

ALONE/TOGETHER: THE PRODUCTION OF RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN A
CHURCH FOR THE UNCHURCHED

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CHURCH FOR THE UNCHURCHED

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My dissertation is dedicated to the many people of River Chapel who were so generous in sharing their time with me. Rod, thank you for meeting me half way.

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Chapter One: Introducing Alone/Together as Gendered Worship in the Seeker Church

“Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expression on their surface enigmatical” Clifford Geertz (1973:5).

One key dynamic for any religious body negotiating with the wider social environment is the question of how to make their traditions (the old) new and relevant, while conversely, relating the new and rapidly changing culture to the traditions of the past (Hall, Neitz, and Battani 2003:78-82). This is more than a question of recruitment and growth, though these are certainly concerns of some religious communities. Across a wide range of religious traditions currently practicing in the US, remaining “culturally relevant” often means changing the practices of worship, the form that worship takes, by emulating the form and incorporating the contents of popular media to replace what has come to be defined self-referentially as more “traditionally” sacred expressions¹. Scholars and partisans have paid particular attention to this dynamic as it has influenced conservative protestant culture. Some have written about the shift to

¹ The use of quotes around the word traditional is to indicate that these forms too are “culturally relevant” to many. What is and is not culturally relevant is always in the imagination of religious cultures negotiating the larger social world.

contemporary cultural forms in the practice of religion as it has occurred in “megachurches” (Thumma, Travis, and Bird 2005), “seeker churches” (Sergeant 2000), and “new paradigm churches” (Miller 1998) to name a few examples. In these analyses questions revolve around issues of the organizational vitality and spiritual effectiveness of congregations gathering under the banner of change.

In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of contemporary Protestant ritual practices designed to be culturally relevant to a category of potential converts known locally as the “unchurched seeker.” I argue that a congregation’s strong commitment to reaching the “unchurched” produces a culturally masculine worship ritual form because though often unacknowledged, “the unchurched” is understood to be the men in the community. This new focus on reaching the unchurched follows from a history of efforts by evangelicals to reach men in the US as church and family have become increasingly private, increasingly feminine domains of social life (Douglas 1977). By paying careful attention to the embodied practice of worship in a congregation devoted to reaching the unchurched residents of the city, I explicate the ways in which worship rituals become gendered as they are made “culturally relevant to the unchurched seeker.” At the same time these rituals remain resonant with the core evangelical narrative of personal salvation through an intimate relationship with a loving god. To capture this dynamic, I develop the concept of worshiping Alone/Together as an embodied practice for feeling this core evangelical narrative. All religious practices may be characterized by the ideal affective states they would instill in practitioners and understood for the stories they convey through movement and

speech (Neitz, Bradley, and McElmurry; Winchester 2008). *Alone/Together* is meant to interpret the local practices of making tradition relevant for the unchurched residents of Midwest City.

Over the past 30 years evangelicals have been particularly deliberate and visible in their efforts to make the old new and in relating contemporary cultural forms to the past on a range of personal, theological, and aesthetic dimensions (c.f. Warner 1987; Smith 1998; and Marti 2004). Of particular interest are those churches identified by Donald Miller (1997, 1998; see also Shibley 1998) as “new paradigm churches.” Miller argues, “[new paradigm churches] may be pioneering a new sociological category, where reforming the tradition is not the focus so much as reinventing it in ways that connect the historical message to a medium of expression that has cultural resonance” (1998:209). The development of new paradigm churches in the last quarter of the twentieth century is for Miller, above all, a dramatic shift in the medium, or the cultural packages, by which Christianity is conveyed. While doctrinal differences may exist between new paradigm and seeker congregations, with the former more likely to be based in more charismatic traditions, the practices of cultural relevance remain largely the same. My work shows the importance of gender for unpacking these “contemporary” worship practices and connects the shift in medium to the cultural and religious heritage of the evangelical movement. To do this, I focus attention specifically on the production of the main weekend worship events in a seeker-oriented congregation by adopting a cultural production approach outlined by Wendy Griswold (1987). I show how the church staff responsible for producing

the weekend worship event imagines the unchurched seeker and how that imagining shapes worship practices and thus “the experience of worship” (McRoberts 2004) in specific ways.

The gender gap in church attendance

Beginning in the 19th century, as men moved off toward western expansion in the US, the sphere of religion became increasingly privatized and, like family, viewed as the domain of women. This trend continued as a gendered division between public and private began to increasingly organize social life. More importantly for the argument developed here, religious worldviews and practices became culturally coded as private and feminine (Douglas 1977). From Billy Sunday’s raucous revivals at the opening of the twentieth century to stadiums packed with Promise Keepers² at its close, countering the feminization of American Christianity has been a recurrent theme among those interested in bringing men back in.

It is often noted that getting men through the doors has been a problem for Christian churches for many generations, and women have been and remain more religious no matter how that term is measured. Sociologists of religion have primarily examined the relationship between gender and religion in terms of individuals’ organizational participation or identity projects. In the US on any given Sunday, the average gathering at a worship service is roughly 2/3 female,

² Here I intend only to emphasize Promise Keepers’ as well as Sunday’s masculine worship style as short lived historical precedents for current attempts make religious spaces more hospitable to men. For analyses that highlight the complex relationship between individual gender identity projects, politics, and religion see Rhys Williams .ed 2001.

and this gender gap holds true across multiple generations, suggesting a persistent pattern (Bruce 2004). Evidence suggests the pattern exists in Europe as well (Walter and Davie 1998). This is true across Protestant denominations and within the Catholic Church. Several explanations for this pattern often rely on differential gender socialization as the mechanism for producing gender differences in religiosity (Miller and Stark 2002), positing that women are reared to be more nurturing (Chalfant, Beckley, and Palmer 1994) or more risk avoidant (Miller and Hoffmann 1995). More institutionally focused explanations hold that women participate more than men simply because they have more time to do so (Azzi and Ehrenberg 1975; Iannaccone 1990). However, others (Cornwall 1988; de Vaus 1984) have shown that participation remains higher than one might expect for women regardless of their workforce participation.

Studies of mainline women have primarily focused on the professional problems of women clergy and lay leaders as they have begun to take on leadership roles in religious institutions dominated by men (Chang 1997; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998; Nesbitt 1997; Chaves 1997), the ministry styles of congregations led by women (Findlay 1996; Lehman 1993; Wallace 1992), and the demographic and organizational characteristics of women-led congregations (Konieczny and Chaves 2000). Outside of the mainline, a substantial literature addresses women's identity projects and power within more patriarchal religious cultures such as contemporary conservative evangelicalism (Stacey and Gerard 1990; Ozorak 1996; Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997), Orthodox Judaism (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991), and conservative Catholic

communities (Wittberg 1994; Wallace 2000). Add to this an emerging look at women's relationship to fundamentalist Islam abroad (Gerami and Lehnerer 2001), and we begin to get a clear picture of how women negotiate organizations and personal gender identities within a cultural sphere largely presided over by men but disproportionately carried by the participation of women.

My argument differs in that it does not focus on men's and women's organizational locations or their individual identity projects within religious settings. Instead I draw attention to the way in which corporate ritual forms are gendered. I examine the practices involved in producing a "culturally relevant" worship service in a seeker oriented church and argue that these practices emphasizes autonomy, anonymity, and control. Gender scholars characterize these relational modes as more culturally "masculine" in contrast to "feminine" modes emphasizing interdependence and physical and emotional intimacy and contact (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). I argue that culturally relevant seeker worship practices constitute worship in a masculine relational mode.

Evangelical churches and problematic masculinity

An examination of the literature produced within the seeker church movement itself provides clear evidence of the concern many movement leaders have for both bringing men back into the church and bringing worship practices in line with one version of contemporary masculinity. This literature advises local churches to be "high impact" (Morris 1993) by being "challenging" in an effort to bridge what these authors see as a disjuncture between contemporary

masculinity and a feminized Christian practice (Podles 1999; Murrow 2005); while men already in churches are encouraged to close the perceived gap between masculinity and religious participation by being “wild at heart” (Eldridge 2006) and no longer simply “Christian nice guys” (Coughlin and Coughlin 2005).

Possibly the most well known among these leaders is Bill Hybels, the pastor of the Chicago-area seeker congregation Willow Creek Community Church. Having a hand in the success of the youth ministry, Son City, that was oriented toward contemporary culture and “being relevant” to the lives of teenagers in the early 1970s, Bill Hybels and his staff set out to create a stand-alone church around the same concept for the adults of suburban Chicago (Pritchard 1996; Braoudakis 1997). The Willow Creek Community Church opened its doors on October, 12, 1975 to a disappointing turnout (Hybels and Hybels 1995). Wanting to understand the disconnect between poll data reporting high levels of public support for religion and the low turnout at not just his new church, but evangelical churches of all types all over the country, Hybels and his associates went door to door in the surrounding communities asking people what was keeping them from attending religious services. For Hybels, the results were unambiguous. The biggest hindrance to a family’s participation was the men (Twitchell 2004: 101). Men do not, Hybels reasoned, like to practice their faith in public, at least not as those practices are constituted in most churches. Some men are reluctant to engage in public situations where they are so explicitly subject to authority and where they may feel pressure in the encounter with a face to face community. The reluctance is even more pronounced in the

company of women in a space traditionally defined as theirs (Pritchard 1996: 104-06). Clearly this description and interpretation does not apply to men in general. But, it does say something about the men in the suburban neighborhoods surrounding his church, men whose female partners were already likely to be interested in attending a church. Willow Creek was founded in part on the principle of bringing these men back into the churches through making the experience more congenial to contemporary masculine interaction styles. Recognizing that the traditional practices can be a barrier to men's participation, Willow Creek sought to re-fashion Christian ritual worship, to "do church differently," in an effort to reach "the unchurched" who were understood to be the men in families in suburban Chicago.

Over the past 15 years, this suburban Chicago seeker church has become an organizational and stylistic model for church-growth oriented evangelical congregations. And, in 1992 the Willow Creek Association (WCA) was established as a separate nonprofit entity in order to assist church leaders and religious organizations interested in reaching the unchurched in their local communities. Currently the WCA claims over 11,000 member churches from 90 denominations in 45 countries. Member churches share an "evangelical statement of faith" and an "interest in the method and philosophy of Willow Creek Community Church" ³. To meet this interest, the WCA provides conferences and seminars as well as a large catalogue of books, program packages, and manuals to its membership. The WCA does not provide direct oversight to member

³ Willow Creek Association webpage accessed on 3-30-07 at http://www.willowcreek.com/wca_info/.

churches. Instead, they provide the rationale and resources for conducting seeker-oriented worship across a broad and disparate array of local contexts. For the past four years, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork examining the production of religious culture in a church for the unchurched patterned after Willow Creek.

Locating River Chapel

River Chapel is located on the affluent Southern edge of a mid-sized Mid-Western city and draws about 2,000 worshipers on an average weekend. Ground has already been broken for the fourth significant addition in ten years. The church employs 32 full and part-time staff members who largely mirror the predominantly white, middle-class, suburban congregation that they serve. This staff relies on a pool of over 200 registered volunteers ready to serve in most aspects of church work. In addition to office, classroom, and meeting space, the current building houses four performance venues well equipped with the latest sound, lighting, and video technology. Church literature, signage, and website promotes River Chapel as a “safe place” in which music, drama, and video are used to bring the truths of the Bible to life while helping participants to better understand how God relates to everyday experience. The official doctrine of the church is conservative evangelical but not charismatic.

Data presented in this chapter are ethnographic and were drawn from a larger multi-method congregational study (Ammerman, et al. 1998). Since beginning fieldwork for this project four years ago, I have been granted considerable access to church life and business at River Chapel. My primary

interest has been on the intersection of worship practices and popular culture. Behind the scenes, I have attended and kept detailed fieldnotes on meetings, planning sessions, conferences, and retreats, as well as the day-to-day routines involved in setting up and rehearsing the public worship events. These notes were then transcribed and coded for themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I have regularly attended band practices of the various groups of volunteer musicians around the church and tried to learn the jobs of the sound engineers, lighting technicians, camera operators, and production directors. In addition to this research on the nuts-and-bolts production of worship, I participated in a 10-week class designed to teach the philosophy behind River Chapel's way of "doing church" to emerging leaders within the congregation. I provide a discussion of methods in more detail in the following chapter.

Finally, I have been regularly attending the large public worship events on weekends and midweek, again keeping detailed fieldnotes and paying particular attention to my own feelings and experiences while in this space. In this way I have used myself as an instrument of data collection (Krieger 1985; Warner 1991; Wacquant 2006). Taken together, these sources of data form the basis for my analysis of practicing worship Alone/Together at River Chapel.

I do not claim that my "being there" as an ethnographer could stand in for the subjective experiences of the worshipers in the space I examine. Instead, I follow the advice of Omar McRoberts to move beyond the impossible demand for total empathy when trying to represent peoples' experience of worship sociologically. McRoberts outlines and advocates an aesthetic approach to the

many aspects of religious experience that have nothing to do with the “stereotypically mind-blowing” and hopelessly interior encounter with the sacred (2004). He encourages ethnographers of religion to access those shared parts of the experience such as “the feeling of a hard wooden pew, smoothed by decades of use, pressing uncompromisingly against the sitting bones and spine, and the very cadence of an order of a service...” in order to humbly relate to other participants based on what makes the experience compelling and to speculate on how the mechanisms behind a worship experience operate (199). McRoberts summarizes his argument:

“The ethnographer who views the religious setting as an aesthetic universe thus struggles to understand the aesthetic experience of the believer, as well as to analyze and interpret the more formal aspects of religious practice. The result, it seems, would be a richer sociological account of, or a deeper speculation about, what makes religion compelling” (200).

Participants’ accounts of their experiences can be important sources of data as well, but they do not preclude the insights gained from an ethnographer’s encounter with and participation in the practices of others. Close-up observers of religion in a variety of contexts have noted that through such things as music, food, and physical movements, religious rituals carry culture through practices as much as they do through cognitive or ideological content, and that practices coordinate and connect participants through time and across space without necessarily implying consensus (Orsi 1997; Warner 2005; Ammerman 2003; Gilkes 2001; Neitz and Spickard 1990; McGuire 2002). These insights can lead

to an understanding of aspects of participants' social world that might otherwise go unnoted.

While the following chapters in this dissertation take into account the many sites, times, and activities for producing religious culture at River Chapel and the various ways people talk about their experiences in these sites, here I want to draw attention to the mechanisms operating in the production of the seeker oriented weekend worship rituals. These events are the most public and are designed with the intention of reaching out to the unchurched seekers in the city. I describe how the use of sound, lighting, and a multi-media presentation combined with the physical structure of the worship space configure people to worship in a manner I call *Alone/Together*.

I argue that this form of worship is produced for the benefit of “the unchurched” imagined as a particular cultural archetype, a masculine figure of “the lone Texas cowboy.” And, worshipping alone together should be understood as a development within a religious culture that has as its primary motivating narrative the cultivation of an individual transformative relationship with the divine (Hunter 1987). Evangelical seeker churches not only have an interest in trying to bring men in, demonstrated by movement literature, as I describe below they also have the cultural tools in place to produce a worship event that resonates with one version of contemporary masculinity – the ruggedly individualistic man overwhelmed with difficulties, lonely, and looking for a place to call his own.

Congregational cultures often have orienting stories that rise to the level of foundational myth (Ammerman, et al. 1998: 95). These stories serve as both inspiration and justification for the particular way things are done in congregations. Paul, the associate pastor of River Chapel, recalls his early inspiration for what he terms “doing church differently” through an often repeated story of his encounter with a lone Texas cowboy in a church one Sunday morning 20 years ago. I have documented this story recounted on six occasions; twice at orientation programs presented to people new to River Chapel, once during the 10-week class for emerging church leaders, once in casual conversation between Paul, myself, and a fellow researcher, once in an in-depth interview I conducted with Paul, and most recently in a church-wide staff meeting dedicated to recounting the history of River Chapel on the occasion of the congregation’s 20th anniversary. The quoted material below comes from the interview transcript. This particular story is worth recounting in full as it is so often used in didactic settings to lay the foundation for almost every decision about how to practice worship at River Chapel. Reclining in the overstuffed chair in his brightly lit office, Paul recalls:

“I was working at a Bible Church on staff during my seminary studies, typical church. And while I was there I was in charge of hosting the weekend service. So I would lead the music, turn people to the hymns, try to create the atmosphere, introduce the various parts of the service, the choir, the pastor. This one particular weekend I noticed there was this guy who was sitting on the second row and he had cowboy boots on, red sandy hair. He obviously didn’t fit, didn’t know when to stand up, didn’t know when to sit down, didn’t get the cues, you know. And after the service I went to him, spoke with him and ended up asking if he wanted to go to lunch, and he said he would. So we met at a Furr’s Cafeteria in East Dallas. And he basically told me, after the niceties, he said, ‘I’ve just ended my third marriage, I have five children by those three marriages.

The last one is still with me. I'm up to ears in debt. I've never been much of a church-goer, but I thought, with my life as messy as it is, this might be a good place to go.' This cowboy said, "I came to your service. I sat through it. And everybody knew when to stand up, and they knew when to sit down. Everybody knew all the stories that the pastor told. Heck, I don't even have a Bible, and, if I had one, I wouldn't know where to turn to it when the pastor asked you to do so.' He said, 'when you got to the end of the service and you asked us to grab hands with people across the aisle, I ain't holding hands with no man I don't know.'" Rod paused before continuing, "And then he said words like they came from heaven itself. And the words were, 'it just seems there oughta be a place for a guy like me to go.'"

To drive home the point, Paul told me that in this one moment he felt like all he had trained for, and dedicated his life to, was for naught, if he could not reach someone like this man seated across the table. It was then he decided he would leave his position in Dallas and plant a new church for the unchurched, that he would create a place for men like that lone Texas cowboy. Though his first venture was largely unsuccessful, a subsequent effort in conjunction with a like-minded pastor from the East Coast and resources provided by the Willow Creek Association transformed a "contemporary" Christian church into River Chapel.

