (from *The Revelation Song*, contemporary worship song by
Gateway Worship)*

Before examining the individual’s personal experience of prayer, I examine the group experience of prayer, as one might see at a worship service or church function. Upon walking into the church at 10:30 am on a Sunday, the listed Sunday service meeting time, there are about five minutes to mingle and greet people before the opening video played to direct the congregation to wrap up their conversations and take their seats. Miss Peggy, a middle-aged African-American woman who directs the children’s ministry and who is always dressed in her “Sunday-best” attire would greet those present with an acrostic poem about the church, and the worship music portion of the service starts. The worship music normally lasts for about the first fifteen to twenty minutes of service, but today the music lasts much longer – in the thirty to forty minute range – because the congregation is really “feeling the presence.” The worship service intersperses older hymns with contemporary Christian songs, with the older hymns sometimes being performed at the more increased tempo of the contemporary songs. The worship portion of the service is used as a form of prayer, as the congregants use the music to

allow themselves to speak directly to God. The musical ensemble holds an instrumental break for a few bars in order to read a Bible passage and follows the scripture by speaking a direct prayer for Christ to hear his followers lift up his name. The lyrics for the worship program are displayed on a large projection screen above the altar. Some members of the congregation look straight ahead at the screen and rock back and forth on their feet while reciting the lyrics. However, many of those present listen to the music with their eyes closed the entire time, singing toward the sky and projecting their arms upward to display deference to God. One believer circumambulates the sanctuary with his arms raised and his eyes closed as he prays – as the song “The Stand” that began the previous chapter says, he literally stands “with arms high and heart abandoned, in awe of the one who gave it all.” The lyrics of many of the songs – samples of which are included in the epigrams of many of the chapters and subsections of this thesis – are frequently phrased as direct addresses to God.

Corporate prayer is a relatively new addition to the regular Sunday service at Moreland Heights. Derived from the Latin word for body, *corpus*, corporate prayer involves assembling the body of the church to pray for specific needs. An example: When Pastor Randy asks the congregation if anyone has any prayer requests, a young mother says that her child is going into surgery to attempt to alleviate the child’s chronic ear infections on Thursday. Pastor Randy asks the mother to bring the child up to the altar and asks the congregation to gather around and pray over the infant. Pastor Randy then begins to pray for healing and relief and a successful surgery. He prays that the baby’s pain goes away, he prays for strength and comfort for the family, and he prays for knowledge and skill for the doctors performing the surgery. All the while, members of the congregation slowly file up to the altar and lay hands on the child. When the area

immediately around the child is at capacity, people filing up begin placing their hands on the shoulders of congregants who do have a hand on the child or on the mother. The format that corporate prayer takes varies each time that the body of believers is assembled, and the individual who initiates the call to pray as a church also varies each time that the church assembles for corporate prayer. Sometimes the congregation is asked to pair up with the person next to them and ask the other person their prayer need. The pair would then take turns praying for the other person's prayer need. Other times, the congregation might be asked to pair up with someone who sits on the other side of the sanctuary with whom the congregant does not normally speak or with whom he has not spoken in a while and ask that person for a prayer request, and pray together as a pair. The corporate prayer can last anywhere from two minutes to half an hour, depending on the atmosphere created by the prayer.

The Sunday service also features the *invitation*, alternately called an *altar call*, at the end of the service. On Easter Sunday 2012, a long-time member of Moreland Heights and former trustee who moved away several years ago, Muriel, attended the Easter Sunday service with her family. Muriel's entire family went up during the altar call, including a very young child, and as the family prayed silently, her son spoke with the pastor. At the conclusion of the altar call, the pastor introduced the family to the congregation and revealed that Muriel's great-grandson (the young child) had recently lost one of his eyes to cancer. He then asked the church to come up and pray with the family for the child's healing, as long as it wouldn't scare the child. Most of the church then went up to the altar to pray with the family – some, particularly elderly members who had trouble walking, prayed at their seats. The altar call often yields an interesting mix of group and personal affective experience. Sometimes, the worship team will play

their song, no one will go up to the altar, and everyone will be dismissed. Not infrequently however, a person or two will go up to the altar, standing or kneeling, and pray silently through the remainder of the song before going back to their seat.

One Sunday, an African-American woman in her thirties approaches the altar during the altar call. After the altar call she speaks briefly with the pastor, and then they both close their eyes as he places his hand on her shoulder and says a few words. At the conclusion of the song, the pastor makes an announcement to the congregation: “Linda has just shared with me that she would like to become a member of this church and that she would like to be baptized.” The congregation begins clapping and a few interjections of “Praise the Lord!” can be heard. Pastor Randy continues, “I would ask that she remain up here as we’re dismissed so that everyone can come up and introduce themselves to her welcome her into our church family.” The aftermath of this woman’s profession of faith is typical of what one sees after a particularly intense altar call, or if someone decides that they would like to join the church or be baptized. Many people stick around to chat informally and introduce themselves. Many members of the church also use this time to check in with other members with whom they had not spoken in a while. The members of the congregation function at a more leisurely pace in the time following a particularly intense altar call; they need some time to “cool down” or recover from the experience.

The church is always accepting prayer requests from individuals who believe themselves or their loved ones need prayer through a trying time. The *intercessory prayer team* is an informal group of people who pray for these specified needs. In the Moreland Heights congregation, these individuals are also termed *prayer warriors*. Mark and Lisa feel that God has laid it on their hearts to be prayer warriors, and they

maintain lists of prayer needs for both the Moreland Heights church family as well as the congregation that they belong to closer to their home in the suburbs. In addition to being members of the intercessory prayer group at Moreland Heights, they participate in an intercessory prayer group with another church in the suburbs closer to their home:

We're intercessory prayer group leaders; have been for about the past thirteen years. We meet every Thursday night. Not very many of us; we have maybe five or six. But we pray there every Thursday night. And their age is from – right now, we've got a 104-year-old lady that comes, down to 50ish. We've had them as young as six or seven praying openly. The staff collects the prayer requests on Sunday mornings, and we type them into a list, and it's just a private list for our eyes only, and then we pray over it Thursday nights, and then we pray over it during the week individually at home [at this point, he pulls the list out of his back pocket, unfolds it, and flips through it to show me what the list looks like – it's about three pages in length with three columns of 12-point font each]. And we pray for the missions – and this is the children; they turn their prayer requests in too [holds up a handwritten page in the back of the packet]. Every week we get a new list. I keep it in my pocket. I pull it out whenever God tells me, I pull it out, I run my finger down, and bingo, I pray for somebody.

Organized intercessory prayer functions similarly for the prayer warrior group that meets at Moreland Heights. A staff meeting is held every Wednesday night, and the intercessory prayer team meeting has recently been incorporated into the weekly staff meeting for logistical convenience, so that the family ministries and bible study groups had more time to set up. An additional reason for the change, as Mark says, is that “the staff needs [to be prayed over] more than anyone here.” Recently, Pastor Randy also began sending out text message alerts to church members and church contacts for prayer needs as well. The text message alerts usually contain the person for whom the prayer need is – if it is a friend or family member of a church member, then it will specify the relation, what the prayer need is, and usually a way to get in touch with the person, especially if the need is medical- or loss-related. An example: “Church family: Jane Smith, longtime MHBC member, hospitalized in Gwinnett and facing heart

surgery. Please pray. She is at 678-555-1234.” Mark and Lisa also pray for the prayer needs expressed in the text message alerts when they receive them, at the weekly staff meetings, and incorporate them into their normal practice of praying for someone “when God tells them.”

Lisa recalls that the drive to pray for others is what led them to return to Moreland Heights, despite the distance.

We came back for homecoming and Randy was here, and originally we thought, “Aw, this’ll be our last time coming.” Because everytime we’d come back, Moreland Heights was going down, down, down, down. And when we came back that last time, the sanctuary had been remodeled, and new pastor, and so I started coming on Wednesday night just to come to supper, because honestly, I was just hanging around eavesdropping, listening to what was going on, and just making my little private list so I’d know what to pray for, and it turned into something. We started coming on Wednesday nights and they started giving us a more formal list. But honestly, I keep my own private list, and sometimes there’s things that I don’t even put on there. I just feel like God says to pray about that, and it’s just for me; things that I pray about.

While the concept of a “prayer list” may be convenient in remembering a large quantity of prayer requests once a believer is conditioned to pray in the way that Lisa has been, her personal relationship with God produces what she perceives as a mutual understanding of some of the prayer needs that do not need to be written down.

Whether she feels that God does not want her to write down the prayer need or she feels that the prayer need might be too sensitive or private to be written, Lisa and her God have developed an “understanding” over these prayer needs. Mark adds that sometimes prayer needs are not explicitly expressed, but prayer warriors have taught themselves to be perceptive to body language and other indicators:

You can hear the need of the people without them really expressing it. So therefore, sometimes we don’t share that in front of each other. In other words, if Randy’s having a problem with so-and-so, we need to pray for

that. We don't want to put that in a list. We want to pray for that outside of that list.

Keeping a list is not the only way that prayer warriors address prayer needs. As both Mark and Lisa said, they are driven to pray for others primarily because God tells them to pray. Praying on the individual level is the most commonly used form of prayer, and 1 Thessalonians says to “pray without ceasing.”

The Southern Baptist Convention also advocates *believer's baptism*, as opposed to the infant baptism present in Catholicism and some other denominations of Christianity. Believer's baptism involves the “total submersion of a believer [in Christ] in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit” (SBC n.d.a.). At this church, an interested party, or according to the SBC definition, the “believer,” approaches the pastor, publicly or privately, and declares that he or she is ready to accept Christ as his or her personal savior. The believer then expresses interest to the pastor in being baptized. Due to logistical concerns and utility costs, the church conducts group baptisms a couple of times a year to serve interested believers. During my time attending the church, I have attended one baptism ceremony in which seven believers were baptized. Often when a new member joins the church, they are asked if they want to be baptized at the next ceremony. Many times the adult member requests to be baptized, even if they have been baptized earlier in life, because the believer feels that he or she has not actively walked with Christ in many years. During the baptism ceremony that I attended, members of the youth ministry (middle school and high school age) represented the largest contingent of those baptized. Most of the participants wore a white robe with some form of swimwear underneath. Those who are being baptized are called up to the pool, which has a window over the altar that faces out

over the sanctuary. Pastor Randy briefly introduces the person being baptized and asks if they are prepared to reject the temptations of Satan and follow Christ. He then addresses the believer as his “brother (or sister) in Christ,” and baptizes him “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” As Deacon Pete understands, believer’s baptism is a way to symbolically follow Christ:

We do not believe that baptism has any salvation in it. It’s just the matter that we followed Christ in baptism. He was baptized. By John the Baptist. And that’s why we go through that, and it’s symbolic. You die to the old, and you’re resurrected to the new.

Baptism therefore is one of the few liturgical holdovers from the Catholic Church, but as Brackney points out, John Smyth and the early Baptists of the 16th century chose to incorporate believer’s baptism into the rites of the church to reinforce their status as a “true church of true believers” (2009: 51). Baptists are taught the Bible and are taught to interpret scripture and to make the Word alive to them, and then are taught to seek baptism only after they feel that they know enough about following Christ to follow Christ in baptism.

Prayer and Healing

“At our church your past will never define your future. There’s always redemption, which means there’s always a brighter day” - From “Welcome to Our Church” video featured at the beginning of Sunday worship services (Sermon Spice n.d.)

It is with some reservation that I say that members of the congregation use prayer as a “tool” for healing and coping with hardship, although Mark himself calls prayer the “biggest tool that God gave us.” Prayer engages the senses and affect of the individual at a number of levels. As Lisa said, prayer to her is “just like having skin on.” Members of the congregation report that prayer, and their personal relationship with

Jesus as well as their fellowship with other believers, have helped them cope with a multitude of struggles, not limited to financial hardship, depression, and loss of loved ones. Mark describes how he interprets God's work in answering prayers for healing, and how death is sometimes the answer to that prayer:

We pray for healing – well, death is a way of healing. It is an escape from pain and agony, and all of that. So you have to look at it from that aspect. It may not be the way that we want it, but it's the way that he wants it. You have to put it in his perspective. It's like the old country song, "Thank God for Unanswered Prayers," if he answered every one of our prayers, the way that we prayed, I'd be in a world of hurt. All of us would be.

One of the most important things that church members emphasized was that the best way to display Christ's love toward the unchurched was to pray for them, or to ask if they had any prayer needs. Mary recounts that asking others about their prayer needs is often the first thing that she does when trying to share the Gospel with them:

We find that asking [the unchurched] if there's anything we can pray for them is not offensive; they seem to be very open and actually sometimes really shocked. "You want to pray for me?" It's almost like, "Only people that care pray," or something. So they seem to be really receptive with that, and then as you build a relationship with them, they're open to hearing why you do this, and then from there we can share about the love of Christ, the scripture talks about, "We love because he first loved us," and being able to share that.

Praying for someone else's needs, as the believer experiences the relationship, not only allows the believer to share the love of Christ with the unsaved individual for whom they are praying. The believer experiences what Brennan (2003) calls a transmission of affect by experiencing the other person's suffering or needs as their own as a disciple of Christ. By directly communicating with God through prayer for others, and with others the believer is reinforcing her own faith in Christ by making a direct personal emotional investment in seeing that God answers the prayer needs for the individual for whom she is praying. With prayer, affects are both attached and enacted as the believer feels the

love of Christ in her heart, and shares the love of Christ by surrendering her body to do his work.

CHAPTER 4 – SPREADING THE “GOOD NEWS”: EVANGELISM

While the idea of the priesthood of the believer and the freedom of interpretation by the reader was being discussed by theologians from the Protestant Reformation – and Southern Baptists would argue, was being practiced by the ministry of Christ and the apostles – most scholars situate the shift in some denominations toward what is now specifically classified as an evangelical style of ministry in the nineteenth century (Rosenberg 1989, Crapanzano 2000, Harding 2000, Luhrmann 2012.a). Central to the Southern Baptist concept of the Great Commission, as well as the subject of many of the sermons and the goal of many of the outreach programs, is to tell others about the Gospel with the focus on expanding God’s kingdom.

Affect is important in spreading the Gospel to others because in addition to explicitly telling the unsaved about the Gospel, the believer is ultimately trying to share the love of Christ with the individual to whom she is trying to reach. Sharing the love of Christ can be accomplished by conducting oneself the way that scripture says that Christ lived. *Witnessing* and *sharing testimony* are some of the ways that born-again Christians share the Gospel, or the “good news,” to others. Evangelism is the component of the Southern Baptist’s life that most directly affects how the believer interacts with others who are not associated with the church.

Witnessing

*God sent his son
They called him Jesus
He came to love
Heal and forgive
He lived and died
To buy my pardon
An empty grave*

*Is there to prove
My Savior lives*

*Because he lives
I can face tomorrow
Because he lives
All fear is gone
Because I know
He holds the future
And life is worth the living
Just because he lives (from *Because He Lives*, hymn by Bill & Gloria
Gaither)*

Witnessing is the term Southern Baptists use to describe when a believer shares the Gospel with another individual. A close analog to witnessing that is also used interchangeably to mean the same action is *praising God*. Witnessing can be accomplished by a number of ways, and many publication houses provide a variety of tools, such as visual aids, tracts, pamphlets, posters, cards, with the intent of making the encounter with the unsaved easier and more accessible to the individual to whom the believer is ministering. During my fieldwork, one visiting church sent a group of missionaries to assist in a door-to-door campaign to collect information about the community and invite households to a church block party. I was accompanying two visiting missionaries on a neighborhood walk while they were using one such visual aid, a tool called the “EvangCube” (E3 Resources n.d.). The EvangCube is a folding cube with images that are designed to be viewed while the person witnessing explains a couple of key passages of scripture that accompany the images. The object itself looks similar to a Rubik’s cube or some other small puzzle. One possible use of the EvangCube, according to one reviewer on the product’s website, is to place the cube on an office desk and when visitors begin playing with the cube, the believer can explain the scriptural passages designed to accompany the images.