The argument developed throughout this chapter rests largely on being in River Chapel's space. In order to take the reader into that space, inasmuch as print will allow, the following passage provides an ethnographic narrative of my encounter with the ritual practices at River Chapel⁴. While the specific visual displays and songs that make up the weekend services do change from week to week, I quickly learned that the ritual form does not. I have constructed this

⁴ This narrative is not meant to interpret meaning for co-participants, only to describe the configuration of the cultural object for further analysis (Griswold 1987; 2000).

account from many fieldnotes and journal entries to try to convey what one might expect to encounter coming to worship at River Chapel for the first time. I present this material in one continuous piece to preserve and highlight two key aspects of the service, the flow of worship event in time and the manner in which sound, lighting, physical space and electronic media operate in conjunction to create a particular emotional flow over time. Following this ethnographic narrative, my analysis of the event unpacks how the physical and aural environment created in ritual time combine with the content of “culturally relevant” services to both individuate and connect participants, positioning them to worship Alone/Together.

Weekends at River Chapel: An ethnographic account

Were it not for these signs and the many windows, River Chapel could easily pass as a light manufacturing plant, warehouse, or other production facility. The primary surface material is tan corrugated sheet metal interrupted periodically by panes of clear glass. Sets of glass double doors are spaced evenly along the side, and the eastern most part of the building is slightly larger than the rest. I can hear the sounds of car doors and conversations around me as I join the stream of people heading toward this larger section. I enter through glass double doors with a larger set of clear glass windows stretching some ten feet above.

I fall into a short line passing through another set of double doors, this time steel. Inside the auditorium some people are standing in one of the three short entry halls or to one side of the wide aisle separating the floor seating from

the risers, small groups greeting one another... chatting. It is a very homogenous gathering, but that's not unusual in many religious settings. Though it has been a mercifully cool Mid-Western summer, it is still hot outside. Most people wear short-sleeved, light-color polo shirts or button ups that match well with their chino pants or blue jeans. Some women wear lightweight cotton dresses, some men wear shorts. Most do not.

Many people, their seats chosen, look through the printed program waiting there for them. Others look toward one of two giant video projection screens mounted high on either side of the stage. I read the messages and announcements as they flicker by with the graphic quality of local cable advertising; invitations to retreats, information about the men's motorcycle ministry, a reminder of the upcoming baptism and pool party to be held this weekend. The welcoming music plays on.

Flat black paint covers everything overhead; steel beam rafters, electronic rigging, and light fixtures. Combined with the varying shades of blue in the carpet, walls, and upholstered steel-frame chairs, the space is at once cavernous and close. At some point the welcoming music must have stopped, but I hadn't noticed. It was the four sharp clicks, the same count-off made by every drummer with whom I'd ever played, that brought my ears back to attention. It's the opening chords of a rock song. Simultaneously the lights in the room go dark, the velvety blue curtain begins to rise, and the advertisements on the screens are replaced with live video feeds trained on the stage.

The stage is the absolute focal point of this space, visually, aurally, and spatially. The room radiates out from the 45 feet of stage front so that bodies, whether seated or standing, are oriented toward whatever transpires there. There is nothing in the room to catch the eye save the elaborate set design beautifully lit by a chain of hues ranging from light pink to deep purple. In addition there is the ever present option of viewing the stage, its set, and its players in continually shifting close-up perspectives projected onto the video screens.

And the sound... the sound of a near perfectly tuned custom digital PA system built to match the acoustic characteristics of the room. Speakers everywhere, built into the stage, the walls, behind you, to the sides. Somewhere behind the stage, racks of power-amps hum at a thousand watts per channel. The music is all encompassing... full... dominating without being what one would normally think of as loud.

A man standing next to me tries to comment on the performance. The tip of his nose almost grazes my ear. I can only catch part of his sentences.

The second song has begun now, a seamless fading transition from the last. This one is again up tempo and in the major key of C. I stare at the stage, and then scan the audience, then to the video screens to read the lyrics of the songs as they are transposed upon close-up images of the drummer, then the bassist, then the singer. I look back to the stage. There are eight performers for this set of opening numbers. Sometimes there are one or two more or less. It is

a large rock band. The kind assembled by mature stars on stadium tours. Think Sting, or a Fleetwood Mac reunion.

Before the final notes of the third song have finished ringing out across the audience, the blue velvety curtain descends. The stage lighting shifts almost imperceptibly toward white, and a power point slide replaces the live video feed on the screens. The house lights remain dark. At once from both wings two people bring out a minimalist looking wire frame podium and matching stool like something you might find in an Ikea catalogue. A fit man, blond, middle aged, bounds onto the stage from a seat in the front row. He's wearing work boots, blue jeans, and a polo shirt. Suddenly that wheelbarrow and bag of grass seed at stage-left don't seem so out of place. There are some remarks of appreciation, for the band, for the audience, for the day. Then a lesson begins.

A running outline, key quotes, and biblical passages occupy two video screens hanging over the stage while cameras track the speaker as he works his way back and forth across a small portion of center stage delivering his message. His image is projected on the larger screens to the sides of the stage. The theme is overcoming personal feelings of pain. The wheelbarrow and seed end up serving to illustrate a colloquialism found in the Bible regarding generosity.

I suppose I had let my mind begin to wander toward the end of the lesson when the house lights suddenly dropped, leaving the audience in darkness with only a deep low level blue coming from the stage. I scramble to jot down the

speaker's last line delivered with a slight bow and gesture toward the slowly rising curtain. Later I would look at the words "everybody hurts sometimes" I had scrawled across the front of my program and wonder how I could have missed the connection. But, in the moment I was too busy trying to place that familiar melody. It was the first chorus when it clicked. Even though the singer could not duplicate Michael Stipe's plaintive voice, this is, I think, a nice cover of the REM song "Everybody Hurts."

The only light in the auditorium comes from the back of the stage silhouetting the performers and audience. But for a few bowed heads and the movements a person's shoulders make when trying to cry quietly, the audience is motionless and silent in the dark. As the curtain falls, I wonder what kind of transition could possibly follow. The room was too heavy for another rock song. The house lights come up, the pastor returns, and the service is concluded with a prayer.

Alone/Together as a mode of interaction

McRoberts' advice to ethnographers of religion to examine the more or less mundane aesthetic experiences of worship in order to unpack religious practice is particularly fitting for the setting described above. In these large, public weekend events designed for the unchurched religious community is not characterized by face-to-face interactions. And yet this is still a corporate worship experience where people are physically co-present to one another. Throughout this dissertation, I draw attention to how the practices of worship are shaped by the desire of the church's staff to create a space for particular men,

and the mechanisms at work in the production of an “unchurched” religious culture. In the remainder of this chapter I focus on the use of popular culture in worship at River Chapel, particularly the mechanisms of shared taste, time, and emotive flow.

Though historically the arts and religion are deeply intertwined, recent research has begun to point toward the prominence and the impact of the arts in the regular weekly worship experiences of church-goers (Wuthnow 2003; Marti 2005). To me, one of the most interesting findings from the 1998 National Congregations Study is the degree to which observers have traditionally overestimated congregations’ participation in social service and political activities and underestimated their engagement with the arts (albeit the arts broadly defined). Mark Chaves (2004) reports that worship is the primary activity of virtually all congregations in the study and for a surprising proportion of these congregations, listening to music and watching dance and dramatic performances are significant elements of worship activity. Furthermore, for the average attendee, the weekly worship event is most likely their only experience with a live musical performance on a regular basis. River Chapel is not unique in the present religious landscape, nor is their relationship to popular culture historically unprecedented. The uses of Billboard top-40 rock songs and clips from top grossing summer blockbusters in the rituals at River Chapel is the continuation of a long and sometimes uneasy alliance between Protestant identity and popular culture with roots that stretch to the early 19th century (Moore 1994). Long before the ringing distortion of electric guitars filled sparsely

decorated worship auditoriums, evangelical ministers condemned and derided, but ultimately accommodated their own contemporary cultural forms such as the mystery novel, the play, and the boardwalk (Chaves 2006). The changes associated with a contemporary worship service and the attendant debates over the soundness of competing theologies are just the latest, and certainly not the last, chapter in a long history of religious innovation.

What may distinguish the contemporary worship I am describing here, however, is the degree to which the language that articulates ritual practice has been adopted from electronic media culture (Kellner 1995; also 2002 for example). River Chapel and churches like it have an organizational/religious philosophy that encourages the incorporation of popular culture in an effort to make the experience of going to church relevant to the lives of potential participants (Pritchard 1996; Sargeant 2000). Seeker churches draw on the content of television, films, and popular music in the production of their worship experience, but they are also drawing on the language of these media. The rise of electronically mediated communication in the Twentieth century not only produced new means for communication, but also a new grammar in which to communicate. Contemporary evangelical church leaders like those at River Chapel argue, often explicitly (c.f. Casey 2003), that if they want to effectively communicate with generations of people raised in an electronically mediated environment, they must become fluent in the symbols and grammar of media culture.

A familiarity with the symbols and grammar of, and a shared taste for, popular media offerings produce a form of relationship located in media culture that has been described by Joshua Meyrowitz as having “no sense of place” (1985). Meyrowitz argues that for most of history the ability to share social information, the culturally rich realm Goffman termed the “interaction order” (1983), has been directly tied to physical space. Those who more closely share space have more access to information about one another. Relationship, then, is in part always a function of geographic location and proximity. However electronic media have the power to blur geographic boundaries by allowing people to escape their own information systems and to share in the information systems of others at a distance. Meyrowitz writes:

“...media are types of social settings that include or exclude, unite or divide people in particular ways. The discussion of changes in media, then, is analogous to the study of architectural or geographical change, or to the effects of migration or urbanization. The focus is on the ways in which a new medium or a type of medium may restructure social situations in the same way that building or breaking down walls or physically relocating people may either isolate people in different situations or unite them in the same or similar situations” (1985:70).

Both the decline in importance of shared space and the new channels of social information documented by Meyrowitz are evident in the practices of worship at River Chapel.

At River Chapel, culture workers behind the scenes are strategic in terms of the particular symbols and grammar they employ to articulate a worship experience in the language of media culture. River Chapel has as a stated organizational mission “to reach 10% of the unchurched in the city and

surrounding county.” In trying to reach this target audience, a professional creative arts staff at River Chapel produce weekly worship ritual that takes the form of a contemporary rock ‘n roll music performance in an environment crafted to maximize the experience sonically as well as visually. The content of these rituals, popular top-40 songs and clips from television programs such as “Friends,” are selected for their appeal to a particular target audience. In this sense, the production of the unchurched worship experiences appeals to and sustains a “taste culture” (Gans 1974) surrounding a specific variety of cultural expression already in part constituted by the mainstream entertainment industry; namely the film and popular music industries. Therefore the dynamic of “remaining relevant” also follows the contours of taste cultures that themselves are structured by racial, class, and gender boundary-making activity (Bryson 1996; DiMaggio 1991; Peterson 1997). Members of the creative arts staff will, and almost always do, select upbeat rock ‘n roll songs for incorporation into worship, but do not select hip-hop, polka, or jazz. They argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with these or many other musical styles. Jazz, polka, hip-hop, or even death-metal, they claim, could in theory be as easily “redeemed” and pressed into service as the top-40 rock style⁵. Church leaders argue it is simply not the music that their particular target audience, the unchurched of Mid-West City, would likely appreciate.

Musical practices are important for understanding the production of religious culture for a second reason. Music and ritual share properties for

⁵ For an analysis of evangelicals’ efforts to redeem popular culture in Singapore see Lloyd Chia (2007).

ordering experience of time. Here I follow phenomenologist Alfred Schutz in arguing that we might find new insights into interaction by conceptualizing music as constituting a non-discursive form of sociality (1951). Spoken and written languages are means of communicating that rely on combinations of sounds or symbols that make reference to objects or concepts. Music itself is another form of communication apart from language, as are other forms of art like painting, sculpting, and dance. Music allows for co-participation in structured time. Following Schutz's argument, I suggest that one way to interpret the practice of religion at River Chapel is to attend to music as a non-discursive basis for shared experience. Much can be said about a particular piece of music: about its tone, its characteristics, and its place in the lore of a particular symbolic community. Yet experiencing the piece cannot be grasped "monothetically" (ibid). It cannot be removed from its unfolding in time.

Thus language can only ever grasp a part –though a significant part- of the musical experience. Participants can provide accounts of their experiences for researchers, locating themselves and their practices in the larger or smaller narratives drawn from available public discourse (Somers and Gibson 1994). But, these narratives do not capture that part of sociality experienced through sharing structured time (Spickard 2005; 1991; Neitz and Spickard 1990). The emphasis here should be on the word structured, for as with narratives these shared musical experiences are comprised of recognizable and often pleasurable patterns. In pushing at the boundary of narrative analysis as limited to an analysis of the spoken, Nancy Ammerman writes:

“The metaphor of narrative runs the risk of allowing us to reduce social action to texts and words, when the habits that guide us, as well as the experiences that disrupt those habits, are often carried by affect more than thought, by deeply sensual memories and impulses as much as by plot lines. I am convinced that embodied practices are crucial. Gestures, postures, music, and movements tell the story and signal our location in it” (2003:215).

Thinking of worship practices as being, in this sense, musical allows us to hear a story told through ritual as people listen, gesture, sing, and pray together. The ritual practice at River Chapel creates a particular mode of sociality where, at least for the duration of the worship event, the “we relationship” (the Together in Alone/Together) is grounded in the production of structured time and the familiar materials of media culture rather than face-to-face interaction.

Finally, in addition to the symbolic richness and temporal power of music to forge connections, listening to live music engages the body in ways different from, and one might argue more profoundly than, reading a text or even hearing a speech. During live performance, musicians have access to audience members’ bodies through the manipulation of rhythm, timbre, volume, and tone. And, combined with their appearance, gestures, and performance, musicians on stage take the most visible and auditory role in defining the emotive character of the musical event. Similar to other concert settings, at River Chapel this role is emphasized by the spatial location of the players on an elevated platform in a central location and by the superior volume of sound produced by musical instruments augmented with sound reinforcement technology (McElmurry 2007). In her analysis of the rock concert setting, Deena Weinstein points to this central role played by musicians in defining the musical event, characterizing musicians

as symbol manipulators with encoding skills (1991:100). Throughout the production, River Chapel's musicians occupy the sonic and physical center of the ritual space, signifying and encoding the content, flow, and emotive character of the worship service. Together with the rest of the production staff, these musicians work to order the "action feeling trajectories" throughout the worship experience. I principle is the same as the manner through which a soundtrack offers cues and suggestions about how to feel, what to expect, and what points are critical in advancing the plot of a film (DeNora 2000). At River Chapel, music serves as a marker offering suggestions about where one might focus attention as the ritual worship unfolds, how one might feel, and what one might do as a physical body in the ritual space at particular moments. Taken together with the other elements of production, it also structures relationships.

While the flow of the ritual, through the transitions between songs, or from songs to talk and back again, provides potential coordination of time among worshipers as well as how one might feel about what is going on, this ritual flow also frames the relationship between coreligionists as well as between the worshiper and the worshiped in specific ways. For example, one of the most striking experiences I had while first participating with this congregation was not being able to hear the voices of others around me singing⁶. In fact the aural environment is such that I can rarely ever hear myself singing, perceiving my own voice along with the thud of the kick drum more in my chest and through my

⁶ Over time I learned that the volume in the auditorium occasionally becomes a flashpoint for complaints to church leadership. In interviews I learned that people enjoy or dislike the high volume of sound precisely for its ability to enable and constrain that I am describing here.

feet than in my ears. While the volume of sound in the auditorium often peaks at over 100 decibels, the audio production quality is such that this volume can be tolerated and even found to be pleasurable over sustained periods of time. The effect of this high-volume, high-quality sound provides an intense feeling of connection directed toward the musical activity transpiring onstage rather than toward those with whom one is standing shoulder to shoulder. Or, more accurately still, it provides an intense connection through the sound system itself. This configuration stands in stark contrast with modes of being together produced through congregational hymn singing, whether accompanied by an organ, piano, or a cappella.

Deborah Kapp (2002) has described the differences between worship styles that employ hymn singing and those that are gathered under the board and ill-defined category of “contemporary” in terms of the mechanisms they employ to produce emotional energy. She argues that syncopated worship styles of the type I am describing above produce energy through unlikely juxtapositions and sudden shifts in music, mood, and lighting. The operating principle is the element of surprise. Energy is heightened, lowered, and heightened again as participants are kept continually off balance in anticipation of what will happen next. Resonant worship experiences on the other hand produce energy through resonating voices as participants sing, speak, and move together. Their harmonies fill halls with reverberation. These worship experiences resonate as well with the past. Here ritual practice resonates through time forming a chain of memory connecting past to present through

tradition (Hervieu-Leger 2000). For Kapp, these different modes of producing energy offer differing possibilities for actors within the religious space to exercise agency and authority in the congregation. While both forms grant considerable agency to worshipers, she argues, syncopated worship styles consolidate authority within the church leadership and the musicians on stage.

In the syncopated rituals at River Chapel, the sum of all individual voices is almost always subsumed within the highly amplified, beautifully polished musical mix coming from the sound system. Rather than blend with the rough and varied voices of those standing nearby, an audience member sings with a near studio-quality musical production. The audience at River Chapel is of course encouraged to sing. The large video projection screens display line-by-line lyrics superimposed upon alternating shots of the musicians from three separate cameras trained on the stage. But, this directs attention to their musical performance and away from the actions of the audience. Being in the auditorium in the middle of a worship service immerses one in these amplified sounds and sights. The sound coming from the stage is a force. It can be felt in the chest and through the feet. Participants in the worship event are in a sense physically joined in this wash of sound. Yet at the same time the sound (along with the structure of the room, lighting and the screens) significantly narrows interactive possibilities, muting one's ability to sense others co-present in the situation. The sound, the physical space, and the lighting combine to simultaneously connect and individuate participants.

While worshipping, participants' ability to connect with fellow worshipers does not disappear behind this technology, but rather is reconfigured through a worship experience that mirrors the larger mediated social context. A sense of 'we-ness,' an experience of being part of something larger than one's self, is achieved through a familiarity with the grammar of the particular media culture, a fifty minute emotional arc, and a bodily connection intensified through high quality musical production and sound reinforcement. But this is an individuated we-relationship; worshipping *Alone/Together*.