As part of the door-to-door campaign, we collected age and household demographic information in the community. We visited 18 houses and had four people take our survey. One household that took the survey was a white male who claimed no religious affiliation, and revealed that he saw the church as a valuable part of the community but had no interest in becoming a member at this time because he felt that many religious figures had hurtful opinions on marriage equality. As one of the visiting missionaries recited the scriptural passages associated the EvangeCube and shared the illustrations with him, he stared at the device with a look that I can only describe as curious discomfort. He did express interest in attending a church block party, and took a brochure. The missionaries whom I was accompanying spoke with each other after speaking to this man and felt that “a seed had been planted.” Mary offers comments that affirm the idea that sometimes she just has to be satisfied with planting the seed:

I’ve had people who have said, “No, I don’t want to hear it,” but then later have come back and said that they thought about it, or I’ve shared the Gospel with someone and they’ve said that they didn’t receive it, but years later, I found out that somebody else came along and confirmed what I had said. It’s not all about us anyways, God uses each one of us. But there is just something so powerful when you see someone go from death into life, and to thrive. We were never meant to just survive, and then whatever comes our way, that’s it. That’s a humanistic way of thinking and that’s not what God called us to. And it’s because of that – I never saw myself as an evangelist, but the more that I understood that evangelism was just sharing the message, the story of God’s love for us, and how much we mean to him, and how valued we are. The more I saw that, and knowing what he’s done in my life, I realized, “How could I stay silent?” Like I said, I have lived in closed countries, I’ve been spit on, I’ve had people threaten me, and things like that, but it was worth it, because that one that ends up giving their life to the Lord, and seeing that it’s not about you; it’s about what God’s done in their life; it’s worth it, it is so worth it, and I’ll do it again till the day I die.

Some of the other members of the congregation have some reservations about sharing the Gospel in certain environments. Mary reports that when she had her “secular job”

as a child welfare caseworker, she was a bit more hesitant to share the Gospel in the workplace. Lisa has similar reservations about talking about God in her workplace, but she likes to “pepper” her conversations with it.

I don't know that I'm really overt, but I pepper my conversations with it. I have a friend at work, we were both really concerned about the last political process when we elected a president [in 2012], and we'd talk about world things, and I kind of throw God in there. I just let her know that God's important in my life and other people, I let them know that God's important in my life, but I just try to feel people out and pray about it. When I feel like people need to hear the Gospel, I'll tell it, but mostly I'm just kind of low-key about it.

The idea of conducting oneself as a Christian as a form of evangelism is cited by many members of the congregation. Mark reports that in addition to conducting himself as a Christian, he offers to pray for people and invites them to church with him:

I always let people know that I am a Christian. I try to act as a Christian should around anybody that I'm around at any particular time. And I try to let them know that if they have any situations or any problems that they need to come to me. And I usually ask them if they're attending church, or something of that nature, but I always invite them to the church that's closest to wherever I am at that particular time.

Mark and Lisa's preferred method of evangelizing is by example is a form of what Brennan (2003) calls the transmission of affect. Brennan (2003) explains the transmission of affect as multiple affects encountering each other in a group and creating new affective experiences as a result of the encounter.

Sharing Testimony

Part of the personal relationship with God that the congregation identifies as a uniquely Southern Baptist trait is the sharing of testimony to others to affirm the work of the living God and the success of prayer. I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis that the members of the congregation hoped that speaking to me would give them

a chance to share their testimony with others, and in this subchapter I explain what testimony means.

Testimony can most accurately be described as a narrative of the events that have highlighted an individual's spiritual journey. A person's testimony may include a period of rebellion or lapse in faith, or a narrative about their decision to accept Christ as their savior. It is not uncommon to hear born-again Christians speak about or celebrate their "re-birthday," meaning the day that they chose to accept Christ. Easter 2013, for example, marks Mary's 16th re-birthday, and the re-birthday is something that some believers – especially those who are growing sensitive about their age – might share more enthusiastically with others than their legally documented birthday.

The environment that prompts a person to share their testimony can vary. Mary recalls an instance when she felt compelled to share her testimony with a young woman whom she saw something "off" in. As a child welfare caseworker who was also a Christian, she had been asked to speak at a church in a community that had been experiencing problems lately. She ended up nixing her original topic entirely:

When I got up to the pulpit, I saw this young woman, who must have been 19 years old I think she was, and she just looked like she had dead eyes. That there was just this sadness, this deep sadness in her. And it so overwhelmed me when I saw that, and I just felt that God laid on my heart that what I was originally going to speak on, not to. And that I needed to share my testimony with her, and to be able to share the love of Christ. And so I shared my testimony because I myself had tried to commit suicide many, many times. In fact, so much so that I actually have been in the hospital many times when I was younger, because of it. And I just shared that; I shared openly and I shared how Jesus not only gave me an eternal future, but he gave me a hope and a future now. At first the pastor was upset with me because he didn't understand why I did it and I shared with him what was going on and he didn't understand it, because he knew the girl and he didn't know this was going on with her, but she ended up coming up to me and asked me if what I said, if I really believed it. And then I got to share more of my story, but then I got to talk about the Lord and how – because a lot of times when you're suicidal you believe there's

no hope, the pain is so intense; you just want it to end. It's not even that you're thinking about death. And we got to talking about that, and that we can choose life because he's given us a purpose and he loves us unconditionally. I remember just in that moment that she had told us that she had planned on going home to commit suicide. But that she felt that God loved her. And that she had decided that her life did have purpose, and she gave her life to the Lord. And it was just amazing, because I literally got to see someone who was on the verge of death turn and be saved by God, like I said, not just eternally but *right there*. And she ended up doing really, really well, because the pastor was right there and saw that they got to disciple her, and since then I've actually seen that happen a lot. God has put me in a lot of crisis ministries.

In this instance, sharing testimony with another person not only served as a way for Mary to attempt to share the Gospel with this young girl, but also reaffirmed her own faith in a living God and the potential for a personal relationship with Christ to permanently transform the girl's life and save her from her own struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts.

For these Southern Baptists, God is not just a metaphysical concept, but rather someone whom they actually see working in their own lives everyday. The believer's body is a site of both affective attachments and affective enactments (Richard and Rudnyckj 2009: 59). The believer feels God's love and feels God working through himself. When Southern Baptists share the good news of God's love through witnessing or sharing their testimony, they seek to see God's love reflected in the people whom they are trying to reach, and they seek to be imbued so deeply with God's love that they embody that love toward the people whom they encounter.

CHAPTER 5 – EXPANDING “GOD’S KINGDOM”: DISCIPLESHIP IN THE COMMUNITY

The next aspect of evangelism as Southern Baptists are taught involves teaching others to pray and creating new “disciples” in Christ. This process is slightly different from a simple attempt at conversion, as a central point to the Southern Baptist doctrine is self-conversion as manifested in the act of believer’s baptism. The SBC opposes the practice of infant baptism, as the SBC believes that infant baptism does not involve a conscious choice by the believer to accept Christ as his or her personal savior (SBC n.d.b.).

The central aspect of discipleship is learning to live the Bible and teaching other people how to use the Bible to guide their lives. Southern Baptists believe that directly communicating with God through prayer throughout the process of learning the Bible is essential to experiencing the Word. Being a disciple in Christ refers to living one’s life as Christ lived. Since the SBC affirms the priesthood of all believers, imitating Christ’s life is open to interpretation by the believer himself.

Discipleship also refers to community involvement. Members associate discipleship with participation and planning in church activities, and establishing relationships with one another, with members of the community, and with new potential members of the church. These potential church members may already be established believers who want to get involved in the community, or they may be members of the community who are seeking out church as a way to get involved in their community. The goal in incorporating community involvement into a church is to

establish a semiotic, living, working relationship between the church and the community.