Alone/Together as a Gendered Form

According to River Chapel's public face presented in advertising literature and on their website, they provide a "safe space." Inside the unchurched will find "a place to be Valued, Appreciated, and Celebrated." Set within a social environment where face-to-face interaction no longer defines community, River Chapel offers up a safe place: an instantly recognizable and accessible community legitimated with reference to a deep tradition. While it is true that anonymity by itself may provide safe spaces for a variety of people who are seeking spirituality, connection, or both, the seeker oriented weekend worship event is specifically aimed at the masculine archetype of the lone Texas cowboy. Despite the fact that there have never been any cowboys working in this area, speaking to this lone, rugged, unchurched audience of "wild men" provides the cultural framework for the production practices at River Chapel.

This plays out in many ways. For example, at each weekend service and even in the mid-week communion events, speakers introduce themselves by

name and announce their positions on staff. Everyone present is welcomed as if no one had been to the church before. Detailed instructions are given to everyone in the audience throughout the worship, invitations to stand, sit, pray, and on the second and fourth Wednesday of the month, how to form lines for the sacraments. There is never an alter call⁷. Thus rituals are organized to prevent the unchurched cowboy seeker from feeling embarrassed for not standing and sitting at the appropriate moments, or feeling pressured to interact with strangers in ways that are not on his terms. River Chapel's leaders argue that these men do not want to stand out as obvious outsiders in a group perceived as intimates. Greetings and handshakes may be fine in the lobby, but being asked to hold hands and sing with one another would be very uncomfortable for the particular unchurched seeker they imagine attracting. Similarly, they argue that the seeker wants practical advice he can use to work on the problems in his personal life, and that he does not want to feel excluded for not understanding the language, imagery, and stories from a book he may not even own. Above all, they note, he will especially avoid the sounds and images of a place that in its traditional form has never really 'been for him'⁸.

⁷ During three years of fieldwork I have observed public invitations to touch another person twice, once to extend a handshake greeting to those nearby and once to place a hand on the shoulder of someone who acknowledged feeling personal pain and trouble by raising a hand when asked.

⁸ Age plays a significant role in the production of the congregational culture as well. But, the young are not often imagined as seekers. When church staff talk about the importance of the young they are almost always talking about how to keep them from leaving. In the culture of this congregation "the seekers" are adult men while the "the kids" are potential defectors.

Setting the stage for the unchurched seeker

I have shown that the unchurched seeker whom this pastoral staff imagines coming through the front door is male and I propose that this ritual form- alone together- independent yet connected- anonymous while intimate- can be interpreted as culturally masculine when read against Protestant worship practices as they have developed since the 19th century. It is possible that River Chapel and churches like it continue to be successful within their evangelical peer communities because they have found a way to innovate that reconfigures a social space that has been culturally defined as private and feminine, historically linked to home and family, and popularly supported through the work and efforts of women. Evangelical churches have always been able to count on the support of the women in the community. And as their own body of literature demonstrates, men have always been viewed as the problematic category. River Chapel advertises itself as using popular culture to provide a “safe space” in which to explore the important issues of life. I argue that in practice the production of the ritual worship experience makes this a safe space to welcome back that apocryphal lone Texas cowboy sitting on the second row of Paul’s traditional church in Dallas.

Through worshiping at River Chapel everyone in the audience is positioned as the unchurched seeker. Regardless of one’s relationship to others within the congregation or one’s individual religious stories, every participant is asked to participate Alone/Together for the benefit of the unchurched seekers among them. At River Chapel the seeker does not have to fear standing out for

not knowing ritualized, or even customary, movements and interactions, much less being pressured into holding hands or singing with anyone nearby. The social comfort of these men is a primary operating principle for the production of worship events at River Chapel. And, the congregational culture is to provide that comfort by making an effort never to tread on the autonomy of anyone walking through the door for the first time. Commitments are minimal and expectations are kept low. Yet a positive feeling of connection is always made available through familiar television and movie references, the embodied and emotive experience of a high quality rock music performance, and a shared story of the possibility of redemption and transformation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The practices I have described have become familiar to scholars as those associated with the contemporary megachurch movement. While these practices are having a resurgent influence on a wide variety of Protestant traditions (see Ellingson 2007 for example), it is worth noting that they have their origins in the classic American “religions of the heart” (Ballmer: 1999). A defining tenant of evangelical theology is the emphasis on an individual relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Everyone is invited to take a personal walk with Jesus. Everyone must, of his or her own accord, come to ask him to be their own personal lord and savior. In the seeker oriented gatherings I am describing here, this story and practice are tightly connected in the ritual form I am characterizing as Alone/Together. This ritual form not only characterizes the relationship among participants, but also models the evangelical narrative of an individual

and personal relationship with the sacred. It makes sense then that we have seen these particular worship practices develop within Protestant evangelical culture. Indeed, practicing Alone/Together may feel culturally unrecognizable, and certainly less accessible, to a man raised in an observant Jewish or practicing Buddhist home.

In this chapter I have provided the basis for a gendered analysis of the ritual practices associated with the contemporary seeker church. But, I have not addressed the effectiveness of these practices at attracting and sustaining male congregants. It has never been my intention to judge whether the masculine ritual form Alone/Together is an effective church growth strategy, though I certainly do want to point out that this form has emerged directly out of evangelical leaders' attempts to draw unchurched men to their churches. Similarly I have temporarily set aside the question of how individuals negotiate their own gendered identity projects within the context of a church for the unchurched seeker. I have found that individual gender identities vary somewhat, but can be described as adhering to heteronormative and gender normative performances (Valocchi 2005). Here my analysis has focused on the mechanisms through which this ritual form structures interaction in particular ways and outlines the gendered nature of the form itself. Throughout the chapters that follow, I work to situate this ritual form in both contemporary popular culture and in Protestant evangelical tradition. An explication of the gendered nature of Alone/Together provides insight into the particular ways in which contemporary American evangelicalism imagines itself and to whom it

speaks, and how this imagining shapes the production of religious culture. The following chapters provide perspective from a variety of locations within and around the church. However, first I would like to offer a description of my strategy for learning about and engaging with the people I met at River Chapel.

Chapter Two: Methods for Moving with the River

The continual revival that characterizes religious culture at River Chapel might be thought of as organized into a set of three progressively smaller concentric circles where each move inward toward the center or core represents further investments in the organization (see diagram A). These investments are expressed most often through time spent participating, volunteering, and financial giving. However, the core is also defined by increased face-to-face interaction with other invested participants. In addition to an increased commitment to and investment in the organizational activities and goals, the core is defined in part through relationship investments in the form of being well known by and knowing other core members, particularly charismatic public figures on staff like Patrick, Mitch, Richard, and Paul.

These social investments, time and energy spent knowing and being known to one another, spiral out to the periphery and back. But, like the atoms at the core of a star, social investments are denser, weightier, and increasingly interconnected in the center. Consequently their loss is more damaging to the body as a whole. The more amorphous outer layers may expand and contract, in turn increasing or depleting resources without ultimately altering the constitution of the body. Like stars, many congregations organized in this manner have imploded after the collapse of key core constituents. In fact, River Chapel nearly imploded twice in its history.

A significant piece of River Chapel's culture is reflected in this organizational structure. And, longtime members of the congregation frequently mark the history of the church by the shift in structure under the leadership of the church's second administration. While working among the congregation, I came to understand several ways in which this organizational form carries such weight in the culture of the church. I even drew the pseudonym "River Chapel" from the rationale forwarded by the new leadership during this time of transition. I return will to this history of River Chapel in the following chapter.

Many types of voluntary organizations including many churches may be accurately characterized as having a periphery of occasional participants, strata of committed members, and a core of leaders. But, staff members at River Chapel have made an intentional strategy of this organizational phenomenon. They describe their work in broad terms as "continually creating experiential environments to reach people from the city, connect them with God, move them into the core of the church, and send them out again to reach others;" or more simply "Reach, Teach, and Send." My research practices are implicated in the organizational structure of the site I set out to study.

As an ethnographer, and an unchurched one at that, I found myself following one of many possible paths lain out by River Chapel for welcoming in the unchurched seeker. Invested members and staff often characterize their organizational approach and philosophy with a fluid metaphor. The flow of people into and out of the congregation is for them like a river winding its way through their building. Many people may enter, stay, or go, but leadership and

invested members often publicly and privately reaffirm their commitment to their mission and their strategy to be a point of entry for the unchurched in the community. Taking seriously this organizational metaphor, I began gathering data from different points of view in the various environments designed for someone like me to encounter while floating through River Chapel.

The widest concentric circle, the periphery, is comprised of those who are new to the church, those who are regularly attending but interested in loose affiliation only, or those who are unwilling or unable to invest more of their time in the organization. Generally speaking, for most of these people time spent at the church occurs during the large weekend worship events. These weekend worship events are designed to appear as informal, anonymous, and user-friendly environments where a person who has had little or even negative experiences with organized religious practice may participate in upbeat expressions of praise and hear an easy to understand practical message about living a better life once a week. At this distance one might also choose to participate in a weekly meeting with people who share particular life circumstance, for example a group of post-college twenty-somethings, a morning meeting of married women with young children, or a Tuesday night men's group with a sports theme. There are a range of short classes and seminars as well. These along with the groups can serve an entry points in addition to the large worship events. Each represent an example of "an environment" carefully crafted for the widest circle.

Those willing or wanting to invest more time into River Chapel may participate in a number of intensive semester-long classes. Classes often meet once a week in the evenings and can last as long as 3 hours per session. Participating in the next concentric circle often also means one has begun volunteering in some capacity around the church. Volunteer duties range widely from childcare, staffing the café and bookstore, greeting visitors, playing in the bands, operating camera and audio visual equipment, and property maintenance. The people who comprise this loosely bound stratum often also attend the Wednesday night River Chapel Live service that meets twice monthly. It is here that participants receive communion and twice a year during the colder months baptisms are performed⁹.

The core is made up primarily of paid church staff and long-time participants. These people do the bulk of the organizational work of the church. They coordinate volunteer efforts, design and operate the “environments,” and attend to church planning and finance. As of this writing there were 32 staff members at River Chapel. This staff is organized into five departments referred to as “teams:” Family Life, Pastoral Care, Administrative, Christian Formation, and Creative Arts.

⁹ Baptisms are performed quarterly throughout the year. During the summer months these events are held at a community swimming pool.

Location and Research Methods

River Chapel draws mostly professional middle and upper middle class whites from the affluent south-side of Midwest City, a slightly overgrown “college town” with primary industries in education, health care, and insurance. Over 90% of the adults participating in the church at the time I was conducting research report having at least some college education. And just over 24% hold a graduate or professional degree. Two thirds of participants reported a household income of \$50,000 or more before taxes for the prior year, roughly \$16,000 more than the median household income in Midwest City. As a physical structure, River Chapel is a large tan corrugated metal and glass building, surrounded by parking and minimally landscaped. Several cul-de-sac drives from an upscale housing development flank the west side of the property, and an elementary school was recently built across the road to the south. The environment is in transition, existing on the edge of the city’s expansion into the rural landscape. The only way to access the church is by car, and even those who live nearby drive.

Modeled on Willow Creek and a member of the Willow Creek Association, River Chapel draws about 2,000 worshipers on an average weekend. Church literature and signage promotes River Chapel as a “safe place” in which music, drama, and video are used to bring the truths of the Bible to life while helping participants to better understand how God relates to everyday experience. The official doctrine of the church is conservative evangelical but not charismatic. Until recently River Chapel was officially affiliated with the Southern Baptist

convention though never active in the organization. While I argue that in many ways they retain this cultural heritage as the basis for their innovation, these official organizational ties are weak and strained. Until recently the church had maintained a loose connection with the state Baptist association through state association's local campus ministry as well¹⁰.

As I made clear in the previous chapter, my research locates the production of this particular religious culture in an increasingly interconnected, divided, and mediated social environment. I work from a critical perspective that foregrounds the relational insights from narrative and practice theories to examine the moral orders created by boundary-making activity in local contexts (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Operating on the principle that every boundary is also a point of encounter, I argue that a focus on activity at these sites sheds light on the processes of cultural movement and transformation in pluralistic societies. What constitutes the territory of the moral is a contest at the heart of many of the public debates in the US and around the world. Although all politics are ultimately local, increasingly the places where people live out their daily rounds overlap, albeit unevenly, through telecommunications and electronic media technology, environmental degradation, and cycles of production and consumption in the global marketplace. Broadly speaking, my research

¹⁰ The campus Baptist Student Union (BSU) was for many years a source of recruitment for River Chapel. Many of my interview participants as well as many acquaintances followed a trajectory that led them from their hometown church, through the BSU, and into River Chapel after graduating college. Almost all of the younger staff members (30 or under) followed this trajectory. These ties led River Chapel to provide funding for the BSU after a state level Baptist association reorganized their campus ministries by cutting all full time campus ministers. Now the BSU is almost fully independent of the state organization. This effectively severed River Chapel's affiliation with any organizing body except for the Willow Creek Association.

examines the work people do in creating, sustaining, and transforming moral orders in these interconnected local contexts.

I have worked in two broad areas useful for developing these concerns: religious communities and local music cultures. Early in my training, I conducted an eight month field study in a working-class Pentecostal congregation. The study was part of a larger comparative project, and I signed on to get practical research experience. This was my first encounter with organized religious practices and the single thing that I remember most from that experience is their music.

Later, I turned to another local yet interconnected site for the production of culture to continue working on the problems of social/cultural change, moral ordering, and the everyday practices of community. I also began to think systematically about sound as a dimension of social life that provides a set of conceptual categories and metaphors that dovetail with many of the goals of social theory after the cultural turn. For example, a focus on sound foregrounds embodiment, relationally, and time; three key elements brought into the discipline with the turn toward narrative and practice as a way of theorizing the social. While pursuing research in the local music scene, I was attentive to its social organization and the interactions of its participants, but I focused primarily on the ways sound produced embodied affects, organized subject positions, and coordinated time.

In Midwest City, the music scene is relatively small and composed of people who often know or at least know of one another playing in common venues to common audiences over time (including local labels, flyers, websites, etc...). Different scenes develop around genres of musical style and attach to particular venues known, at least for the duration, for that style of music. These genre scenes often overlap. Regional and national music scenes are comprised of people who often know or at least know of one another playing in common venues to common audiences as well, though the connections among musicians, among audience members, and between musicians and audience members may be significantly more attenuated. When their cultural productions spread extra-locally, these scenes develop identities over time like “the Southern California punk rock scene,” “New York Hardcore,” or the “Dirty South.”

Musical scenes exist in much the same way other “imagined communities” through an engagement with the material culture of music production and consumption including recordings, flyers, magazines, critical reviews, performances, books, t-shirts, stickers, patches, video games, websites, and so on (Anderson 1983). The term local music scene indicates at least some degree of geographic and temporal proximity where relatively the same people playing in the same set of venues for which their style of music is known during a particular time period (i.e. The Midwest City scene back in the 1980s verses last year). Drawing on Becker (1982) I found the local music scene to be a good site for addressing issues of cultural production and began to think in terms of the various types of religious scenes happening in Midwest City.

Like music scenes or art worlds, one might conceptualize the religious pluralism characteristic of a place like Midwest City less as a collection of discrete organizations locked in competition for supporters and more like a set of loosely affiliated and overlapping sites of collective creative activity. Like the music scene, people may move among several similar venues over time or consistently return to their favorite. One or two venues may define a genre locally, and the tension between venues or among genres provides further local definition to the scene as well.

Adding to this mix, River Chapel and the local music scene exist in relationship with one another and to not consider the musical life of Midwest City would be to leave out part of the story of the church. Like many of the people I interacted with in the course of completing my research at River Chapel, I became aware of the church through my participation in the local music scene. Years ago I had set out to write an ethnographic account of music-making activity located in the rock clubs and bars of Midwest City. During my brief time working on the project (about a year) I gathered oral histories of this scene from longtime participants, interviewed several musicians, and went out to many, many shows. I even briefly toured as a “soundman” and roadie with a local band trying to establish a regional reputation after landing their first record deal¹¹. I began to develop a few ideas about what I was seeing, some of which become research papers and this material eventually became tools for thinking about my present work.

¹¹ Go buy “The Cripples: One More for the Bad Guys” (Dionysus Records catalog #ID123395-LP) to hear what I was doing at the time. I suggest you buy it on vinyl.

But, I learned something else important through these experiences. I found it difficult to live so closely parallel to the lives that I was trying to capture in my notes and journals. Maintaining some sense of so-called “objectivity” was not my concern. As a sociologist, I am sensitive to the ways in which we create stories about other peoples’ stories -written, told, or enacted- about whom they are and what they are doing, and furthermore, we do so in situated relationships with those people not as detached or omniscient observers. As the anthropologists proclaimed clearly, we are engaged in the work of writing culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Instead, I was concerned that my proximity to and personal affinity with the people I was among was drawing me further away from the conversations in my discipline. As I said, there never was a line to cross in “going native,” a fairly repugnant term in my estimation. But rather I found it increasingly difficult and frankly less fun to think sociologically with the ethnographic materials I was generating about my friends.

It was around this time that I read a post on a popular internet bulletin board for local musicians. The advertisement invited volunteers to learn how to mix live sound “using some of the latest musical equipment.” I admit that I was more interested in the opportunity to play with that beautiful 48-channel Mackie mixer than I was in advancing any academic agenda at the time. But, when I went to the church, I was immediately struck (again) by what the people I met there were doing with music.

As I explored River Chapel as a possible research site, I found that many of the staff members working for the church are also musicians and because of

this, we often had plenty to talk about early on. I learned that three key creative arts staff members, Jerry, Andrew, and Carol play together in a local rock band that I had often heard playing at one of the venues in downtown Midwest City. Several other staff members and volunteers write and record their own music at home, something I have done periodically since high school.