Mary shared her observations with me about the role that the personal relationship with God that Southern Baptist churches advocate, and how an understanding and “living out” that relationship provides the best path to creating new disciples, in her experience:

There’s a huge difference between just telling someone about Jesus, and actually making disciples. Discipleship is what the modern-day idea of mentoring is. We see Big Brothers/Big Sisters, or we see where even internships; I’m interested in this kind of job or this career field so I become an intern to learn more about it, and somebody takes me under their wing and teaches me more about that field and everything like that. Well, discipleship is like that but it’s so much more intimate, because you’re sharing life with other Christians and you’re going to church, and you’re doing community projects and missions, but through that you’re also learning more and more about God, and his love, and seeing that played out through other people as well. [...] And I found that with the Southern Baptists, that they understood the idea of discipleship; that that was so important; that it wasn’t just about – in the Southern Baptists, there’s a term called “fire insurance policy,” where if you just share Jesus, you accept Jesus, you don’t go to hell. That’s it; you don’t do anything else. Maybe you go to church, maybe you don’t go to church. But that was never what it was about; it’s about relationship, but in order to have a relationship you have to live life in the love and in the knowledge of God, and seeking him out on how to live and choices in your life, and that plays out into worship and that plays out into ministry, because who you see yourself in God ends up impacting your whole life, and all the choices that you make. And I just felt like with other churches there wasn’t a strong sense of discipleship; they might have the theology, “let’s study the Bible like, ‘the Greek word means this,’ or ‘the Hebrew word means this,’” but never about how to live life through this, and what does this mean to *my* life, and that I don’t have to do this all by myself; I can share it with someone.

The members of the congregation report that successfully creating new disciples requires a reflexive understanding of the involvement and makeup of the congregational body itself. Mark says:

The church to me is not that important, per se. It's the people within the church that are important to reach out to the community. The church can't reach to the community unless the people who are in it can. There's too many churches today that are just unsaved. You've seen them. They're everywhere. There's one just up the street, just to show you what the difference is, the only people they welcome is gay people. If you're not gay, you're not welcome there. I mean, that's not right either. That's the clique. "You're not part of us, therefore you're judging us." Therefore you're judging *me*. I don't like people that judge other people. I've been down that road.

When referring to their approach in telling others about the Gospel, members of the congregation often reference what has become known as "the Great Commission," a text from the Book of Matthew in the New Testament of the Bible which calls on believers to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19 NKJV). The Great Commission has been emphasized in many Baptist publications and missions programs lately, and the most recent name change suggested by the SBC Name Change Task Force has been to change the name of the organization to "Great Commission Baptists" (SBC n.d.f.).

Deacon Pete posits that many of the people who moved into the neighborhood after the 1970s – a period that he refers to as the neighborhood's "transition" – are more frequently unchurched or were not raised in a Christian environment than was the case in the 1960s when he began attending Moreland Heights. Pete was raised in a Baptist family, and he and his wife moved into the neighborhood in the 1950s. After a few years, when they were expecting their first child, they decided that it was time to look for a church for their family. Since they had friends that already attended Moreland Heights, his transition into the congregation seemed like a natural fit to him. Mark and Lisa were also Baptists prior to moving into the community, and they lived across the

street from the pastor of Moreland Heights during their time living in the neighborhood. The fact that many of the community members were not raised in church at all, much less evangelical churches, can make entering the congregation seem excessively foreign and overwhelming to outsiders. William's introduction to the church is an example that the pastor often cites in energizing the congregation to go out into the community and witness to the community and invite people to church:

[Before I joined Moreland Heights] my background basically was just living a life each day, going to work, and trying to make ends meet and trying to take care of things like that. The thing that led me to come to this church was that I always had a background and had been raised in church and taught the Bible as a child, and so those two things played a big part of me coming to this church. That, and the fact that the pastor came and knocked on the door one day and invited me.

The idea that "sometimes you just have to ask" is circulated as a message to alleviate anxiety among the members of the congregation.

On the other hand, the incorporation of people who were raised unchurched and whose life experiences led them to become born-again, such as Mary, provides a different set of experiences to attract new congregants. The common theme in finding a church home and becoming involved in the community that the congregation members emphasize is that they want to be involved in a church with people who are similar to them. Since Mark and Lisa allocate their church involvement between Moreland Heights and another church closer to their current home, the two churches have very different make-ups. They report that their church in the suburbs has roughly 800 people in a typical Sunday service. In searching for a church, Mark wants to ensure that if he is going to be putting effort into the church, he wants to make sure that the leadership is involved in operations enough to recognize the effort that its members put in:

It's maybe an *average* suburban church of about 800 attendance on Sunday service. A megachurch would be something like WorldChangers, Creflo Dollar's big church, where they have 2000 at their worship service on Sunday morning. That's a megachurch to me. Don't get me wrong, every church that I've ever been to, if the pastor doesn't know my name – my first name – I do not want to be a part of that church. If I'm going to be a member of a church, I'm going to put the work into the church, I want people to know who I am. Not just somebody. Not just a face.

For an individual who seeks a church home where the church leaders know your name and recognize your efforts, the small community church like Moreland Heights would fill that need.

“I'd Like to Invite You to My Church this Sunday”

The language that the congregation uses in developing discipleship is not so much based on *conversion* so much as an *invitation*. The congregants *invite* people to visit their church on Sunday, they *invite* people to pray with them as they are trying to help them on their “journey toward Christ,” they *invite* people to answer the altar call at the end of service (the altar call is alternately called the *invitation* portion of the service), and there is an open invitation for anyone to share their testimony at any point that they feel moved by the Lord to do so.

Mary is a new addition to Moreland Heights. Mary has formal educational background in missions, with training in inductive Bible study through Precept Ministries International. She received an undergraduate degree in social work with a certificate in child welfare. She is currently finishing a Masters in Divinity degree in Evangelism and Church Planting from Liberty University after changing her program of study from Family Counseling. She moved from Florida in the early fall of 2012 after visiting Moreland Heights on a mission trip through their megachurch in Florida with her husband.

I didn't go to church right away; it was like two years before I went to church, but I read the Bible and everything, and as I read the Bible I kept reading over and over about believers coming into congregation, coming together, and I longed for that, and then eventually I found a church. I started off in a Southern Baptist church and through that, got disciplined – that's a really big thing in the Southern Baptist church, not just evangelism but discipleship, which is learning how to live out Christ in your life, and learning about the Bible and how to apply that to your life and your relationships with others.

One thing that attracts many of the congregants to the Southern Baptist interpretation of the Bible is their belief that 1) the Bible is true and “living,” i.e. can still be applied and interpreted to problems that individuals encounter today, and 2) they believe that at Moreland Heights, they do not need to “water down” or compromise on the message. When Mary was searching for a permanent church family after becoming newly born-again, she became involved in several congregations with different denominational affiliations:

I didn't grow up in the church, and so I didn't know about all these denominations, and so I started reading the Bible, and the Bible didn't talk about denominations or “Thou shalt go Catholic” or “Thou shalt go this,” and so as I was growing in the Lord as a Christian and as the years went on, I started wondering about other denominations. So I had learned about it, and I had tried joining the Assemblies of God, which is like a Pentecostal, and there were things about it that I really liked, and I was actively involved in the youth ministry, but I didn't – there were some things I didn't agree with, I read the Bible and I didn't see it; I didn't understand – not to the point where I didn't agree with them or anything like that, but I just felt like it just wasn't right where my sweet spot was [...] But I feel like what changed me from having a hard life and being the girl in the druid and the occult, and living the life with all the wrong choices was the more that I studied the Word and understood who God was and had that relationship with him, the stronger I became; the more I was able to make better choices; I had peace, joy, and I can say even at times happiness because of it. In some of these denominations I found that they would have aspects, like they might be community-minded or they might be mission-minded, but the Word itself most – even the leadership – either they doubted the Bible as being true, or they questioned different parts of it, or they just didn't use it in their life; it was just on a Sunday or a Wednesday, and that was it. But it was such a powerful change in my life, and I felt like that was missing.

The personal relationship with a living God and the engagement with the living Word through a non-diluted interpretation and engagement with the text of the Bible is a key part of the experience of being born-again in Christ to the members of the congregation. However, there are many times when church members are asked to close their Bibles and just *experience* the living God. The experience of God's presence occurs primarily through prayer as an individual or as a group.

Church Planting and the Community Church

The term *church planting* refers to the process of establishing a community of believers to create disciples in their own community. Church planting in a community church relies heavily on the immediate geographic area surrounding the church.

Many of the members of the congregation agreed that maintaining a congregation whose makeup was reflective of the community around them was central to successfully expanding discipleship. In the early days of the church, its membership was based around being a walking-distance church. Today, many of the congregation members originally joined when they lived walking-distance from the church, but now commute. Mark and Lisa lived in the neighborhood and headed the youth ministry from 1976 until 1984, when they moved to the suburbs. After moving to the suburbs, they would visit occasionally but the distance was too great to come with any regularity. They considered joining the church to be an important part of their community involvement. Mark recalls:

We moved right up the street. We could walk to church. We lived right across the street from the pastor. We were newly married and we felt like we needed to be part of the community, number one. And it seemed like the easiest way to become a part of the community was to meet people in the church. It's hard to meet – with everybody working, in today's time –

men and women both working out of the house, it's very difficult to meet people – like your neighbors – unless you have a common ground. And that's what we did; we decided to come to this church because it was the only active church in the area. And both of us were Baptists at the time.

When Pete joined the church, some of the charter members of the church were still living. He recalls the reasons for founding the church and the challenges of adapting to changes in the community:

This church was built because people lived within walking distance from it. They wanted to walk to church. And they filled it up. But during the transition which really began in the '70s, and the neighborhood is fairly stable now, but all of that has changed. The people living in the area now, most of them don't have church background. This is totally foreign to them. They're not interested in the church, whether it be Baptist or what. The world we live in, the most important thing now is – excuse me – getting that degree, to get a better thing to present to your next employer, to make more money, and we all want to make more money. Nobody's more interested in that than I am. And the spiritual side is missing as best I can tell, but there is a lot of interest in religion per se. And whether wanting to be a born-again Baptist is one of them is debatable in this neighborhood.

Moreland Heights has been struggling to heal its image in the community after a previous history of exclusionary politics in its membership. According to Lisa, Moreland Heights was an all-white congregation when she and Mark lived in the neighborhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

When we were here in the '70s, it was a white, inner-city church. And there are people from back then who would probably be flabbergasted to walk in now and see the different cultures and different races, and we like it better now because now – the neighborhood was starting to change into that back then, in the beginning stages, but a lot of those people weren't welcome here because they still wanted the church to be the way it was in the '40s and the '50s, but the neighborhood changes. Now, Moreland Heights looks more like the community that it's sitting in, and I think that's important. It needs to reflect the community. Everybody's welcome here. And before, in the '70s, if you asked them point blank, they'd say, "Sure, everybody's welcome," but it really wasn't true. And the truth is that if people like that would have come in, there would have been people who would have been openly hostile to them, not everybody. But that's the greatest change I see is that the church now looks like the community it's

sitting in, which is good because that means it's going to be able to minister to the community that it's sitting in. That's really important.

One important thing to consider is that there still exists enough of a separation of church and state to where churches do not have to admit any individual that they choose not to admit. Mark and Lisa said that the exclusionary nature of the church really only began improving around 2002 or 2003.

The reason [for the shift in the church] is because it got down to so few members – and to be perfectly honest with you, most of the people that are here now were not the ones that were opposing changes. A lot of the change happened when old members finally died off. God took care of the problem. He took them home, the way I look at it. He eliminated them out of the situation; he brought us down to our knees, to where we were down to 20, 25 members, just barely hanging on. That's when Randy came. He came about 2006, 2007, somewhere around there. But it was really bad. You could walk in the church and you would smell mildew, where water damage had been accumulated, and they would just let it go. But Randy came in and then he said, "We're down, and we gotta do something." And we started doing stuff. And through some other people, and some other members, and some sister churches in other states, they're bringing it back.

Mark explains that there have been many drastic changes in the way that the church has reached out to the community, that have helped in Randy's mission to revive the church, particularly in how the members perceive the presence of minorities and single mothers.

I feel like the church is reaching out to the community more than it did in the past. *Really* reaching out. Before it was like a clique. If you belonged, you belonged, and if you didn't, you didn't. When I first came here, I had real long hair. Almost as long as yours. But I worked with the youth, and so I kept it long. But the thing about it is, it took a long time for some people to accept me. Because they were judging me – not by here [points to his heart], but by outward things. Because today, we see more outreach to the community, as it used to be, like Lisa said, it used to be a vanilla church, and now it's a fudge-ripple. We've got guitars on the pulpit, on the platform. And drums, oh Lord, that would have never happened. And things like that. But see, that doesn't change what you're trying to do. You're adapting, but you're not changing. You keep your strong doctrine and your faith and what you believe, but then you reach out to the community. And you accept them. That's the biggest thing. I'll be perfectly honest with you, if you had come here, back in the late '70s and

early '80s, you would not feel as welcome here as you do today. Because of the beard and because of the long hair. That's just the way it was, Brandon. That's just the way those people were. They were just white, middle-class folks and they wanted to keep it that way. I had deacons – quote, “deacons” – who told me that kids of single parents, that were not married, were not welcome in the church, because they were illegitimate. And I'd say, “What?!” I mean, I was a youth worker, and I was trying to reach these kids, and they were telling me that they weren't welcome in the church. I turned right around to that deacon and I said this – I went to the pastor afterward and he had to apologize – I said to that deacon, I said, “There's no such thing as an illegitimate child. There are illegitimate parents, but the child didn't have a choice. He was born. And we're trying to reach them. Don't put restrictions on me.” We used to tell them that we needed to do things that appealed to the neighborhood, and we kind of got the impression that they thought we were saying “water-down the doctrine,” but it's like, “No! No! We just need to do what the community needs.” You've got to accept them, you've got to bring them in, you've got to live with them, you've got to find out what their problems are, what their situations are, you've got to help them as much as you can in your life. Because it's happening now; there's a bunch of young people out here. And we're multi-cultural. It's not all white. I'll be perfectly honest with you, I tried to bring black kids in, “Oh man. No, we don't want to associate with those.”

With its newfound “fudge-ripple” congregation, with a large representation of single-parent households and children and youth from single-parent households, Moreland Heights is the site of what missions experts call a *re-plant*. The term re-plant refers to a church that was once the site of a thriving congregation that has since died. The re-plant involves cultivating a new membership using some key members who have stayed on as a basis for the re-plant. Mary describes how re-planting works from the perspective of an individual who is formally trained in church planting:

We might use the same name, but the way that we do church is totally different. The problem is that originally the church that was here before, they were very closed to the community. They were not welcoming, and they hurt a lot of relationships. There used to be the neighborhood watch here, and there used to be the community development association that used to meet here, and the old church kicked them out, and part of it is because in this community we have a lot of homosexual households here, and the church, previously, was very, “No, you're not going to be here,” and just cut off the relationships. With this church, it's been very slow, it's

been very slow. Before I came here, Randy and the staff had been working really, really hard to build relationships. [...] But after the Christmas party [that the community development association held at the church] they donated some stuff for the Center [for HOPE], because we want to do a food drive in the community, and everything. But it took five years for this church to build new relationships, and to open up that door. And right now, resistance that we would have had otherwise; I think with the way the economy is, and most people are in such a dire situation, they're at a crisis point. And when you're at a crisis point, you will reach out to whoever will help you. And I think that through the Center, they find that when they come here to the church through the Center they find that we value them, and we care about them, and we're not just giving a handout. We actually want to see you go from *surviving* to actually *living*, and showing that you do have a hope and a future, and walking through. Over time, you find that people are very, very receptive to that. And I think as time goes on, I think we will end up getting more. Through the Center, I think that will be one of those things that will be a huge bridge-builder for the community as well.

One thing that I picked up in tone speaking with Mary that might not make itself immediately obvious is that when she refers to "this church," it's almost as though she is implying that it is a completely different entity now than it used to be. That seems to be the nature of the re-plant. Mary, having only been a member of the Moreland Heights congregation for a short time, could not speak from firsthand experience on the shift to a more inclusionary congregation, but she had some comments in defense of the common negative perceptions of Southern Baptist churches:

I love the fact that within the Southern Baptist church, even though their history has been colorful at times, so has humanity. Man at times can be very good, and sometimes very very very bad. But the thing is about the Southern Baptists that the whole idea is to go and make disciples, so that people can have not just religion, but a personal relationship with God. And that's something that makes Christianity different from any other religion. And that's something that the Southern Baptists understand.