This dissertation combines previous work from these two seemingly distinct sites of cultural activity in an ethnographic project focused on the contemporary evangelical seeker movement. To create an environment with the widest popular appeal where one might feel near to God in practice, seeker churches are drawing on the language, tools, and contents of mass media culture to articulate a ritualized one-hour emotional journey that arcs from high-energy expressions of joyful praise to a low-energy period of introspection and back in a space designed to maximize control over light and sound. This form of ritual worship in the language of media culture can be observed to varying degrees across many traditions and may indicate a nascent shift in ways people connect through religious practice in highly mediated cultures. My work provides an analysis of the activities at the intersection of religious and media cultures paying particular attention to their gendered and emotive dynamics.

As a fast moving cultural form, evangelicalism in the US has a long history of revival and reinvention through selectively incorporating and rejecting elements of popular culture. This is evidenced today by the rise of parallel Christian culture industries in film, television, gaming, music, and fashion. While at the same time inside the local churches, evangelical innovators work to

translate the traditions of the past into the vernacular of the day using the forms and language of popular media culture. It is also a question of where, how, and in what contexts do religious bodies create and negotiate a moral order distinguishing between the sacred and the secular on an ever-shifting cultural field. My dissertation tracks this shifting boundary between the sacred and secular as it is elaborated in the everyday practices of cultural production. This research has wider implications beyond the changing nature of religious practices. I hope that a focus on this area of cultural production and movement will help us to better understand the dynamics of encounter and contest in mediated, pluralistic societies.

To answer questions about the gendered and emotional dynamics of “culturally relevant” seeker-oriented practices, I have conducted a multi-method congregational study similar to that described by Ammerman and her coauthors (1998). The data are primarily ethnographic consisting of in-depth interview material, observational field notes from a wide variety of settings, and a participant journaling project. In addition, I use archival materials from the church and data from a church-wide survey administered in the course of this project. In what follows I outline each of these sources of data and how they contribute to an analysis of cultural production at River Chapel.

Participant observation

Identities are always up for somewhat intense negotiation when one enters the new setting as an ethnographer. I entered River Chapel as a musician and a sociologist rather than as a person with a faith commitment and a

sociologist. As I worked, I tried to use this to my advantage. I often seemed to be better at hearing the story of River Chapel in its music rather than in its theology. I raise this for two reasons. First, I have always been interested in (maybe even drawn to) worship practices because they are in some sense musical. Though with this said, I must admit I am very rarely a fan of the genres of music that they produce. However the incredible investment in music represented by River Chapel's production equipment, cultivation of talented musicians, and attention to the tiniest of sonic detail is to me quite captivating. This investment is also expressed non-materially in their fundamental commitment to the idea that producing excellent music is a means for reaching the unchurched seeker and connecting him with god. Second, our identities in the field are never ours to determine alone. Despite my interests in and claims for my work, very often the people I met at River Chapel understood my presence as a somewhat unique but nonetheless recognizable version of seeking. As I point out in several places in this dissertation, in some sense they were right. At times I did try to embrace their version of me as I continued to put my unchurched self on the line in conversations, classes, and worship. I did have a journey in their part of the river. However, I entered and exited listening much more intently to the sound of the waters than I did surveying the shape of the land that gives them form. I have sought to provide a sense of both in the chapters that follow. But, my hope is that my somewhat unique position as an ethnographer of musical practices in a religious space makes up for whatever limitations I may have as a sociologist of religion with an ear for music.

The people I met at River Chapel were very generous with their time and their trust in me early on. Since beginning field work for this project, I have been granted considerable access to all aspects of church life and business at River Chapel. However, my primary interest has been on the intersection of electronic media, popular culture, and worship practices. Working behind the scenes at River Chapel, I have attended and kept detailed fieldnotes on meetings, planning sessions, conferences, and retreats, as well as the day-to-day routines involved in setting up and rehearsing the public worship events. I have regularly attended band practices of the various groups of volunteer musicians around the church and tried to learn the duties performed by the sound engineers, lighting technicians, camera operators, and production directors keeping detailed field notes on these activities as well. These notes were then transcribed and coded for themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), for example relating to the rationale for specific production practices and the “vocabulary of motives” for conducting this work (Mills 1940).

Beyond participating behind the scenes in the nuts-and-bolts production of worship alongside the staff and volunteers, I used the organizational structure of the church to identify small group settings where I could engage with a variety of attendees who have a range of involvement with River Chapel. I tried in many ways to follow the currents of the river.

To join in the experiences of what might be considered the committed core, I participated in a 10-week class designed to teach the philosophy behind River Chapel’s way of “doing church differently” to emerging leaders within the

congregation. I also attended a series of welcoming events designed to introduce the seeker orientation to those who are new to the church or are wishing to become more involved. And, to gain some understanding of the activities of the men at River Chapel, I enrolled in a semester-long small reading group organized through the men's ministry and focused on one of the books by the popular evangelical author John Eldridge.

In addition to allowing me to follow the trajectory from new attendee to the committed core, each of these experiences provided me with access to people with varying levels of commitment and orientations to River Chapel. From these pools, I recruited participants for the journaling project and for the in-depth interviews described below.

Finally, I have been regularly attending the large public worship events on weekends and midweek again keeping detailed fieldnotes (transcribed and coded) and paying particular attention to my own feelings and experiences while in this space. In this way I have used myself as an instrument of data collection (Warner 1991, 1987; Wacquant 2006).

The Worship Journal Project

Over time I became very interested in not only how the worship events were produced at a practical level, but also how the audiences for these events understood their participation. I was particularly curious about how participants would describe the feeling of worshipping at River Chapel. I created a worship journal and asked people to write responses to questions as soon after a worship

event as was practical. I think of these journals as capturing the experience of religion rather than religious experience. The distinction, I think, is that the phrase “religious experience” more directly implies an experience of the numinous, or more specifically in this particular case god. I did not ask questions directly about having a “religious experience” while worshipping, though I did ask one question about feeling the presence of god anytime throughout the week. Rather I asked people to describe in as much detail as possible what went on in the worship event, how they were feeling over the course of the event itself, and whether they felt differently after the event as opposed to during the day leading up to the event. These three questions were repeated in four sections of the journal. A fourth question (including the god question) concluded each section and was not directly related to a specific worship service. A copy of the journal questions and the letter I sent providing instructions can be found in Appendix D at the end of this dissertation.

Before distributing the journals, I created a prototype with drafts of my questions and showed them to Paul, who had been serving as my key contact person and facilitator for my overall project. He suggested abbreviating the introductory material I had included in the booklet and moving it to a separate letter that I could mail with the journals. He also suggested the addition of lines on the pages in the booklet I had created. Paul told me he thought the questions were appropriate and did not offer any revisions. I made the changes he did suggest and began producing the journals.

Since I could not include a realistic example of the journal with this document, I will briefly describe what my participants received in the mail from me. The journals are half-sheet booklets that I produced using a word processing program on a computer. The text, lines for response, headings, and pagination were split into two columns per page. Each booklet is 28 pages printed landscape on both sides of the paper. I stacked the pages in order, folded them down the middle and stapled in the crease. The result is an 8.5” by 5.25” booklet totaling 56 pages with either questions or lines for a response on the front and back of each page. I also printed a light blue cover for the booklet with a simple drawing of a quill ink pen and the title “A Journal for River Live!” (I should note that the exclamation point is how the church renders the name of this worship service and does not represent my enthusiasm for this booklet, though I do think it turned out pretty neat.)

Each recipient of a journal was asked to answer four questions after four consecutive mid-week worship events for a potential total of 16 journal entries. Inside the booklets, I separated each section (corresponding to the service they had just attended) with a title page announcing the date of the service, the entry number, and the four questions to follow. I included my contact information on the inside cover as well as two fields that I used for tracking purposes.

Paul provided me with access to the church’s computer database containing the names, addresses, and some demographic characteristics for those people who had joined the Leadership Community by either signing the Covenant after completing the Leadership River Chapel course or who were

“grandfathered” into this group by virtue of their long-time investment in the organization. I chose 80 names from this list (30 females and 50 males) from separate households. Paul then sent an email to this group on my behalf asking for their participation. Four email addresses were no longer active. I addressed, stamped and mailed 76 envelopes containing a letter with instructions and a copy of the journal. In the letter I asked that people return the completed journal to me at the worship service following the last entry. I then sent two reminder emails as that date approached. In each correspondence, I also thanked them again for what I imagined to be quite an onerous request.

Of the 76 packages I sent out, I received 22 journals with at least one entry completed. Forty-three were not returned, one person reported losing the journal, and ten people let me know that they could not participate after having received the mailing. One woman even took the time to mail the journal back to me and enclosed a lovely card with a snow-covered pastoral scene on the front.

I did not design this process to produce data that could be analyzed using quantitative techniques. However, I can provide the general characteristics of the people involved in this portion of my project. Among all those who received a journal, the average age was 42 years old with a high of 76 and a low of 22. Forty-three people had dependent children living with them according to the church’s records; thirty-three did not. Again, according to these records, 52 recipients were married and 24 single (the only two categories available).

The average age of those who returned the journals was 40 years old, and this group ranged from 26-76. Fifteen of the twenty-two have dependent children in the home; seven do not. Fifteen of them are also married. I received completed journals from 12 women (out of a possible 33) and 10 men (out of 43).

I also attended and recorded these events both to capture what transpired (the order of events, songs played, speakers' names, etc...) as well as to record my own experiences. I thought at the time that making audio recordings of the events might be helpful if journal entries made reference to a specific moment in the service. For the most part responses did not include that level of detail. However, I have listened to and transcribed parts of this audio record of the worship events made from the perspective of an audience member. Including myself, 23 people returned completed journals at the end of the study period. Once I had collected all of the journals that I could, I transcribed them into a word processing documents. I made note of any extra markings on the booklet (for example one person wrote "thanks" on the cover and another put his name, address, and telephone number). I then printed all of the responses and assembled them in a 3-ring binder for analysis.

I chose the mid-week event for the journal project because there are three worship services each weekend. Even though all three are virtually identical each week, I wanted to have all participants including myself attending the same event at the same time. The mid-week event also features more music than the weekend events (which is to say quite a lot). All events average 60-65 minutes. The weekend events are about one-third music; the remainder of the time is

devoted to video clips, the message, and announcements. The mid-week worship events are closer to three-quarters music. This time also includes the communion ritual held exclusively during the mid-week event. If there were ever to be a service approximating “high church” in a place like River Chapel, this would be it. It is the place where the core is expected to gather in communion with each other and with god.

One way that leadership and invested participants express their organizational identity as “one stop along the river” is to downplay the terms ‘member’ and ‘membership.’ Yet when pressed, even the most loosely affiliated regular attendees that I spoke with consider themselves members of the church. This makes nomenclature somewhat problematic. On any given weekend over 20% of the 2,000 or so people attending have been doing so for less than 6 months¹². By contrast, the mid-week service draws between 400-500, people about half of whom have signed forms declaring that they will be accountable to each other and the leadership of this church. If the term “membership” would be acceptable at all, the church leadership will grudgingly concede that these people make up the church’s membership proper. Regardless, it is these people who are investing in the philosophy of the church and who are its most active supporters. What I have then are written first person accounts of how the committed core experience River Chapel worship.

¹² This figure is from a survey administered by the church staff in 1998.

Interviews

I began conducting formal interviews with the people of River Chapel after I had been engaged in fieldwork (participant observation and the journal project described above) in the church for about a year and a half. Drawing on what I had learned to that point, I sampled strategically for a range of interview participants. I chose people to approach for interviews based roughly on the roll that they played in the organization; for example, audience member, volunteer, new-comer, student, and staff member. I chose people that I thought best represented the three concentric circles described above. I deliberately sought out people who defined themselves as “unchurched,” as well as those who had been a part of the River Chapel since its early formation. In two instances, I interviewed people who had returned completed journals to me, asking them to elaborate on their written responses. And, after participating in the men’s ministry and “wild men” reading group, I interviewed several of the men I had met. In all of my choices, I sought to sample across a wide age range, variation in marital status, and variation in gender expression. I was unable to sample across the limited racial and ethnic variation present in the congregation.

The interview schedules I developed were loosely structured and organized topically into modules. I worked from one master schedule and added a series of topical questions depending on who I was meeting. I have included a fairly complete interview schedule as [App X] in this dissertation to provide readers a sense of the questions that I asked. Of course, as with many qualitative studies of this nature, no two interviews were ever identical. I would

often follow my respondents' lead with questions probing the points they wanted me to understand while also guiding the conversation to cover the topics I had printed in front of me. I made space for respondents to ask me questions as well. These interviews proceeded with the give and take of a conversation rather than the question and response of a form. As such, the data produced from these conversations is not directly quantifiable, though I have made systematic comparisons among key sensitizing concepts throughout the process of coding and analysis.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder placed somewhere between myself and the person(s) with whom I was speaking. I began the recording immediately after I had reviewed the informed consent form and obtained my respondents' signature. I tried to leave the recorder on until we had parted company. The length of these interviews tended to vary by the roll of the interview participant (interviews with newcomers were shorter than those with staff members for example) and, by the length of time I had spent on the project. For better or for worse, my interviews became shorter toward the end of the project as I became able to quickly hone in on consistent themes of interest and divergent points of view. The shortest interview I conducted was just over one hour including some inevitable opening and closing small talk. Several of the staff members were very generous with their time. These interviews often ran more than three hours. The longest interview for this project was four hours and 13 minutes.

Whenever practical, I made notes during and immediately following the interview. If for some reason I could not make notes directly after an interview, I would do this work first thing the next morning. I tended to divide these notes into two sections: one describing details of the encounter (what was said, how, what things looked like, etc...) and one for my own (analytic and personal) reflections on the interview. As I wrote, I would often switch back and forth between the two sections. I listened to and partially transcribed key points in the interviews that I already knew were becoming important for my analysis. These then became a basis for refining and developing questions for future interviews. I continued this iterative process in conjunction with my other research methods for the duration of the project. I conducted my last formal interview and stopped fieldwork data collection in the fall of 2008.

At the end of the project, I had made 35 recordings of interviews. Six of these interviews were conducted with couples, five spouses and one mother and son. Taken together, I formally interviewed 41 people in the course of data collection, 30 men and 11 women. Though I had intended to concentrate some of my analysis on men in the church they came to comprise 73% of my interview participants in part because the majority of musicians and creative arts staff were men. I interviewed one female vocalists and the only female creative arts staff member working during this time. The total sample ranges in age from early 20s to mid-70s, but the bulk of my interview participants were between 30 and 60 years old. I interviewed eight people specifically identified as musicians, nine staff members, nine people from the "middle circle" whom I encountered in

classrooms and reading groups, and 14 people identified as relative newcomers from the Welcome to River Chapel orientation sessions. The remaining interview was conducted with a male pastor in his late 30s while he was visiting River Chapel from Birmingham, England.

Though the people I interviewed were specifically drawn from a variety of locations around the church, each of the 41 spoke from multiple vantage points throughout the interview. For example, when I interviewed staff members, these people responded to questions about their job, but also to questions about their personal religious trajectory since childhood, their experiences worshipping at River Chapel, and their views on what makes for a good person/church/society. Similarly I spoke with some heavily invested volunteer musicians about their experiences playing on the stage as well as about first coming to the church and moving from the category of “unchurched” to “believer.” All participants were interviewed for what they could tell me about their experiences in their respective positions, but they also told me much about their lives in relationship to River Chapel.

Interview recordings were transcribed, printed, and collected in binders. I retained the original recordings and sometimes returned to them to hear a tone of voice or duration of pause while I was engaged in the process of analyzing the printed transcripts. After editing the small talk that accompanies the opening and closing rituals of conversation, the transcripts ranged from 23 to 48 typed double-spaced pages in 10pt Arial font.

I sporadically tried using specialized computer software for analyzing interview and journal transcriptions, but ultimately found that my most effective tools were the simplest. I first coded transcripts using word processing software. Based on words that seemed to play a central role in the stories I was hearing, I would insert terms like EXCELLENCE, AUTHENTICITY, and POSTMODERN into the transcripts using all caps. In addition to these insider terms, I was also marking sections of conversation with my own analytic codes using terms like GENDER, MUSIC, and POWER. I continued with the key word approach while tracking the terms, their locations, and their usages in coding memos. I also use a journaling notebook as a scratch pad for recording codes that were later expanded, collapsed, or discarded. When I reached a point at which these large frame codes had helped me to organized my thinking about the material, I turned to the printed transcripts to develop more nuance within each. Here I would write the words representing the code families in the margin of the transcript and then add brief descriptors for how the terms were being used and how they connected to this particular person's story.

I used the cut and paste function of the word processing program to quote from interview transcripts making minor corrections to grammar and punctuation when this would provide clarity. Spoken language is never as precise as written text, and I used my best judgment to render difficult passages while listening to the recordings. I also tried to preserve at least some of the individual character of the voices I heard. Phrases or words that appear in quotation marks in the text without direct attribution should be understood as commonly used insider

terminology. I have tried to limit this practice, but it sometimes became cumbersome to convey a sense of how these phrases are used in everyday conversation without the unattributed quotations. I explain these terms when they arise and I have made efforts to distinguish my voice from that of my research subjects. Sometimes this was difficult as I often felt compelled to teach about River Chapel in the same manner that I had been taught.

The analysis presented in the following chapters does not rest entirely on interview data. The voices of the people I met during my time at River Chapel are present throughout the following chapters. However, my principle reason for spending so much time participating and observing in the field was my strong desire to bring forward the non-linguistic aspects of being at River Chapel through my interpretation of the culture. Early on I felt that I could not tell the story of River Chapel as I was hearing it if I were to rely solely on the text produced in conversation with the congregation. This was particularly true in my encounter with the worship services. Participants can and have told me a great deal about their experiences of worshipping at River Chapel. However, I felt that I had to use my own body and experiences as a basis for launching and ultimately driving my inquiry into the way religious culture is produced.

I did not end my inquiry with a turn toward myself as a research instrument, rather I began inquiry there. Beginning with embodiment led me to investigate how participants at River Chapel practice feeling happy, convicted, or close to god through the particularities of their worship. It allowed me to at least glimpse the complicated way in which affect is a structural component of a

culture; that affective structures operate in conjunction with narrative structures to make practicing in a particular culture feel thick and weighty and consequential. Starting with my own experience forced a disruption of easy assumptions I may have held about the relationship between believing, knowing, and practicing. I have come to think that beliefs are fairly ephemeral. Even simple beliefs are multifaceted and take on very different valences as they are drawn into particular contexts often for competing purposes. One needs more than a story to believe. I am not a believer in the same way as any one person I met at River Chapel. But, during the time I spent there, I often felt like one.