Members understand that the Moreland Heights congregation is continually encountering new challenges to its ability to connect with the community, and by the members' own admission the congregation has had a not-too-distant history of nearly

discriminating itself out of existence. However, the congregation members continually dialogue over these issues as they are encountered. Homosexuality is one issue that is a reality in the community that Moreland Heights is situated within. While views on the role of homosexuals in the church vis-à-vis leadership roles and ministering to “correct” the lifestyle varies in the church – as Deacon Pete says, “If you get two Baptists in an elevator, you have three opinions” – the church recognizes that homosexuals are a significant portion of the community and that they do need to be included and welcomed into the church. During my time with the church, there have been several openly homosexual individuals and households who have attended services and even returned for repeat services, but never any openly homosexual individuals or households who have caught on and become permanent members. So whether they *feel* welcomed is still debatable. Deacon Pete admits that he does not have much experience engaging in dialogue with homosexual populations:

I didn't know anything about homosexuality until I got in the service in 1951. Never heard of it. Didn't know there was such a thing. But of course it's existed since time immemorial. And my first experience of it was, I worked in the office, was lucky with that; although I was born and raised in the country, I didn't like to hunt, didn't like to fish, didn't like any of that stuff. I wound up – we had typing in shorthand in high school. I learned how to type. And I wound up in the orderly room six weeks into basic training; I never finished basic training. There was a shortage in the army at that time of clerk typists. And two guys came in in a uniform that I didn't recognize and they said, “Do you have a Private so-and-so in this outfit?” and I said, “Yessir,” he said, “Send for him.” And they walked on in the C.O.'s [commissioned officer] office, and they sent for him, brought him in, and he left and we never saw him again. He'd been reported as making homosexual contacts in the company. Never saw him again; I guess they drummed him out of the service, I don't know what they did. That was my first experience, I said, “My God, what is that?” And then, on the other side of the ledger, I got to see all of these semi-classified documents, and there was a guy down at the hospital “faking it,” as an investigative officer, investigating lesbianism in the nurse corps. And he got caught up with it. And I said, “Well what's that?” [hearty chuckle] That's how dumb I was. Well anyhow, the point I'm making here is this. I

don't know whether I'm making a point or not. We're covered up in that lifestyle. And the Bible is very clear, that ancient book: it's an abomination to the Lord. And that is repeated in the Old Testament. And then you ask yourself, "Well, is the act itself an abomination, or the fact that they can't procreate the abomination?" Which is it? And then we have the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah. Well, fire rained down and destroyed the city because of the crass conduct of the people. Some people try to prove that scientifically it might have been a meteor that did that, and yada yada yada, and I don't know what to make of all that. But we're stuck with that. It's not that the person is not to be loved; it's the act of the sin. Love the person, but you know, a guy might be a drunkard. So I mean, just love the person and hate the conduct. I don't know [...] What we have, in the area, not all together, but the higher-income people, generally speaking, really don't have a church background. And to try to interest them in the church is just hard-rock mining. I mean, it's really difficult. And you see what our congregation is on Sunday morning. And they're welcome. By all means, they're welcome.

The presence of homosexuals, telecommuters, the previously unchurched, and higher-income households – sometimes all in the same household, or identities possessed by the same individual – have been the neighborhood demographics that the church has struggled to minister to the most. The church's challenges may be due to unconscious projections of a not-quite-welcome attitude toward these types of households. When I walked the neighborhood with the visiting missionaries, I did not detect any hostility in the missionaries toward the man who mentioned that views on marriage equality and homosexuality were important reasons that were keeping him away from church. But the reality is that they have not been able to maintain membership from openly homosexual households, so perhaps these households are coming in to give the church a try and simply are not seeing a good "fit," as I was discussing earlier in this chapter.

The "Church Family"

The congregation members often use the term *church family* to refer to the body of believers and individuals affiliated with the church. This term is used more broadly

than to simply refer to the registered members of the church. When Pastor Randy sends out his text messages containing urgent prayer requests, special event reminders, or scriptures to read in advance in preparation for the Sunday sermon, he always begins the text message by addressing the receiver of the message as “Church family.” The term church family can be used to encompass the guests, regularly attending non-members, people who work with or contribute time to any of the various ministries or programs, or people who pray for the church or its members.

During the time that I spent with the Moreland Heights congregation, the church transformed drastically in membership, in scheduled activities, and most of all, in the general “feel” and atmosphere of the people in the congregation. One of the more controversial changes occurred late in my fieldwork, approximately a month prior to my final informant interview. During a business meeting, the pastor proposed a resolution to remove the word “Baptist” from the name of the church on its sign, website, and logo. The church would retain its affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention and continue contributing to Baptist causes and cooperative efforts. The resulting change would make the church’s official name, “Moreland Heights Church.” When the congregation was debating this decision, many people expressed concerns that the message of the church was going to be watered-down, or that the church was caving to the “stigma” of being seen as conservative or outdated by the community. The pastor reassured the congregation that the message was going to stay the same; the church would continue to be affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and that the monies allocated to the Southern Baptist Convention Missions Board and the resources that the church was providing to Baptist causes were the highest they had been in the past decade.

The debate got heated, and attendance dropped for the first couple of Sundays after the church's name was changed. However, most of the people who vocalized their opposition to the name change continued to attend during these next couple of Sundays. The name change did occur during cold and flu season, and several households were also travelling during this time. The long-term effects of this change have yet to be determined. But the primary goal in the name change was to reinforce to the community that Moreland Heights was a *community* church, and that potential members should not feel dissuaded simply because they grew up unchurched or did not grow up Baptist. The church wanted to reinforce that it was a "Bible-believing" church that emphasized the personal relationship with Christ, and not a church that emphasized "religion," a synonym in the Southern Baptist context with liturgy, which Rosenberg (1989) identifies as a central theme throughout the history of Southern Baptist theology.

CHAPTER 6 – “TO JERUSALEM, JUDEA, SAMERIA, AND THE ENDS OF THE EARTH”: MISSIONS

While conversations at the national level of SBC leadership place great emphasis on foreign missions, as exemplified through the strength of the SBC Foreign Mission Board and the annual Lottie Moon Christmas offering drives (to both of which Moreland Heights is a financial contributor), much of the mission work conducted by the church and at the church originates in the personal networks and relationships cultivated by the congregation itself. Many times, a church will visit another church for the purpose of helping with a summer vacation Bible school, a summer revival drive, a food drive, or some other event that requires more human resources than the individual church’s membership can typically sustain. Moreland Heights finds itself with a staff that actively seeks to grow the membership and minister to the community, but its membership is small and the church itself is situated in a densely populated community. Furthermore, many of the active members joined at a time when they did live in close proximity to the church, but now commute to attend church. Some of the members who still live in close proximity to the church are older people with limited mobility. Therefore, in order to conduct some larger-scale projects, the church utilizes help from visiting missionaries from other churches. The visiting missions groups during the time that I conducted my fieldwork came from places such as Charleston, South Carolina and Ft. Myers, Florida. Likewise, Moreland Heights has sent missionaries to coastal Louisiana and to Kenya to aid in church-planting efforts in those locations, and individuals with prior missionary experience in Haiti, Bosnia, and Israel have joined the church.

The term *mission field* is used to describe the community surrounding a mission site. The mission field can be a site of exchange of commodity goods, such as a canned food bank or building a freshwater well for a village, or a site of exchange for cultural capital, such as regional music or the Gospel. James Clifford (1997) has termed these types of exchanges translocal, because the exchanges do not occur in a universal vacuum but rather as the result of specific encounters and circulations of knowledge among the interacting populations.

I argue that the relevance of mission work in the affects of the Southern Baptist are most directly related to feeling a sense of fulfillment of the Great Commission. When born-again Christians feel in their hearts that they are doing God's work, it imbues the believer with an intense affective experience and disciplines and reaffirms him to use his body and his heart to serve Christ.

One aspect of the church that influenced Mary to feel called to Moreland Heights was its essence as a missional church. She explains that even smaller gestures can be used to express Christ's love and the goal of mission work:

We want to draw people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, through evangelism and discipleship, and then that is exhibited through the greeting cards or maybe driving to someone's house, to giving out food and clothing where it's needed.