Organization of chapters

I have used Griswold's (2004) "Culture Diamond" as an analytic device for organizing my dissertation. Here the goal is to draw out the web of connections between the religious culture of River Chapel, its creators and receivers, and the wider social world of which it is a part. I have introduced my dissertation with a rich ethnographic description of the seeker-oriented worship in practice; its sights, sounds, and feel, drawing both on my own experience as well as interview and journal data. My intention is for this chapter to serve as introduction to the site where I conducted research as well as to begin developing an analysis that did not solely rely on interpreting the accounts people offer of the experiences they have. As I said above, I do not claim to speak for these people, but rather to offer an interpretation based on what I have heard and felt in the environment as well as from the people I met. I developed the concept of Alone/Together as an attempt to capture an aspect of River Chapel that may not have been as

apparent in the oral and written texts produced by worshiper about their experiences.

The following chapter recounts the history of River Chapel paying particular attention to the transitional period when the congregation might be said to have moved from a conservative Baptist congregation worshipping in a contemporary idiom to a church for the unchurched practicing what insiders call “post-modern” worship using the language of media culture. This history has been drawn from interviews with longtime members as well as archival records. It is a partial history told from a particular perspective. In retelling it, I argue that the transition “into a part of the river” involved changes in the church polity and the organizational structure of the congregation. These changes have had continuing consequences for River Chapel’s core and periphery memberships as they work to make connections among themselves and with the many who worship regularly in the auditorium.

Chapter four details the ideological commitments and routine activities involved in producing a seeker-oriented worship experience on a weekly basis from the perspective of the staff and volunteers. As outlined above, I have been participating and observing behind the scenes at River Chapel as well as conducting intensive interviews with technical staff, musicians, and volunteers. In this chapter I draw explicit connections between the wider media culture, technical expertise, emotion, and –borrowing from one key informant, “the creation of experiential environments in which people might feel close to God.” I

conclude by connecting the creation of these environments to important aspects of the evangelical cultural heritage in the US.

Chapter five is focused on those who fill the auditoriums, classrooms, and meeting spaces within the church. Here I draw on the journals entries and interview materials from new as well as more committed attendees. Combined, those materials provide insight into how people are engaging with the “experiential environments” the staff work to create as well as how River Chapel fits (or sometimes fails to fit) their faith commitments and lives more generally. River Chapel recognizes that maintaining relationships in such a large church can be problematic. With data from these two cross sections of attendees, I show how people do and do not key into a religious community so rigorously focused on drawing in the unchurched.

I conclude with chapter six by again highlighting the gendered nature of the seeker orientation and argue that the cultural production of this orientation reconfigures “religious community” as post-modern, yet directly in line with evangelical tradition. Bringing together insights from my data on gender, emotion, and experience, I hope to offer scholars and practitioners new directions and suggestions for further research into cultural movements within religious communities.

Chapter Three: Becoming a Stop on the River

In my account of River Chapel's history, I draw on a central metaphor church leaders use to describe their philosophy and strategy for being a "culturally relevant" church for the unchurched in the local community. This metaphor positions their local congregation as a part of a river where the curious might play at the banks, slowly wade in, and be swept away with the current only to emerge somewhere downstream, changed, and in search of another branch. Here I draw on their metaphor of a congregation as a moving and fluid body to recount the history of the church's transition from a conservative Southern Baptist congregation wanting to worship in a "contemporary style" to an independent megachurch that views itself as engaged in a postmodern project to reach the unchurched seekers in Midwest City. In this chapter, I describe how becoming a fluid, fast-paced, and "culturally relevant" church in part involved moving the production of local religious culture out of the participants' homes and into the church facilities, a consolidation of power in the hands of a growing professionalized paid staff, and a shift toward incorporating the pop culture tastes marketed toward a narrow segment of the population.

From “Contemporary Christian” to “River Chapel”

Like many Southern Baptist churches in the 1980s, River Chapel was founded as a “contemporary Christian” church with the intent to revive itself by moving corporate worship away from what had by then come to be defined as “traditional” forms of worship like hymn singing and organ music. During this time, the bulk of people’s activity as members of the church was split evenly between the actual church building and members’ homes. In the course of becoming fluid and dynamic, the activities of the church became less focused on home and family and more focused on the actual church building and individuals.

Many of the major milestones recounted by these long-time members now serve as markers for them on the path to “becoming like a river.” It is worth noting that this is the story as it is told now by the staff and core members of River Chapel. Even though several of these people have been a part of the church since the early days when they were meeting in a local at the Holliday Inn or earlier, the story could be told differently from the vantage point of those who left before or during the transitional period. Like any organizational story, members of this congregation tell their history as a way to identify who they are and who they are not in their local context, as well as measured against movements in religious culture more generally.

According to one of the founding members, River Chapel began life on the impulse to be a “church unlike our fathers’.” This project began with a small group of people meeting first in the founding pastor’s home and eventually, as their number approached 50, in the conference center of a local Holliday Inn.

During my time at River Chapel, I had occasion to talk both formally and informally with some of the people who were present in these early days. The site where the church now stands was purchased by this founding core group and named for the intersection of two nearby streets. Here they erected an inexpensive but functional blue corrugated-steel building that people now recall “looked so much like a muffler shop.” Volunteers worked evenings and weekends hanging drywall, painting, and laying the mauve carpet. Within a few years after becoming an established and identifiable congregation in the community, this group experienced what many now refer to as “the meltdown” during which the founding pastor lost the trust of the congregation, ended his marriage, and quickly left town. Within months, the church board hired a new pastor and the congregation began a contentious four-year period of rapid growth and transition concluding with a divisive statement of purpose delivered by the head pastor in what is now often remembered as the “waah message.” The delivery of this message marks the period of time when the church became “River Chapel.” In the almost 10 years since, the church has again grown significantly in both size and notoriety in the local church community, adding many thousands of square feet to the original building, as well as establishing satellite congregations regionally.

1987-1994 “Contemporary Christian Church”

Terry had at one time or another been a member of each of the three largest conservative Baptist congregations in town, and he had maintained good relationships with each of them. According to those who knew him, he was

however dissatisfied with their inability “grow or make meaningful change in the community.” This was the mid-1980s, and churches like Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek Community Church and Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church were experimenting with new methods and experiencing increases in attendance. Growth over time is a key indicator of success for churches in the evangelical subculture. Though these early practitioners of seeker-church methods had not yet gained the recognition from the secular media that they would enjoy throughout the 1990s, they were, along with many new theorists and writers, becoming star attendees at regional church growth conferences.

It was from one such conference hosted by the well-known Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas that Terry returned in 1987. Sarah, an active participant in the early days of the church recalls that Terry, “bought into those church growth principles in a major way.” She tells me Terry came back to town ready to approach the many people he knew were dissatisfied with attending the locally affiliated Southern Baptist churches. Terry, she recalls, also had a knack for connecting with the college-aged population affiliated with the Baptist Student Union on the local university campus. Terry gathered several families he knew from area churches and students he had met from his outreach work on the local campus to form the original core of his new church. This group began meeting in Terry’s home, to pray and plan for how to develop a Willow Creek-styled church in their own community.

Chief among the lessons that Terry brought back from the conference in Plano was the importance of centralized authority for making an effective

organization. Like Bill Hybels' church in the suburbs of Chicago, Terry's church was established as, and remains, an organization where virtually all decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of the senior church staff. In the early days, this meant one staff member, the senior pastor. As it stands now, that power is somewhat distributed among four department heads, but final authority remains located in the senior pastor position. Early on, Terry established an oversight board composed of five members drawn from the core lay leadership of the church. This board has the responsibility of overseeing senior church staff, but no power to control organizational operation or decisions for the church. The board is responsible for hiring the senior pastor and approving the yearly operations budget. This structure has remained in place, and positions on the board still rotate every five years on a rolling basis.

The core of people assembled under Terry's leadership, as large as 350 people by 1994, was made up primarily of life-long church going Southern Baptists drawn from other local churches and included as many as 150 students from the university's Baptist Student Union. Terry implemented another of the lessons learned at the church growth conference in Texas by changing the practice of corporate worship. He began teaching his new congregation practically oriented "how to" lessons at their weekly meetings. These lessons included instructions to turn to specific passages in the Bibles that members were asked to bring along, but they may begin with a familiar anecdote about a troubled marriage, difficult kids, or an overbearing boss. Those gathered would then follow Terry's line of reasoning relating the anecdotes to the Bible passages

that might provide answers to life's difficulties. These Bible passages and the key points of the sermon were presented on overhead projector transparencies projected onto a pull down projection screen.

The lessons were bracketed beginning and end with a mix of contemporary praise choruses and traditional hymns sung together by the congregation. The musical accompaniment for these hymns and choruses was strummed on an acoustic guitar and sometimes lightly backed by percussion instruments like hand drums, tambourines, and shakers. Several people fondly recalled the times when one founding member would agree to play his trumpet along with the band. The musicians used a simple amplification system consisting of two portable speakers mounted on tripods and a four-channel public address amplifier. This equipment remains in storage in the basement of the church. Those gathered sang under a large cross framed at the front of the worship space. Worshiping in their new church was, many recall, a welcome and refreshing change from the traditional worship available in the churches from which they had come. It was "contemporary" worship and this model became the inspiration for many of these same churches to add a second service to their Sunday morning schedule as the years passed.

Terry and his group were among the first to do "contemporary" Southern Baptist worship in Midwest City, and they picked up a stigma that is still reflected in the public culture of River Chapel today. Longtime members who recall this time sometimes make joking references to their church being "a cult" or "like a cult," and newer members often seem pleased to carry on the label as a badge of

River Chapel's distinction in the local religious marketplace. These references often come in the form of exasperated joking and are expressed in the voice of "people in the community." For example, someone might conclude an anecdote about a failed attempt to invite an acquaintance or coworker to the weekend worship service by saying "oh, but you know we're just a bunch of crazy cultists anyway..." Greeted with knowing laughter, the remarks heard today reflect an earlier tension and are most likely not directed at the community at large, but rather the local religious community of which the church remains an active if marginal member. This tension may in part reflect the difficulty that members of many religious movements have in recruiting new membership from their social networks. But, in this instance it also reflects a particular oppositional relationship with other conservative Protestant churches in the community established early in the congregation's history. While many of these stylistic changes to worship practice were well under way in the suburbs of many major US cities, in the relatively rural Midwest, the shift to even the comparatively moderate style of contemporary worship described above was viewed as "un-Christian" in the eyes of many in conservative circles. Evidence of this tension can still be felt by talking with long-time members, particularly in relationship to the state and national Baptist associations.

River Chapel has maintained a connection to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as well as the State Baptist Association (SBA) throughout its 21-year history. When Terry began leading this contemporary congregation of conservative Baptists he intentionally established an affiliation with the national

organization as a strategy to gain public legitimacy in the local church community. Connections to the state-level organization have primarily run through the local campus Baptist Student Union that is run by the State Baptist Association. Even though Terry had been involved in campus ministry for many years, the relationship between the leadership of Baptist Student Union and his new contemporary church was strained because the changes represented by this early incarnation of the church were unwelcome in the state association.

While the organizational ties to both the SBC and the SBA remain, the meaning of those ties changed after Terry departed and River Chapel began increasing its size and public presence in the community under the new leadership. This change also occurred as localized expressions of contemporary worship became more common both in Midwest City as well as in similar communities around the state. Under Terry, having affiliation with the SBC and the SBA was viewed as an effective strategy to legitimize the congregation's efforts to make changes in traditional conservative Baptist practices. After the new leadership took over these connections came to be viewed as a liability jeopardizing the church's self-appointed mission to reach the unchurched in the city. In addition conservative movements in both the national and state organizations shifted the leadership of these organizations theologically and politically toward the right-wing (Ammerman 1990). Current leaders and long-time members often cited the negative publicity surrounding this shift to right-wing national leadership in their reasons for wanting to disaffiliate from the convention.

Over the past two decades, the state association went from providing reluctant cover for self-styled “black sheep congregation” to becoming a foil River Chapel’s invested membership in arguments against all that is wrong with contemporary evangelicalism; not to mention the butt of many insider jokes. After the change in leadership following Terry’s departure, the national organization had moved from providing a similar, if not more distant, imprimatur to often becoming “an embarrassment” to River Chapel’s leadership as they sought manage their organization’s identity to appeal to an audience of unchurched that they already imagined were hostile to their presence. In 2008, River Chapel remains formally affiliated with both the state and local organizations, but the senior staff expects a separation following their recent decision to allow women to occupy teaching roles by serving as pastors over their regional satellite campuses.

This same tension could be felt in conversations about the prominent role that the conservative Christian Right had played in the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections, and again during the long campaign for the 2008 elections. Electoral politics is largely absent from the public talk around River Chapel. There were no voter guides or campaign literature in the church. Weekend messages either hinted obliquely at contemporary political debates or reduced them to personal problems rather than public issues. Paul would often tell me that, “there are million dollar issues and five dollar issues” by way of explanation. Whenever I would press for more, he would explain that the church leaders were “unwilling to take a position just for the sake of having one.” Instead, he argued,

they relied on the Bible as a source for helping people to make informed choices. As with many conservative Protestant congregations, restricting a woman's reproductive freedoms and stopping a perceived erosion of religion's role in the public square (often represented through advocating teaching so-called intelligent design in public schools) lead the list of political issues closer to the "million dollar mark." Despite the absence of direct political speech, many people I met at River Chapel may be thought of as constituents of the Christian wing of the Republican Party as it was constituted prior to 2008. However, directly discussing politics was considered a potential barrier to reaching the unchurched and so was often subsumed in the larger public discourse of personal salvation and individual relationships. In this particular case, the absence of political talk combined with an individualizing culture to allow for an unspoken and largely assumed conservative consensus on social issues.

During the early years of the church, being a member meant participating in one or both of two main organizational activities: Sunday morning worship services at the church and a network of home based ministries. These home groups were led by key members of the founding core that originally joined with Terry to remake worship practices in a contemporary style. Some of these groups were quite large. As many as 5-10 families (including children) were involved in some of the larger groups, and at least two of these original groups are still meeting today, though their current numbers are much smaller. Terry and the founding members of the congregation had a commitment to the church-growth principle of a staff directed church with minimal board supervision.

However, long-time members recall that the home groups seemed able to play a role in directing the culture of the congregation by virtue of their providing space in which members of the congregation had routine face-to-face interaction as a group. The large house groups gave lay leaders a voice among the membership that they would otherwise not have in a church polity structure with authority consolidated in the position of senior pastor. Though they had no formal power, these house groups remained an influence in the life of the church even after the abrupt departure of the founding pastor.

1994-1999: The Transition Period

The period of transition at River Chapel proceeded along two broad trajectories following the hiring of a new pastoral staff. It was during this time that the church began to develop a rationale and set of methods for reaching the unchurched members of Midwest City. While members of the church, the board, and the staff had always been interested in leading people to conversions, moves made during this period signaled a stronger adherence to the techniques developed at Willow Creek than was present under the previous administration. In terms of the character of the church and the week-to-week experiences of being a member there, the most important changes occurred in the aesthetics of worship and through a consolidation of activity that counted as “religious” into increasingly rationalized settings, designed by staff members, and located in the church building.

In the spring of 1994, Terry had an extramarital affair with a woman who was working as his administrative assistant in the church office. The exposure of

this affair is remembered by those who knew him as “a shock that rippled quickly through the congregation,” and it set the stage for a four-year period of transition under new leadership. Within three weeks of the affair becoming public, Terry and his assistant Theresa had moved to an adjacent state. They have since become active in another congregation. This period, beginning with the founding pastor’s unexpected departure and ending with his replacement’s public rebuke of the original core members of the church, can be thought of as marking the congregation’s transition from a “contemporary Christian church” to River Chapel. During this time the church would redefine its niche in the local conservative Protestant ecology, or local scene as it were, by adopting fairly significant philosophical and organizational changes.

Through the period directly following the departure of the founding pastor, the church was temporarily led by two different men. One man, Richard, came from within the original founding families who had met in Terry’s home. The other man was a friend of Terry’s and known to other members of the church from his efforts to sustain a struggling church plant meeting in one of the local movie theaters. Terry’s friend, Paul, would eventually become the associate pastor for River Chapel and my main contact throughout this project.

After Terry had left town, Richard took on the task of announcing the news to the congregation and assuring them that the church board was working quickly to bring in new leadership. Still an active and respected member of River Chapel, Richard is credited with “holding things together” in the wake of Terry’s departure. In the weeks that followed, he continued to hold weekly services in

their facility where he acted as pastor and supported the home groups of which he was a part.

Though not a member of the church at the time, Paul had been a friend to Terry for several years. In those final days after his affair became public, Paul even helped Terry to pack the books from his office. On many previous occasions, Terry had asked Paul to join him on staff at the church knowing that Paul shared a similar interest in the theology and practices promoted by Willow Creek. Unbeknownst to either at the time, they had both attended the same Willow Creek conference at Prestonwood Baptist in Texas, Paul as a recent seminary graduate living in Dallas and Terry as the future founder of a new contemporary church in a small Midwestern city. To hear him recall those offers today, Paul says he never fully shared his friend's vision for the direction of his church. For example, Paul once told me, "Terry would use church growth language, but never really adhered to the principles. He was still stuck in that older, modernist, mindset." However, Paul was willing to lead his friend's congregation periodically after Terry's sudden departure.

As staff recall now, it was during the interim period between pastors that the board members made two decisions crucial to the development of the congregation over the next ten years. When it became clear that the majority of the congregation would continue to support the church, the board voted to conduct a hiring search specifically for a "church growth minded pastor actively involved in the Willow Creek movement," and also to retain the organizational structure advocated by authors of much of the current church-growth literature

increasingly popular in evangelical circles. Once the new pastor was hired, they decided, “the church would remain pastor led, with board oversight.” In effect, the board would continue limit its own power to two areas of oversight: decisions on hiring/firing for the senior pastor position and approval of the annual church budget. Senior staff would continue to nominate candidates for positions on the board. In all other areas of operation the church was to be led by the new pastor.

By the fall of 1994, the church board and remaining staff had interviewed and hired Patrick, a 38-year-old pastor of a small church in rural Pennsylvania. Patrick was born in the Netherlands but immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of five. As a child he and his family had been active members of first a Christian Reform church and then later a United Methodist congregation in suburban New Jersey. Like many young men, Patrick lost interest in the church after moving away from this parents’ home. His personal story of trouble with drugs and the law during this time period is a well known part of his public identity around the church, as is the small tattoo on this upper right arm. He often tells the story of his early adulthood in his own personal testimony to new church members. He told the story to me. As he tells it, he was looking for some structure in his life when he left his friends and job in Connecticut to enroll in Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma 1,400 miles to the west. After graduation, Patrick and his new wife Linda moved from the campus of Oral Roberts to Lubbock, Texas so that he could work as a campus minister for an area church. Patrick recalls that after a couple of years on the job, the odd hours required of campus ministry proved difficult for him and his new family. Already familiar with

the Willow Creek Association from his time as a student at ORU, Patrick learned of a church in rural Pennsylvania through their employment bulletin. He remembers being attracted to the idea of a small rural congregation that he could grow into a successful home for the unchurched in much the way Hybels has done for South Barrington. He told me he was disappointed to find that the congregation was not all that interested in changing, as he put it, “much more than some of the decorations and maybe buying a new sign.” He remembers facing resistance from the congregation on almost all of his suggestions for remaking their church as “more open and relevant.” After two years, Patrick tells me he was once again looking at the Willow Creek Association’s employment bulletin. There he found the advertisement for River Chapel.

Paul had grown up in a Southern Baptist church just south of St. Louis as the son of a self-taught minister. He describes both the church and his upbringing as “very traditional,” making a point to tell me in the first of many conversations that he had never even been to a movie theater until he was 21 and both of his parents had passed away. Over the course of those first few months settling into his new job, Patrick found that he was increasingly calling on Paul for advice and assistance in adjusting to this new congregation. And it was during this period that both discovered they shared a similar commitment to what they would later describe as “the River Chapel Way for reaching the unchurched by remaining relevant to their culture.” Both agreed that this commitment “demanded more than simply sustaining a contemporary Christian church for

people who already believed.” What was needed, they argued, was a church for those who either did not believe or were outright hostile to organized religion.

Patrick and Paul continued to talk, and by the following spring Paul had joined in as a full-time staff member at River Chapel responsible for many of duties he had been carrying out informally for the past several months. As associate pastor, he would eventually come to be in charge of pastoral care for the congregation, a role that Patrick’s duties as the church’s executive officer and public face left him little time to fulfill. Paul’s true interests however lay in developing himself as a local theorist and exponent of “doing church in a culturally relevant and sensitive way to reach the unchurched members of the community and connect them with God.” He eventually enrolled in a doctorate of ministry program at Biola University where he developed his thesis on the subject.

The following year Patrick and Paul hired a new full-time “creative arts pastor” from Texas named Mitch. Mitch’s arrival brought many stylistic changes in the Sunday morning services as he, Paul, and Patrick began to increasingly push for “dedicating that key time to those who may be unconvinced.” It was during this period that the images, characters, stories, and songs from the secular popular media culture began to be featured prominently in the Sunday morning gatherings. For example, in the fall of 1997 a worship service was held to mark the 10th anniversary of the founding of the church. This Sunday morning featured the television character Homer Simpson in a clip from an episode of the prime-time cartoon series *The Simpsons* titled “Homer the Heretic.” Here Homer

is shown rejecting the “traditional church” in favor of his own set of beliefs that he calls “homersim.” Ultimately the character is shown returning to church after experiencing the unselfish love of friends. Homer’s original pastor is depicted interpreting this love as god’s love reflected in the many faiths of Homer’s friends¹³, while Patrick’s weekly message emphasized sacrificing some personal preferences for the greater good.

This use of *The Simpsons* television clip is an early instance of what would become weekly practice in the production of worship events in the ritual life of River Chapel. It is also a good example of the kinds of narratives that the members of the creative arts staff seek out (and almost always find) in their extensive stock of popular cultural knowledge. Television shows like *The Simpsons*, *24*, *Law and Order*, and *The Office* as well as feature films such as *Transformers*, *The Matrix*, or the comedy *Click* were commonplace during the time I spent attending worship services at the church. I detail the processes of producing worship at River Chapel, including the selection of popular media products, in a later chapter. However, to many in the congregation, these early changes in the form and content of the weekend worship events signaled a change in how River Chapel’s leadership imagined their audiences and consequently how the rest of the organization was being restructured.

During this transitional period, the tone of the worship services began to change as well. Current members recall this period as a time of “greater risk taking” in the effort to “become relevant in the lives of the unchurched.” Again

¹³ “Homer the Heretic” Episode number 62. Original Airdate October, 8 1992.

taking a suggestion from the Willow Creek Association, the newly forming creative arts staff and volunteers began to experiment with the presentation of live dramatic skits in the worship events. Occasionally during this transitional period, they would take carry their efforts to reflect the lives of their newly imagined audience too far for the comfort of the existing congregation. By way of illustration, one long time member reluctantly tells me she, “strongly considered looking for another church in town” after coming to church one Sunday and watching a live action skit in which “a seductive-looking woman pretended to smoke a cigarette on the church’s stage.” Over time, the staff had to field many complaints when words like “crap” were laced into Patrick’s messages. Clips from films depicting severe alcohol or drug addiction (from the film *Leaving Las Vegas*, for example) allowed them to “better connect the weekend messages with real life experiences,” but along with the other changes, raised significant criticisms from long-time members concerned about their own and their children’s church experience.

Changes in the music used for worship were arguably the most salient and thus most able to galvanize the growing criticisms from members of the congregation. Music is a powerful resource for defining how one might feel and act within a situation (DeNora 2000). And, as Patrick, Paul, and Mitch develop worship practices with unchurched audiences in mind, music became a focal point of contention in defining the nature and purpose of the corporate worship time at River Chapel. Under the direction of the new creative arts pastor the mix of hymns and contemporary Christian praise songs gave way to “edgier, more

alternative rock” songs as often produced by secular recording artists as by Christian artists. Similar to the films and television segments introducing the weekly lessons, Mitch began to regularly feature the songs of secular pop and rock musicians, again with the intention of connecting the messages to “the real-life problems people face.” While secular love songs could often be reinterpreted as songs of praise to a loving god, the staff began to also include moody rock songs dealing with depression, loneliness, self-loathing, and angst.

The instrumentation and sonic textures of the worship changed to match the church’s new style and emphasis as well. A rock-style band with electric guitars, a full drum set, and keyboards replaced the contemporary vocalist backed with light acoustic instrumentation. Thicker distortion, delay, and reverb effects were added to the electric guitar sounds. These effects were even used occasionally on the vocals to achieve a certain dark or distant mood. Eventually the acoustic drum set was replaced with an easier to control, and easier to modulate, electronic drum set amplified by the growing sound reinforcement system¹⁴. And a synthesizer was added, providing a massive palate of tones and soundscapes to fill the auditorium.

In later chapters I analyze in detail the emphasis on technological production and control that was institutionalized in these early changes to worship practices. But it is worth noting that during this period the changes in the

¹⁴ When I was observing the band they were using a Roland TD-20K set from the company’s V-Drum Pro-Series. Striking the “drum heads” on this kit doesn’t make any sound. It triggers an attached sound module. Any sound, including drum sounds, can be loaded into the module, modified almost infinitely, and triggered by the player’s performance or at pre-programmed instances during a song.

sound of worship at River Chapel became an especially potent lightning rod for criticism and complaints from many members of the congregation. For example, one long-time (and very wealthy) member of the congregation went as far as to repeatedly offer purchasing an expensive new organ for the church. He suggested that they could keep it out of sight back stage and just play a hymn or two on it once in a while. The staff declined the offer and now regularly recalls this story as an example of their commitment to “reach the unchurched by using their culture” even in opposition to influential members they already had.

Throughout the transitional period, the changes made by new staff members proved to be quite successful in attracting the affluent, white, suburban families filling the newly built housing developments on the south side of the city. Following the sudden departure of the founding pastor, from 1995 through 1999, the original 350 member church swelled to nearly 1,500 weekend attendees and was regularly overflowing the small building in which they met. The staff attributes this growth to several sources in addition to the changes in style and content of the weekend worship services, most commonly residential propinquity. During this period there was a rapid expansion of middle and upper-middle income housing developments in the surrounding area. The land that the founding pastor had purchased turned out to be well situated among several large tracts that continue to be developed today.

Developments in the local conservative Protestant scene in the city played a role in River Chapel’s growth as well. A significant number of new families began attending the church when the extramarital affairs of the pastor of Castle

Christian Church, a similar local church nearby, were exposed. Though not usually so large, this kind of flow between churches is common among the churches that make up the local conservative Protestant community and is represented in the departure of a portion of membership from River Chapel in 1999. Members of two struggling local church plants eventually became part of the congregation during the transitional period as well. The first was the Willow Creek-style startup that Paul had previously been trying to develop before joining the staff at River Chapel. This group followed Paul to his new position, and many of the 40 or so people who came remain strong supporters of the church. Two of these transplants now occupy staff positions. The other assimilated church plant had broken away from the local Hilltop Baptist Church which in style resembled the early days of the River Chapel under Pastor Terry.

In the course of becoming River Chapel, the church changed organizationally as well as aesthetically. Prior to the changes instituted by the new leadership, the church had been organized around two major activities. The first was the Sunday morning worship. The second was a set of small groups of families meeting weekly in church members' homes. During the period of growth and transition, the home group ministries that were central to the life of the church under Pastor Terry became increasingly less central to the life of River Chapel. These were characterized as medium-sized ministries because they were larger than the six to eight members typically associated with home prayer groups. These were larger subgroups of the congregation, and many who attended the church regularly also participated in this ministry. Under the

founding pastor, there were eight active groups ranging in size from 15 to 20 people meeting in members' homes and one meeting at the church building. These groups continued to meet throughout the mid 1990s. Each was led by a key lay leader who had been a part of the church since the beginning. Over time, the relationship between these groups, their leaders, and the growing church became strained as staff "became less willing to provide resources for the groups meeting away from the church building," preferring instead to develop new groups meeting in the church building. A large proportion of the people participating in the home ministries after the arrival of the new staff had been founding members of the church, had become members under the former pastor, or had come to the church through their connections with people already in the home groups.

The home-based groups had a different basis of association than the new church-based groups supported by Patrick and the rest of the church leadership. Don, a long-time member of the church described the home groups in terms of the activities they would share as families, "Every Sunday night we would all get together and the children would be in the basement while we adults went through our study or whatever we were doing. And we would come together at the end, the children would come up stairs and it was just a great experience for those six years. We went on float trips. We did things around [the city] as a group, bowling, miniature golf... So you know it was just a real great experience for everybody involved." This kind of inclusive church activity was important to his involvement during the early years, he told me. When his group "eventually

petered out” he and his wife went to find a different church that might provide a similar experience. After their children had grown and left the home, they eventually returned to River Chapel because they were attracted to the church’s success, especially as reflected in the number of baptisms the church was regularly performing. Don tells me that he and his wife came to consider “the bigger picture” after trying several churches in the community over the years since they had left River Chapel. He explains, “Part of the big picture is the fact that so many people have been baptized, have committed themselves to Christ over the years. And when we walk around River Chapel now, we never saw anything like it. There isn’t anything like it here in [the city]. And we’ve been to a lot of churches.” After hearing Don’s explanation for he and his wife’s return to River Chapel, I began to ask other more invested members of the church why they continued to attend a church, or at least the weekend service, that was deliberately produced to appeal to “the unchurched walking through the door for the very first time.” Invariably these long-time members expressed some version of Don’s explanation. They were committed to River Chapel because of the organization’s commitment to “reaching the unchurched,” rather than in spite of it.

As the church grew under its new leadership so did the division between the home-group ministries and the newly emerging core of the church. This new core of the church was composed primarily of the new staff members and their families. The combination of a lack of institutional support from the parent church and an increasing marginalization in the wake of changes made by senior staff eventually reduced the home groups ministry to just a few groups primarily

composed of the original core members of the church who were unhappy with the direction the church has taken. The home group ministries may have even provided an important space in which members of the church who were unhappy with the increasingly obvious changes in style and structure being made by the new staff could voice their concerns and recognize themselves as a group, though I can only speculate. However one thing is clear. What was once a key practice of religion at River Chapel ceased to be supported throughout the time of transition. Of those original “medium sized ministries,” two small groups composed of early members remain active.

From the perspective of the current leadership a major factor in the loss of the home group ministries was that new members coming to the church during the time of transition were not forming their own home groups, nor were they entering into the home groups that were already established. When the staff made the decision to stop supporting the existing home group ministries they shifted that support to establishing other new medium sized ministries that would meet throughout the week in the church building. This shifted the makeup of the medium sized ministries from groupings of families meeting regularly in each other’s homes, to classes and ministries based on the life stages, or life styles of the individual participants. So for example, the church began a weekly group for post-college twenty to thirty year olds called Connect Four, one for working mothers called Website, and another for the men of the congregation. Even though the church often offered childcare services during these meetings and classes, the basis for the medium sized ministries shifted from families meeting

together in homes to individuals meeting together in the church building for sponsored activities. In this way the transition from a contemporary Christian church into a church for the unchurched shifted the context for practicing religion from relatively continuous groups of families to more temporary associations of individuals.

The loss of the organizational structure of the home groups had a lasting effect on River Chapel beyond what the loss of a number of former core members may represent. In fact, in the following years many of those who had been core members like Dale who had left after the meltdown returned and are currently active members of the congregation excited by the church's subsequent success.

1999 "A Hill to Die On"

In the early spring of 1999 the leadership of River Chapel recalls that they "had become tired of feeling like we had to continually defend the direction we had taken the church in order to reach the seeker." An active and vocal segment of the congregation had become disillusioned of the tone and style of the weekend worship events, often complaining through the use of comment cards that the staff had gone "too far," that the services were "too loud," and that the "depictions of life in the music, television, and film clips did not honor God." They expressed a desire to return to the quieter praise and worship choruses and the feeling of singing and praying together as a congregation. They worried about their children often characterizing the weekends as being "too focused on entertainment" and not "spiritually nourishing to the flock." For their part, staff and

supporters of the changes made over the past few years were angry that these critics were not taking part in the newly established variety of mid-week groups and classes at the church. This they argued is where “Christian fellowship, discipleship, and spiritual growth” were supposed to occur. “After all,” they argued, “they were putting in enormous time and money into these ministries for the core of the church.” And the weekend events, they countered, were for “communicating to the unconvinced.”

The complaints and counter-arguments that had been building privately for years became public in the spring of 1999. On one Sunday in March during a “vision casting series,” a series of weekend messages given each spring designed to forecast the direction of the church for the coming year, Pieter declared that River Chapel would “continue its commitment to be a church for the unchurched.” He directed the thrust of his message, and the piece remembered by many ten years later, to the longtime members of the church saying, “if you are demanding that you get all of your church experience on Sunday morning and you are unwilling to give this prime time to reaching people who do not know God, if you are doing this and calling yourselves mature Christians, all I am hearing is waah, like a little baby.” The message was laced with sarcasm for which Pieter later publicly apologized, but the point was not retracted. In fact the point became a centerpiece in later classes designed to teach new members “the River Chapel way.” In this new formulation defining the church, “mature Christians” are those who are “willing to give up the things that they want in their church in order to reach people for God.” Further, he argued that day, those who

were complaining should either “get onboard or find another place to go.” Those who were around at the time estimate that about 200 families including 6 staff members left the church that year. Many of those who left were families that began attending the church during the tenure of the founding pastor. Reaching the unchurched became, according to Paul, “a hill we were willing to die on.”

Even with the departures the church was still in need of additional meeting and office space. In the course of the transitional period the staff had grown from four to twenty full-time members and had begun working out of rented office space on the far opposite side of the city. An additional Sunday morning service had been added, and both services were regularly filled to the auditorium’s capacity. The leadership had begun a fundraising campaign over the course of the preceding year, and plans had already been drawn for the construction of a new larger auditorium fronted by an open and brightly lit lobby. When the pledges were counted that fall, the \$2.1 million campaign fell short by nearly half of the required funds to build onto the church. The plans had to be redrawn and scaled back. Instead of a new auditorium the church would expand their existing meeting space slightly and continue with plans for building the lobby.

The end of the transitional period came with the departure of 200 families invested in the church since its founding, the revelation of an affair involving another prominent church leader, and the failure of the building campaign. This led Patrick, Paul, and their staff to begin creating an explicit and formalized written declaration out of the many changes that had occurred since the departure of the founding pastor. During the following spring of 2000, the

remaining staff members dedicated their annual staff retreat to in Patrick's words, "defining our branch of the river." In large part this meant articulating a strong version of their mission to target unchurched people in the community for god. They chose the goal of reaching 10% of the unchurched county and incorporated this goal into the mission statement for the church. Paul once explained to me that their vision for River Chapel is similar to the tradition of tent revivals popular in the 19th century. He told me that they wanted to create a place where people who have had little church experience or have not been involved lately, "can come and get reconnected with God but then move on to some other local church community." He concluded, "It's one of our mottos around here: Helped people helping people." However, building and sustaining connections and a sense of investment among concentric circles outside the core has been a constant issue for the church since the shift represented by Patrick's declaration.

Creating a River-style church required concentrating power into the hands of a small number of paid staff. And, sustaining the River-style church concentrates pressures on the core of members that form around them as they are largely responsible for creating the connections for people who come through the door. In addition, they may also feel the strain of relying on a limited number of people with the expertise to produce work at the level of "excellence" thought necessary to reach the unchurched. One area where this is particularly evident in the case of the volunteer musicians who supply a key ingredient for the weekend services meant to reach the uncommitted seeker. Take for example the investment of time required to play in one of the River Chapel bands.