The drive to share Christ's love with others can lead a believer to serve wherever she feels called on by the Lord until she finds the mission field that feels right for her. When Mark and Lisa moved south to the suburbs, they joined a church of a different denomination with a much larger membership. They continued to work with the youth in their new church, and would bring the youth group up to Moreland Heights for a

week-long vacation Bible school each summer. Ministering to people from other churches is also considered to be missional work.

International Missions

Keane notes that:

[S]ince churches are often linked to other churches across the globe, they are significant facilitators of global flows in their own right...so it is not enough for anthropologists to take note of Christianity only insofar as it forms an expression of purportedly *local* identity (2007: 45).

Jeremiah, the previous associate pastor of Moreland Heights was from Kenya, and upon completing his residency at Moreland Heights, he returned to Kenya to begin his own ministry. The church maintains communication with the family's ministry and has provided some human and monetary resources to the family's ministry in Kenya since Jeremiah's departure. Jeremiah's ministry currently meets under a tent in Kenya, and his family ministry is currently constructing a permanent building to house the church. Pastor Randy has reported that Jeremiah attributes his confidence in church planting and urban ministry to his experience at Moreland Heights. Prior to his residency at Moreland Heights, Jeremiah came from a ministry aligned with the Four Square Pentecostal movement that originated out of southern California, and brought with him a charismatic style of preaching and worshipping that others began to imitate and continue to imitate now.

Mary has worked on international missions trips in Bosnia in the late 1990s, following the Bosnian War, and for seven years in Israel in the early to mid 2000s during the Second Intifada. In Bosnia, she ministered primarily to Muslim children who were victims of the Bosnian war. Mary recalls her experience in the international mission field:

Both [Bosnia and Israel] are what they call closed countries. You can be a Christian and go there, but you can't talk about Jesus; you can't share the Gospel. But I knew that without Christ I was dead; I was just dead inside and there was no hope. And I knew that this love that he showed me; I needed to share that with others, and I was willing to take the risk and do that and saw amazing things happen with that.

While the conversations surrounding the type of mission work that Jeremiah and Mary have brought with them to Moreland Heights are happening globally, the work itself and their experiences with international mission work are a result of translocal interactions and circulations of ideas. Their experiences in the mission field have led others in the sites that they have visited and relocated to profess their faith in Christ. Seeing their own prayers answered and their own work through Christ has helped reaffirm their own faith. Further, sharing their testimony shows other believers that God is at work in their church and reaffirms the faith of others.

“Taking the City”: Inner-city Missions

One of the more recent additions to the Wednesday night family programs schedule that intrigued me enough to attend several meetings has been the “Taking the City” Bible study class taught by the associate pastor, Michael. The only other regular attendees of the class were Pastor Michael's wife, an elderly couple, and a middle-aged man. The class was originally conceptualized around the theme of evangelism and mission work within the community. The title of the class was designed to reflect both the goals of inner-city missions and the concept of “spiritual warfare.” Pastor Michael cites Philippians 2: 1-4 as guidance for the spiritual warfare goal of the class:

Therefore if *there is* any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let* nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of

mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others (NKJV).

One session of this class provided three videos: two examples of street evangelism encounters, as well as an account from atheist comedian Penn Jillette of a man who attempted to share the Gospel with him. The class was asked to comment on the pros and cons of the evangelism techniques described in each of the three videos, based on our immediate reactions to the videos.

The first video depicted a sight that many people who have spent time on a college campus might find familiar: A woman wearing brightly colored clothing with the words “Repent sinners” outside a Justin Bieber concert, shouting at the concertgoers in the queue line to get into the venue about the abominations of this world and picking some teenage girls out of the crowd to voice her disapproval at the girls’ choice of clothing (Crytgod 2012). Understandably, the crowd reacts in a hostile manner toward the street preacher using hostile language toward them, and by the end of the video, the interaction devolves into a shouting match.

The second video came from actor-turned-evangelist Kirk Cameron’s ministry, *The Way of the Master*. The video begins *in media res* with Cameron (2006) speaking with a man in the street about how the man feels about his life and his actions, and leads the man to call himself a sinner and invites him to accept himself as a sinner. Cameron (2006) slowly begins incorporating God into the conversation, and the man expressed doubt that God would accept his past. The video ends with Cameron (2006) inviting the man to pray on what the two discussed when he goes home. The man refers to his encounter with Cameron as a “wake-up call.”

The third video was an account from atheist comedian Penn Jillette (2009) about an encounter with someone after a performance that concluded with a man giving him a pocket New Testament. Jillette (2009) says that the man was not hostile toward him, and did not mention God when he was talking to him. The man simply ended the conversation by giving the Bible to Jillette and telling Jillette that he thought that it would help him. Jillette (2009) argues that people who genuinely believe something, whatever they may believe, should proselytize toward others. Jillette (2009) recalls that he later reflected on the encounter and concluded that he was indeed an avowed atheist, but he understood the love that Christians felt toward others. Jillette (2009) argues that if a Christian really felt strongly about someone they loved, and felt that as a Christian, he or she had something that he or she felt could help their loved one, that the Christian should feel compelled to share that with their loved one.

The class responded most positively to the techniques described in the second video, with a generally negative reaction to the narratives featured in either of the other two videos. The class praised Cameron's (2006) ability to speak to his subject succinctly, and to treat him with maturity. The class criticized the speaker in the first video for speaking in a condescending tone to the subjects, for speaking of a vengeful and judgmental God, and for directly engaging a group of teenage girls on their choice of clothing and criticizing the girls' parents for allowing their daughters to behave sinfully. The main problem that the class had with the third video revolved around Jillette's (2009) denial of the existence of God.

Pastor Michael's evangelism video exercise engages affects in a number of ways. As Massumi (2002) explains, involves a reaction to an image. If everyone in the class accurately reported their feelings in the way that Pastor Michael requested, by reporting

our initial reactions to the videos, we would be reporting our affects toward the images presented. When I watched the first video, I was reminded of the people who wear orange T-shirts and carry signs with provocative slogans that stand in the common areas of Georgia State University and shout statements denouncing coeducational housing and evolution. These people have always made me uncomfortable, but fortunately I have never had one of them directly address me the way that the person in the video addressed the girls who the speaker felt were dressed provocatively. When the second video played, I felt that Cameron (2006) was being rather confrontational toward a person with whom he had apparently never spoken before, but Cameron was cordial and friendly toward the subject of his encounter. Jillette's (2009) video testimony was the video that I found most interesting, and it was this video that my immediate reactions differed most from the reactions that the other members of the class reported. I was intrigued by the positive reaction that Jillette (2009) reported toward the man by whom he was being proselytized. The reactions that the rest of the class reported seemed most characteristic of intense affective responses – one class member seemed defensive toward the claim that Jillette did not believe in the existence of a God, another perceived a “mocking” tone when Jillette was describing the edition of the Gideon Bible that the man he encountered gave him. Pastor Michael steered the conversation to clarify that he intended for the class to focus on Jillette's reaction to being proselytized and how he received the message. However, Jillette's (2009) other claims made in the video directed the class members' reactions toward the claims that they found most disagreeable.

The “Taking the City” evangelism class emphasizes recent trends in regional and national mission networks toward *inner-city missions*. Inner-city missions focus on

administering to the unchurched, affluent cosmopolitan neighborhoods, impoverished communities, and neighborhoods that have problems with drugs, prostitution, and crime. Although there is a push to minister toward more affluent demographics, the church's attempts to minister toward the more affluent members of the community have not gained much traction to date. Mary, Mark, and Deacon Pete have all lamented this situation. Mark summarizes his view of ministering to the community:

The big thing now is inner-city missions. And to be perfectly honest with you, it's really difficult to minister in this community. One of the reasons is because you have some affluent people in this community, and you have some moderate-affluent people in this community, and then you have some really poor people in this community. Of course, we draw a lot of the poor people, and you work with them. But then the moderate-affluent people start seeing, and the moderate people want to be involved in it, and then the affluent people will start coming too. And I think times are changing, of course the way the government's taxing us we're all going to be poor before it's over with. But the thing we have to look at is that people's hearts are changing. Because everybody sees that everybody's struggling. I feel like what we're in right now is God's judgment on us. I mean, the situation of our country. I was sitting in a meeting, and I thought about this many, many times, how right after 9/11 – the big, World Trade Center thing – the churches were *packed*. Because people needed reassurance that everything was going to be okay. And that comes from God. And only God can give you that real reassurance. Man can't do it. And now we've wandered off again.

The church also houses a missions dormitory. There is a male dormitory room and a female dormitory room that are on opposite ends of the building from each other. The original idea behind constructing the missions dormitory was to establish a source of income so the church's finances are less reliant on tithing. The availability of the missions dormitories are listed through local and regional missions directories, and the dormitories are open to be rented to groups who are not Baptist, and who are not doing mission work in direct cooperation with Moreland Heights. With the emphasis in missions work on inner-city missions, the idea is that their location will be appealing as

a non-hotel accommodation, as the Moreland Heights dormitory facility was designed to be able to accommodate more missions workers with fewer chaperones.

HOPE and Opportunity

Moreland Heights is establishing a community outreach center that they call the Center for HOPE, with the initial primary focus being on serving the needs of single mothers, as a missional center for community outreach. After the individual requesting help completes a needs assessment to see how the church can best serve them. Mary is the coordinator of the project. Her background in social work and in church planting have driven her to seek contacts to aid families who request help from the Center in hardship situations.

The idea with the Center for HOPE, is that we are taking a holistic approach, that – just like God sees us mind, body, and spirit – that we meet everybody and understand that they are mind, body, and spirit, and so that’s what we try to address. Part of the body, is that a lot of the people here – there’s people that need food. In fact, here in Atlanta, 74 per cent of the households here are run by single mothers. Of that, 60 per cent of those households live below the poverty line. A lot of people think that, “Oh, because they’re mothers and they have kids that they can get food stamps and they get all this assistance and stuff.” But when someone is in crisis, especially if that’s all they’ve known, then you get very beaten down and you don’t know that there is help out there, or you don’t know the way to go. [...] Emotionally, we want to come alongside and give them encouragement and support. We can do some counseling here as a church; there’s a lot of different types of counseling that we can do, but if they do have depression or there are certain mental health issues, we’re going to connect them to community resources [...] The Center for HOPE is one of the best ways of being able to express the love of Christ and the mission of the church to be able to reach out into the community and not just to be here [...] the other thing is, I’ve already talked to several people, the goal is that we actually want to be able to – once we do the assessment – to take the food and the clothing to the people, instead of them having [to come here], because again, a lot of them don’t have transportation, but to actually be able to take it to them, because we can build relationships; we’re not just a cold agency; here it is, go off on your little way, but we can take it – “How are you doing? How can we pray for you? Is there anything

else that you need? How can we assist you further?” And to be able to build deeper relationships that way.

The goal with the Center for HOPE, as Mary has envisioned, is to provide a holistic “mind, body, and spirit” support for people in the community who are in need.

Assistance is provided by addressing commodity needs and mental health needs, as well as by providing prayer for a permanent solution to the person’s needs. The Center does not require a contribution to the church in return, but the goal of the Center is to show people that God is working to help them with their needs, and that prayer is the way to communicate with God and tell him their needs. The service that the Center for HOPE has most thoroughly developed to date is its food pantry. Deacon Pete believes that the church’s function as a social service is especially important in the city, as resources in the city make self-sufficiency more difficult than in rural areas:

I think it’s good, for example, this food bank we’ve got here getting off the ground. There are some people who just get in desperate situations, especially in the cities. More so than in the country. Now let me give you a for-instance, my background: We bought nothing in the household I was raised in, except sugar. Didn’t buy any meat; we raised that on the farm. Raised our vegetables. We might not have had any money, but we could eat. Chickens, eggs, pigs. My granddaddy would buy a so-called “mess of fish,” usually mullet, about every six months as a Saturday night supper treat. Raised everything else. We’d take the corn to the mill to grind the corn into cornmeal to make cornbread, took our wheat to the flour mill to be ground up into flour to be took home. They all traded on a barter basis. No money changed hands. And you can’t do that now.

The social services that the church provides function on a voluntaristic basis, often utilizing extra help from visiting missionaries or local mission networks. Recipients of charity or church services are not expected to return the aid per se, especially if it would continue to put undue strain on their finances, home life, or family. However, there is an understanding, as Mary quoted from scripture “We love because he first loved us,” so

the idea is ingrained that one should pay their blessings forward once they have the ability.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that examining the born-again experience in Southern Baptists can best be explained by exploring affect. Anthropological approaches to affect (Hirschkind 2006; Richard and Rudnycky 2009) have stressed the importance of understanding the seemingly unmediated construction of the subject's thoughts and actions in intersubjective encounters. This study elucidates the intersubjective and unmediated nature of the relationship with God, and of the relationship between evangelical Christians and the populations to whom they are trying to minister. To the Southern Baptists in the Moreland Heights congregation, the ability to experience an intensely personal God who expresses his love toward the believer in such a way that the believer feels in her heart that God loves her in a uniquely personal way that is different than any other person experiences God's love. The believer's relationship with God influences how she interacts with others, regardless of their relationship with Christ.

Being born-again and accepting Christ as one's savior, as the born-again Christian perceives it, involves surrendering his body, mind, and spirit to God. The born-again Christian is Bible-believing, and learns to use the Bible as a guide in everything that he does despite and as an adaptation to being surrounded by skepticism, an affirmation that characterizes what Luhmann refers to as an "epistemological double-register" (2012.b: 378). The believer conceptualizes the Bible as love letters written by God that are addressed directly to the believer, and the believer learns to read these love letters and respond to them through prayer.

Through prayer, the believer interacts directly with God, and seeing the answers to these prayers makes God “hyperreal” to the believer (Luhmann 2012.a: 301, 2012.b: 378). The born-again Christians of Moreland Heights see that God is real because they see God at work through his children, meaning they see God’s presence and influence in human actions. Prayer can be experienced as a group, and what Brennan (2003) refers to as the intersubjective transmission of affect that is experienced among members of the group through prayer is something that can reaffirm the presence of God to the believer. The believer feels God working through his own hands, and sees God’s love reflected in the lives of other believers. As Luhmann (2012.a) observes, and the members of the Moreland Heights congregation confirm, prayer is both learned and taught, and the experience of prayer between a believer and his God is unique to that believer’s personal relationship with his God.

Born-again Christians at Moreland Heights see God’s love as good news that should be shared with others. Sharing the good news, or evangelizing, to others is a way that the believer sees a hyperreal God working in both herself and in others. In terms of physical commodity need, a church building needs members to keep its doors open, which is theologically tied to the ultimate purpose that the born-again Christian is taught to surrender herself to: the expansion of God’s kingdom, or the Great Commission.

Southern Baptists live out the Great Commission by ministering to others, or advancing the cause of discipleship. As Mary says, discipleship is roughly analogous to mentoring, but refers specifically to mentoring in the spiritual sense. One way to advance discipleship is to promote community involvement in the church and in church activities. In the Moreland Heights congregation, the focus is on inner-city missions

and establishing itself as a community church. By providing physical and emotional aid to the community, as well as spiritual support through prayer, members of the congregation see themselves as working toward fulfilling the Great Commission. The Great Commission is not conceptualized as a fixed concept; the physical and spiritual needs of the community are always fluid and prayer is the way that they communicate with God. The members of the congregation use prayer to relay the needs of the community to God, and God “lays it on their hearts” to focus on specific needs that he communicates to the believers.

The born-again Christian believes that central to his personal relationship with God is experiencing God’s love through the conscious decision to accept Christ and to communicate directly with God through prayer, and sharing God’s love through evangelism, cultivating discipleship, and expanding missions. The relationships between these actions are frequently unmediated and must be experienced as a whole through engaging the believer’s affects. Just as born-again Christians see the needs of the Moreland Heights community as temporally fluid, the social and moral issues that the members of the congregation see around them are constantly in transition as well. Many academics (Rosenberg 1989, Shurden 1993, Vestal 1993, Harding 2000) argued that the rise of fundamentalism within the SBC was a period of “transition” for the SBC. The Moreland Heights congregation and the community surrounding it has experienced numerous transitions in membership, leadership, and activity before and since these authors made this claim. The congregation continues to adapt throughout these transitions, and the members of the congregation believe that they will continue to reach others with the good news until they are called home to be with the Lord.

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