Beyond their other commitments to the church, musicians at River Chapel must commit a significant amount of time to the church in order to be in the band. They must agree to play their instruments one weekend a month, but some of the best may perform every other weekend. Music to be played at an upcoming service is distributed by recorded CDs and simple guitar chord sheets to the musicians about two weeks in advance. Each is responsible for learning their parts prior to the weekend that they will perform. Each weekend that musicians are going to be onstage, they arrive at the church around 4pm on Saturday afternoon for an hour and a half rehearsal where all of the elements of the worship service (the lights, video, music, and speech) are brought together for the first time. The musicians, production volunteers, and staff then eat together at 5:30 before quickly rehearsing one final time before the show. They perform from 6:30-7:30 on Saturday night and may leave the church by 8:00pm. They return at 7:00am on Sunday morning for breakfast and another full run-through. They perform twice more on Sunday morning and, after gathering their equipment, usually leave the church at about 1:00pm. As invested members of the church, many of the musicians also participate in the classes and groups (sometimes as leaders) that occur regularly throughout the week and all attend the twice monthly mid-week service whenever possible.

Recruiting enough musicians to carry off the elaborate performances may be somewhat of a specialized case. However, I often heard public and private expressions of concern for the lack of committed volunteers to do work in other parts of the church. For example, there seemed to be an almost continual

need for recruiting volunteers to run classes for and provide childcare through the children's ministry, particularly after the River Kids addition to the building was complete. And, financial giving, when it waned, was also considered a sign of ineffective connections (and communication) between the core members and the periphery audiences. During my time at River Chapel the staff initiated several different programs they hoped would help to bridge this divide. Some of these became sites where I sought people out to tell me about their experiences getting connected.

In the next chapter I provide an examination of the behind-the-scenes work paid staff and volunteers undertake in producing a mode of connection through the weekend worship events that I have described as *Alone/Together*. Producing these large weekend worship events is the central routine activity in the life of the church, and the worship events are the church's most salient public characteristic defining their place in the local religious scene. As such, the staff members and volunteers are particularly attentive to and articulate about the details of the production techniques they employ in service of reaching the unchurched seeker the moment one walks through their doors. They characterize their use of technology and their commitment to remaining relevant as postmodern practices necessary for reaching a postmodern generation. I begin with a discussion of this multivalent role that the term postmodern plays in the broader discourse among evangelical elites before moving into an analysis of how this discourse is practiced at River Chapel.

Chapter Four: The Production of River Chapel Worship

“...musical materials provide parameters (stylistic, physical, conventional) that are used to frame dimensions of experience (interpretation, perception, valuation, comportment, feeling, energy). This framing is central to the way in which music comes to serve as a device for the constitution of human agency” (Tia DeNora 2000:27).

“I was kind of lonely as a kid and the first time I really connected with anything was music. And it was music that wasn't super-positive, actually fairly depressing. But I know how much, I really felt like as a kid that those guys were the first people that understood me, I guess. And I think that a lot of the reason I do what I do at River Chapel is because I know how much music means to me and how I connected with it. And I think that what we do at River Chapel is a really, really positive way to connect with people through music” (Carter, an invested member and River Chapel musician).

Speaking of the Postmodern

Throughout my fieldwork with River Chapel the term “postmodernism” has proven as ephemeral as many of the phenomena its users, myself included, purport to describe by deploying it in various accounts of the church. Though now in wide popular currency, it remains a particular piece of academics’ argot and as such the term is often adopted and repurposed by people with an agenda and a desire to make claims about cutting edge (if often ill-defined) changes thought to have a wide-ranging impact on the human condition. I have pulled this rhetorical move in papers prepared for presentation with titles such as “Feeling Jesus in the Backbeat: Gender, Music and Emotion in the Postmodern Church”

(2006). No doubt as many people came to hear me describe a “postmodern church” as did how one might “feel Jesus” in a rhythm pattern made famous by The Beatles. I became painfully aware of problems with this move as I struggled to separate my notions of postmodernism -informed mostly by music and art- from what a “postmodern” church might be like if such a thing exists. When I began to incorporate the claims that River Chapel’s representatives insisted on making with phrases like “reaching the postmodern generation,” “using postmodern culture,” and “being postmodern” even simple acts of description become desperately complex.

I made a decision to bracket the questions “what is a postmodern church” and “does River Chapel conform to my own notions of postmodernism.” By the way, the answers are “I have no idea” and “no,” respectively. I began to focus instead on what I was hearing and experiencing by being around the church so much. But this move only slightly simplified the matter. By the many accounts I have collected while talking with people at River Chapel, by participating in small groups and classes, and by attending lectures and worship services, “postmodernism” seems to take on multiple characteristics including, but not limited to: a mindset one might chose to adopt; an essential condition of every generation following the media-saturated members of Generation X; a property of a culture entirely other to the culture they would claim for themselves, a cultural shift deeply affecting everyone including themselves; and a communications style and method that involves multiple sense organs at once¹⁵. To the people I spoke

¹⁵ On this last meaning see the D.min dissertation written by River Chapel’s Associate Pastor (Casey 2006).

with at River Chapel none of these are mutually exclusive. And often more than one use of the word was deployed in the course of a conversation.

I want to make one important caveat here. I am not suggesting that this is a common conversation in the public spaces of the church. Not all or even most people around the church are familiar with or have anything more than a passing interest in these issues. The typical church member I spoke with never used the term postmodern to describe their own identity or their experience of the church. In fact, the term frequently produced silences and conversational repair work when I would introduce it in interviews. However, the term is important and merits discussion in this chapter because it has currency among those responsible for producing the experiences of religion at River Chapel. Largely made up of staff members, educated lay leaders, and volunteers, this core group of people draw on the debates taking place in magazines, books, lecture halls, films, and websites that broadly comprise evangelical media to map out who they are and more importantly who they are not as they debate among themselves and, while I was there, with me. Just as I read Lyotard, was also inspired by Duchamp, and thoroughly turned off by Baudrillard, the people at River Chapel are enmeshed in relationships with their own touchstones of postmodernism. I will turn briefly to this broader conversation before returning attention to the practices for producing a particular “postmodern” culture at River Chapel.

Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern: Touchstones for a discussion on form and content

Religious practices in the US were transformed in relationship to the sweeping institutional and cultural changes associated with 20th century modernity. And at the beginning of a new century religious practices and their practitioners continue to rework traditions in relationship with the currents of social change. This relationship is irreducible to any one force, is reflexive, and is always open ended. Similar to the role it plays in stories about the shift from “traditional” to “modern” society, religion itself remains an object of debates among scholars and people who would reform, defend, or debunk it in a new age of change. For example, seminaries of all stripes regularly offer courses in postmodern culture, theology, and philosophy while extensive popular and academic literatures have developed discussing the implications for the place of religion in a period of accelerating globalization and during a time when many core Western narratives of advancing progress and liberty have been destabilized.

Again as with “modernism,” varying interpretations of “postmodernism” have become a flashpoint for debate within evangelical circles in the US and abroad¹⁶. To even briefly describe the many claims people have made on the “question of postmodernism” in relationship with Protestant tradition would require far more space than is within the limits of this chapter, the bulk of which might focus on the political rather than theological implications. However, here I

¹⁶ For a sense of this debate as it has developed within the literature of the conservative Protestant establishment, one might search the archives of Christianity Today for the keyword postmodern and its derivatives.

want to highlight the concrete work that goes in the ongoing production of religious culture within a church that has staked its own claim to “postmodernism.” As I have described in previous chapters, River Chapel positions itself as translating between “the world” often described by church leaders and membership as a hyper-mediated, humanistically-oriented and thoroughly secular culture of the unchurched and a kind of neotraditional discourse of belonging. In telling me and each other how they think about their efforts, and through watching closely as they carry out their routines sometimes often pitching in a hand, I have come to believe “postmodernism” wears the mask of many partially sketched characters introduced in telling a story about River Chapel. No less important for their incompleteness, these characters serve as foils and jesters, as heroes and villains in their tellings as well as my own.

Recently a branch of evangelical activists and leaders have sought to adopt and popularize much of the philosophical bent of postmodernism from the academy and claim a contemporary moment for the re-emergence of a take on “tradition” that differs significantly from the culturally conservative stance of the Christian Right. Identifying as an “emerging church,” this relatively diffuse movement has defined itself at least in part as a reaction against the perceived influences of modernism in the Christianity of the 20th century US, be it liberal accommodation or conservative insulation. Citing many of the shifts more secular cultural commentators take as indicative of a postmodernity, the unmooring and nearly limitless reproduction of signs and signifiers, for example, those in the emerging church movement advocate recasting theology and

practice to better engage with the coming age. In recent books such as *Velvet Elvis* (2006) and *The Irresistible Revolution* (2006) (but even more prominently on websites like *The Emergent Village*), the Emergent Church leaders challenge the organizational structures, worship and preaching practices, and political involvement (or sometimes lack of involvement) within the large suburban mega-churches of the previous generation¹⁷. They advocate small-scale and decentralized “conversations” and emphasize a contextual and pluralistic approach to the interpretation of scripture and its application to a fragmented society that they seek to engage on its own terms.

In a gesture of pastiche, gatherings of the emerging church might borrow freely from a range of sometimes disparate rituals. Prayer beads, meditation, incense, as well as the more common activities of listening to music, public talk, and the study of scripture may be combined variously in ad hoc worship rituals. And like those reformers who came before, those in the emerging movement frame their critiques of modernism and their own postmodern practices as a return to the “original church.”

This style of engagement with postmodernism has been met with criticism. For some conventional evangelical movement activists and public figures the term postmodernism is synonymous with radical relativism, secularism, and immorality. Many like Charles Colson (one time senior advisor to the Nixon

¹⁷ I have had an ongoing conversation with my colleague and friend Lloyd Chia about the social location of people who claim affiliation with the emergent church movement. I suggest that these seekers of the small, quiet, face-to-face worship spaces where they might reclaim the “old ways” are the children of the middle-class baby boomers reared in the booming and buzzing sanctuaries, classrooms, and affinity groups of suburban mega-churches. He politely lets me know he thinks this is an oversimplification. I’m looking forward to learning that he is right. His dissertation on the emergent church movement is currently forthcoming at the University of Missouri.

administration turned evangelical author and public figure) frame “postmodernism” as a world-view fundamentally at odds with the “Christian Worldview¹⁸” that they advocate. Others like James Dobson link postmodernism, the struggle for LGBTQ rights, abortion, and “judicial tyranny” to frame his contribution to “the struggle between godless postmodernism and the Judeo-Christian worldview.” In a typical note of encouragement to his audience Dobson writes, “To be sure immorality and postmodernism are still the dominate forces in our society, but there are hopeful signs that, at least in some areas, the tide may be turning” (Dobson 2003). Much like the reformers calling themselves the Emergent Church, Colson, Dobson, MacArthur and many others frame their critiques and practices as a return to the original church as well (or at least its preservation in the face of challenge).

The stories that these conservative defenders tell frames “postmodernism” as a thoroughly secular, coherent, and immoral “worldview” that must be overturned in order to preserve the authority and relevance of “the church” for peoples’ lives. Taking a stance similar to that taken by earlier defenders of “tradition” against “modernism,” these commentators position themselves as guarding their country’s very soul. For example, philosophy professor and popular writer Douglas Groothuis maintains “without a thorough and deeply rooted understanding of the biblical view of truth ... the Christian response to

¹⁸ This term is relatively new and represents an attempt to synthesize an audience in opposition to perceived threats. See “How Biblical is the Christian Right?” (Mitchell 2006) [The Religion and Culture Web Forum from the Martin Marty Center]

postmodernism... will be muted by the surrounding culture or will make illicit compromises with the truth-impoverished spirit of the day¹⁹.”

Discussions among conservative evangelical elites often revolve around the implications of “postmodernism” for the authority of the church to define and enforce an immutable truth from which flows the organization of all aspects of social life. For these elites “postmodernism” is a tool that their enemies wield in a war against that truth and thus against any possibility of creating a good society. Postmodernism here is quickly reduced to and made synonymous with “liberal relativism,” then often dispatched with a crude hypothetical involving primates or livestock. At River Chapel “postmodernism” occasionally undergoes a similar reduction especially when human rights are the topic of discussion. I never heard the ugly hypothetical mentioned above, but the reductive logic is the same.

More often staff members and the active inner circle of volunteers who populate this chapter frame “postmodernism” as a broad cultural shift that the local church must attend to in order to *become* a source of truth and authority. Interested members, particularly Paul who graciously served as my main interlocutor on these matters, often hedge on questions concerning the scope of truth and authority they desire. They do not want to be taken together with those pushing for the imposition of truth through law and politics in organizations like the Christian Right. Yet they agree with much of the agenda of these organizations and some participate in them. However, talk or action viewed as directly political is discouraged in the more public spaces of the church.

¹⁹ in Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism (2000)

Beyond the questions of truth and authority in matters of public policy and politics in the US, conservative defenders against “postmodernity” are often highly critical of the compromises they argue are being made within local congregations like River Chapel. Evangelist John MacArthur has been a vocal critic of what he terms the “pandering soft-sell” approach taken in many contemporary church services. He and others accuse “postmodern” congregations of “dumbing down” their messages and incorporating popular entertainment during their worship services in order to “give people what they want, rather than what they really need.” MacArthur represents a critique of River Chapel’s engagement with “postmodernism” that raises the question of truth and authority, but formulates this through critiques of method, style, and structure. Consequently MacArthur often serves as an arch rival and foil the staff of River Chapel draw on to educate and energize their membership.

Engaging the postmodern at River Chapel

Through the remainder of this chapter I examine the everyday practices that staff and volunteers undertake in the course of staking a claim to truth and authority by looking closely at the production of the large weekly worship rituals. The weekend worship event is important because it presents the most public face of the church. In Midwest City most people know about River Chapel and know something about their weekend worship events regardless of whether they have ever been to the church. For example, no matter how generically I frame my answer, I have never been able to describe my project to a resident of this city without that person then making reference to River Chapel. As a novice

ethnographer testing out the many rules of thumb for conducting research I sometimes found this reality vexing.

Within the church it is common knowledge among the congregation that the weekend worship services are designed to reach out to nonmembers living in the city. Yet, this is also the place where majority of those who would claim membership in the church have contact with and participate in the life of River Chapel on an ongoing basis. Regardless of a person's involvement in the many possible activities offered throughout the week, being a part of River Chapel means going to the church to worship on the weekend. Most importantly, the weekend worship service is the place where the philosophy and strategy of the "postmodern" church is brought to life. It is where members of River Chapel most frequently experience their religion and thus may serve as a text for interpreting part of the religious culture they are creating for themselves.

For several years now I have been an ethnographer in River Chapel writing and thinking about the local production of religious culture. River Chapel has closely patterned itself after Willow Creek, and the large professionally credentialed staff at River Chapel often characterizes their mission as "doing church differently in order to remain relevant to the postmodern culture." Early in my time at River Chapel, and many times thereafter, I had an opportunity to learn what both "doing church differently" and "postmodern culture" meant to the church leadership. River Chapel's leadership characterizes their strategy variously as "reaching the unchurched where they are," "using popular culture to connect people with God," or "making the local church relevant to the

postmodern mindset,” to offer a few examples. However these goals are articulated, the strategy that follows from these goals is paramount and influences even the smallest decisions in the life of the church. While the focus of this chapter on the way that the staff put their strategy into practice through the technical production of the large weekend worship event, it is worth noting by way of illustration that even seemingly insignificant decisions surrounding the event, concerning the flavors of coffee available in the lobby, and the typeset fonts to be used in the advertising literature for example, are made based on how they might impact the impression made on the “unchurched” coming through the door for the first time.

During my time studying the culture of River Chapel I had many opportunities learn the strategy and rationale for reaching the “unchurched postmodern.” In fact what I have come to call Learning the River Chapel Way is an activity central to the inner life of the church. It is core to their identity as an organization, and it is a story that they tell one another and newcomers often. I have participated in Learning the River Chapel Way in several different formats over the years. It is a presentation given regularly to potential new members should they choose to attend Welcome to River Chapel. This three-hour course is designed to provide a basic introduction to the church and is focused on convincing attendees that the weekend worship is theologically sound. The seminar serves as somewhat of a demonstration that, in the words of the senior pastor, “we really do know what we’re talking about here and we’re not just making it up.” Learning the River Chapel Way is also carried out in a more

extended and intensive fashion through a 10-week class called Directing the River. This is often considered the basic membership course and can be followed by two more 10-week courses called River Discipleship I and II, to be taken consecutively. I discuss the role of these and other courses in the overall organization of the church in other chapters.

Learning the River Chapel Way is a frequent activity among even long-time staff members as well. For example, following the Willow Creek sponsored Leadership Summit in the fall of 2007 Paul took it upon himself to refocus the staff on “the DNA of River Chapel” by leading didactic staff meetings in which staff members reiterated their understanding of and commitment to the River Chapel Way. And beyond meetings and classes, the specifics of strategy and rationale are very common conversation topics among staff when they gather in hallways, offices, and coffee shops. Of course this was especially true when I was involved in these conversations since I was fairly easily identified as a newcomer and particularly interested in Learning the River Chapel Way as a shared story and a frequent activity among church members.

In addition to legitimizing the church for newcomers, much of the work carried out through Learning the River Chapel Way involves elaborating arguments for the legitimacy of the *style* worship in the face critiques from other evangelicals like those described. In contrast to figures like Dobson, Colson, or MacArthur, the staff and other interested church members at River Chapel do not portray their culture as under siege from the new “postmodern culture.” In their framing of the relationship between “the culture” and the local church,

postmodernism is a culture in need of the guidance of the local church rather than a culture of threats against it. Aside from the publicly vocal defenders of “traditional” conservative Protestantism, the legitimizing aspects of Learning the River Chapel Way are often directed toward the mainline churches that make up a bulk of the local religious ecology.

One crisp fall morning early in my fieldwork I accompanied Paul, River Chapel’s associate pastor, to a meeting of local church leaders in Midwest City. Paul had recently completed an advanced degree in ministry and had arranged to teach a day-long seminar titled “Reaching the Emerging Generation” to a group of mainline protestant pastors of the downtown churches. The opportunity to address this particular audience, as I later learned, was rare. Like many small cities, the religious geography of Midwest City is divided between the older mainline Methodist, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches downtown and the newer Pentecostal, Independent, Holiness, and Southern Baptist churches in the residential neighborhoods and among the strip malls and business parks on the suburban edges²⁰. This was to be Paul’s first visit to the

²⁰ Of course there are “mainline” churches on the city’s edges as well, just as there are many conservative protestant churches in the central city neighborhoods. In addition the historically black churches are located both downtown and in the central neighborhoods. However there is little if any formal integration among the pastors of downtown churches, the historically black churches, and conservative protestant churches. For an analysis of one group attempting to bridge this gap through domestic violence prevention and outreach training see Kendra Yoder “Negotiating an Historical Divide: Women of faith doing advocacy in the domestic violence movement.” Presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Louisville, Kentucky. October 17-19, 2008.

meeting of the downtown church leaders and their first time hosting a representative from one of the “new” churches²¹.

That morning in the Hillel House on the local university campus Paul warned the mostly male pastors of the downtown churches that a qualitatively different culture was developing in United States and that if they wanted to continue to have a voice in that culture, they had better learn about its inhabitants, their fears, desires, motivations, and styles of learning. People with this “postmodern mindset” he argued, are skeptical of definitive answers and “prefer to hear ‘it has been my experience’ rather than ‘this is true for everyone.’” This new culture, he argued, is “hungry for relational connections because a legacy of broken and dysfunctional homes has failed to provide psychological security and a base for personal identity.” The postmodern person is both “distrusting of the institutional church” while at the same time “spiritually curious.” Paul explained to the group that “while postmoderns [sic] are willing to consider the immaterial as a personal power and embrace mystery and transcendence, they fault the traditional church for being unwilling to accept responsibility for its part in the world’s desperate condition.” He went on to suggest that they are “disillusioned with society’s solutions to these problems. Materialism, unrestrained pleasure and utilitarianism have failed to create the utopian experience promised by modernity.” Finally he continued, “The postmodern mindset values authenticity and expects excellence. They appreciate a person

²¹ The leadership at River Chapel has intentionally cultivated connections with the chamber of commerce as well. It was considered by many at the church to be a terrific sign of their success at “reaching the city” when the church was invited to join the local chamber of commerce and then to host a chamber of commerce breakfast. As of this writing, they are the only church in the city to have done so.

admitting faults, but 'being real' does not give presenters an easy out. In order to be both excellent and authentic," he argued, "great communicators must speak in the vernacular of their times. And the language of the postmodern is that of popular culture," he concluded.

Paul's description of the postmodern mindset may tell us more about the concerns of contemporary conservative evangelicalism than about the mindset of any group that one might label "the postmoderns." Yet his diagnosis of contemporary American culture in some way mirrors that of others interested in assessing the spiritual state of recent generations (Roof 2001; Wuthnow 2000).

At River Chapel the engagement with postmodernism is carried out through its mission to reach the unchurched with the word of god. To become relevant to the unchurched, they argue, the local church must understand the concerns of and speak the language of the "postmodern person." In thinking about how to achieve this mission, the staff at River Chapel engages two questions. The first is a question of audience: the "postmodern generation" according to the staff at River Chapel are engaged (some might say obsessed) with popular culture and media; they are hip, disillusioned, culturally aware, and alienated. They "value authenticity and excellence." Above all they are skeptical of the local church and its traditions and must be approached carefully on their own cultural territory. The second is a question of method. "Postmodern people," they argue, "expect an experience in church that compares with their experiences outside of church." Postmodern people seek out "experiential environments" and therefore, they reason, "creating an excellent environment

where people can meet God is essential for the church to create new and better Christians.” Creating this environment on a weekly basis is a practical problem for the staff and volunteers at River Chapel. And like any organizational activity it requires engaging in rather routine and mundane daily work.

In the next section I trace that production work from the initial directives of administrators through to the final adjustments made to the sound system. I pay particular attention to the technical work carried out by the staff members most directly responsible for controlling the environments they create. For the most part they are professionals and I frequently present their descriptions, drawn from recorded interviews, of the work they do and their reasons for doing it. Following this I will return to a discussion of emotion in the production of this religious culture.

Mediating for god and worshiper

As with all decisions governing the life of River Chapel, the production of the worship events begins at the top of the organizational structure with the senior staff members who comprise the Pastoral Advisory Team. Shortly after securing permission to pursue fieldwork in the church I found myself sitting in the living room of a well appointed three-story suburban home with five people who I would later learn are the senior staff of the church. There was the senior pastor, charismatic Patrick wearing blue jeans and a striped polo shirt. He introduced himself with a smile that bordered on a grin and I remembered later being struck by the worn brown leather wristband on his right arm. For years I attributed his style and demeanor to his being a transplant directly from the

beaches of southern California. I even pictured him with a well worn surfboard now neglected and hanging somewhere in his garage. It wasn't until I began conducting interviews that I discovered Patrick was born in New Jersey, reared in Connecticut, and educated at a seminary in Texas.

Paul, who was providing my introductions as he would continue to do for the next three years, explained to Patrick and the rest that I was interested in how River Chapel worked and was there to learn their process. I quickly met Beth, Karen, and Mitch and was invited to sit on the overstuffed sofa facing two-story windows and a stone fire place on the far wall. Mitch had set up an easel in front of the fire place and propped a very large pad of blank paper there. Patrick distributed printed copies of notes he had brought with him to each person, three single spaced sheets stapled in the corner. He told the group that his quarterly retreat had been productive, that he had a vision for several upcoming series themes, and he would be happy to have their feedback. I later learned that the notes and plans made at this meeting would set the agenda for the rest of the church's staff and thus for the church as a whole for the next three months.

The staff and volunteers of River Chapel are divided into five teams including Pastoral Advisory. They are the Creative Arts Team, the Christian Formation Team, the Family Life Team, and the Guest Services Team. Once the Pastoral Advisory Team has met and decided on some basic content for the messages in the coming months, these message outlines are then distributed to the various other staff teams. The weekend worship services are often bundled into a three or four-week series with titles like "Say What?" (Discussing the

Confusing Passages from the Bible) or “24” (detailing the last 24 hours of Christ’s life using the popular television show by the same name as a model). Each team then begins work toward integrating the themes of the upcoming series into their departmental activities for the weeks corresponding to the series. Teams begin making specific preparations for a new series up to six weeks in advance.

Series themes generally address what senior staff presumes to be common and shared contemporary life experiences among congregants and tend to focus on problems in managing interpersonal relationships, personal moods / motivations, family finance, and personal responsibility²². Each weekend difficulties are represented and resolved in the course of the worship event conducted in particular and patterned emotional cycle, what I call the UP/Down/UP emotional narrative. In conjunction with the theme of the service, lighting, sound, and images are combined to evoke the feeling of a lover betrayed, or a lustful and guilt-ridden consumer of online pornography (examples I return to below). The sermon is then situated as a quiet climax during the period of solemn affect carved out between sets of upbeat rock songs performed by the large band. This quiet stretch of talk makes a potent appeal to audience members’ emotions as well. One is asked to identify with the feelings of personal failure evoked to this point and look toward to the saving grace offered through a personal relationship with a living god.

On that summer afternoon in Beth’s living room, moving from theme to the fully realized weekend production began with Paul taking up position next to the

²² Titles and a brief synopsis for all of the services for the past 6 years are kept in 3-ring binders in the bookstore. Anyone can look through these to purchase a CD or DVD copy of a past service.

easel and blank pad of paper with a marker. He draws two lines vertically dividing the pad into three sections and labels them subject, compliment, and application, and explains to me that this is how they organize all of their communications. They ask themselves what it is that they are saying to people, their subject. Then they ask what they are trying to say about their subject, the compliment. And finally, how is what they are saying about the subject useful to the audience? What is its application to their lives? The series idea that Patrick has presented them with is on the seven deadly sins, one sin per week for the next seven weeks stretching through the hot Midwestern summer. One by one each sin is recorded on a new sheet of paper at the top of the column marked “subject” while the senior staff brainstorm ways to make the ancient injunctions feel relevant to the lives of the men and women sitting in their audience.

Working in conjunction with the pastoral advisory team, the creative arts team is the group most directly responsible for designing and executing all of the activity that transpires in the auditorium during the weekly (and mid-week) worship events. Given that my interests lay in the use of the arts, music, and popular media in the production of religious culture, it made sense to spend the bulk of my time working with these two teams. Primarily this involved attending weekly team meetings and the rehearsals held prior to the worship services. I would also attend the worship events both as an audience member and as a behind the scenes observer. I would often take advantage of the ability to observe the same event from both of these vantage points since any one production occurs three times in a weekend.

During the time I occupied an empty office in the basement of the church I would find reasons to wander up to the auditorium to spend some time hanging out. This often meant contributing to the mundane back stage labor required to mount a large scale performance on a weekly basis. At various times I found myself moving equipment and props around the stage, helping to assemble set pieces, or simply cleaning up and arranging chairs. Ultimately I learned the bulk of what I know about the production process at River Chapel by talking with members of the Creative Arts Team. This occurred in both formal interviews where I asked elliptical and often wrong-headed questions, as well as through the many casual conversations I had with team members as we tried to pass the time while engaged in the routine tasks of stagecraft.

On Monday afternoons the Creative Arts Staff, five men and two women, all full-time staff in their late 20s and early 30s take up positions on the couches and chairs around their team leader's office. These meetings have the atmosphere of a creative group workshop appearing relatively leaderless and free-flowing, though Mitch often does exercise the final say. For two, sometimes three hours, team members draw on their collective stock of pop culture knowledge, pouring through stacks of CD catalogues, scrolling through each others' iPods, and brainstorming as many scenes from movie and television shows as they can recall. Their goal is to match every "creative element" of the service to the message themes passed down from the senior staff for upcoming weeks. The entire length of one wall in their workspace is covered in gridlines drawn on a whiteboard. Across the top and along the X axis of the grid are

written all of the message topics for the next six to eight weeks. Down the Y axis are boxes corresponding to each element to be used in support of the message themes; video clips, stage design, lighting, and music.

The first time I joined in on one of these brainstorming sessions the team has just received the themes from the pastoral advisory team meeting described above. The task at hand on this Monday afternoon was to choose creative elements for each of the seven deadly sins. I had been listening somewhat anxiously as members of the team called out scenes from movies and dozens of titles of pop songs corresponding to lust, greed, and gluttony. Being a competent member of the popular media culture and sharing many demographic characteristics with team members, I knew at least something about practically all of the songs and movies being suggested. So when the lively give-and-take stalled on the sin of sloth I ventured a contribution of my own.

I suggested that the band play “Longview,” a 1994 hit by the punk rock band Green Day. The group took my suggestion seriously even though I was meeting many of them for the first time. Andrew went to the computer and started to look up the lyrics to the song, while Chad and Christie began look for it on their iPod music players. After a few moments searching Andrew began to laugh and tell the rest of the group, “There is no way we’re doing this one.” He assured me that the suggestion was on point. Indeed it was a song with a loping melody sung by a slothful protagonist telling of his inability to muster the motivation to complete even the simplest tasks. But, apparently in my excitement to jump in on this new fun game I had missed a crucial point that I

wouldn't fully understand until much later. While all of the products of the popular media industries are potentially fair game for Christian reinterpretation and use, the elements incorporated in the weekend worship services must be broadly accessible and appealing in order to be recognized as legitimate material for building worship. According to the staff, the Green Day hit, while popular, would be neither accessible nor appealing to the church's target audience.

The praise music that opens and closes each worship event is chosen much the same way as the performance songs, but without as much attention to their relationship to the message for the weekend. As I show below, these songs are meant to move people to emotional high-points in the service and prepare them to encounter god.

It usually falls to Mitch or Barry to comb through the latest batch of hit praise songs from the top 40 Contemporary Christian Music charts and select the ones that best fit with the style of music played at River Chapel. If sheet music is available, they will copy and distribute the chord progressions and lyrics to the members of the band two or three weeks prior to the weekend they will be onstage. If sheet music is not available for the song, Chris will note the chord progressions in the verses, chorus, and bridge by ear. He will sometimes do significant rearrangements of existing popular praise songs as well. There are many amateur songwriters among the staff and volunteers at River Chapel. In fact Mitch is widely recognized in the church for his training in composition from a prestigious music conservatory. However, the staff avoids using any original material in the public worship events because, they argue, the professional

praise songs are often better in terms of their composition and lyrical content. They also worry about arguments and jealousy that may arise over the selection of church members' songs for performance in the weekend worship events.

Many of the staff and long time members talk about the importance of using their respective specialties (video, light, sound, talk) to “create a moment” for the audience attending the worship event. While the group moved on to another sin and more brainstorming, I was left wondering how then they actually bring all these pieces together. Over time I came to understand that “creating a moment” means crafting a flow of film, light, words, and music to create a moment for feeling connection.

Creating emotional connections through popular television and film

Clips from popular television programs and commercial films are a key element in the worship rituals at River Chapel, and the members of the creative arts team pay significant attention to selecting the right clip to support the message for the weekend. These clips are usually between two and four minutes in length and are positioned between the opening high-energy praise songs and the beginning of the sermon. They are designed to introduce and offer a framing for the subject of the weekend service. In this position they also serve as a transitional point between the high energy and positive feelings conveyed by the upbeat songs and the low affect lecture style talk that is to follow. The clips are often introduced by a title graphic projected onto the screens telling the audience the subject of the message for the weekend and therefore providing some context for what they are about to see. While these

clips play across the screens the audience watches in a darkened auditorium. When the clips are finished playing, the lights are brought back up to about 35% of the intensity of the opening praise songs, and the speaker for the weekend will take the stage and use the content of the clip as a jumping off point for the sermon, frequently referencing the clip throughout.

As both an announcement of the weekend's message and a key transitional point in the worship service, video clips are a significant element in the production of the ritual experience at River Chapel. As with the choice of popular top-40 songs, choices about which clips ultimately become part of the service are made by the creative arts team in their Monday afternoon meetings. I was often struck by how the group was able to agree on which clip from the ones suggested would be the "best fit" for the weekend message. Often within 10 minutes team members would be debating between their top three choices among the dozen or more presented for consideration.

As the team member responsible for editing and delivering the final video clips, Chad describes the typical process of video selection as follows: "We'll brainstorm from the scenes that we can remember from movies that all of us have seen that would convey whatever message is for the week. Out of those we pick a couple of ones that best convey the feeling that we want to get to the audience." Members of the team tell me this is often easy work because they share such a large common stock of movie and TV references and feel that they could comfortably gauge the audience's ability to recognize and identify with the scenes.

It was especially instructive then when the creative arts team could not come to an agreement over which clip to select for a message titled “Pluck Out Your Eye” to be delivered during a series on “the unusual passages from the Bible.” The pastoral advisory team had decided that the subject for this particular “odd passage” (Mathew 18:9) was infidelity, and the “compliment” was to be the prevalence and problems associated with men’s consumption of Internet pornography. For this message, the creative arts team presented Paul, who was to deliver the message in Patrick’s absence, with a choice of two video clips that he might use in support of his message about sexual fidelity. One clip was pulled from the film *Love Actually* and featured an argument between a husband and wife over a bracelet he had purchased for another woman, the subtext being this purchase indicated the husband was engaged in an extramarital affair.

The other clip was selected from the popular television series *Friends*²³. The clip involved the ending of a romantic relationship between two of the central characters, Ross and Rachel. Normally a half hour situation comedy, this particular episode stands out as a more dramatic portrayal of the central characters’ actions. Members of the creative arts team were unanimous in their decision that the clip from *Friends* was the best fit and would tell the story they wanted to set up the week’s message. But they were hesitant about including this clip because they worried about the emotional impact it would have on the audience.

²³ “Friends” was a popular half hour situation comedy airing Thursday nights on NBC from 1994 until 2004. The final episode remains one of the most watched series finales in television history. Paul Olsen drew my attention to the important fact that in the US *Friends* consistently ranked in the top 5 shows for white television audiences, but ranked in the middle 50s among blacks. “Friends,” he pointed out, “is a very white show” (personal communication 01/20/07).

The television program *Friends*, they reasoned, was extremely popular and well liked among their audience members because it reflects their own lives and that of their own friends. In fact, Chad described the appeal of including the *Friends* clip in terms of the identification audience members would have with the characters saying, “The reason I like that clip the best is because it takes something that people think is safe, *Friends*, all these people you have grown to love over ten years, and it puts you right in the middle of the pain of their mistake. It hurts you because, you know, Ross hurt Rachel and you can see that.” This was the consensus on the team. The *Friends* clip would work in the weekend service better than the clip from the film *Love Actually* because of the particular emotions that it makes visible on the screens. Chad continues explaining his problem with the clip about the questionable bracelet, “It didn’t feel as harsh as those situations are. And that was kind of distracting to me because I didn’t really feel it a 100%. Plus it was just a shorter scene and didn’t convey the back story of the bracelet. It did say what we wanted, but it just didn’t feel as emotionally involved as I would like to be.” As Chad points out, the clip from the film did the work of illustrating a clear moral lesson; deceit damages marriages. But, he and the others maintained that calling on *Friends* would do the work necessary to evoke the pain of infidelity in a quick and easily accessible manner.

In the days leading up to the weekend service many members of the arts team speculated out loud about the tough decision the associate pastor had to make and which clip he might choose. At the time I made a note in one of my journals: it is surprising that any decision, particularly one concerning such a

prominent element of the service, would be left open to debate for the entire week leading up to the performance. The dilemma Paul was considering, and to which the arts team members were reacting, was over the intense emotional impact that the breakup scene between the Ross and Rachel characters would, they all imagined, have on the people attending the weekend worship service. The team's main concern was that this clip might evoke such strong emotions from audience members who identify closely with the characters that it would be a challenge to redirect attention to the larger issue at hand, the danger of internet pornography and the redeeming power of god; an issue, it is worth noting, that is not really the subject of either clip. Paul speculated that the men in the audience may feel so convicted by watching the consequences of Ross's failure and the women similarly affected by Rachel's decision to end the relationship that the rest of the sermon would simply be too difficult for them to endure²⁴.

The decision to include the clip was not finalized until the Saturday rehearsal, the day of the first weekend service. That afternoon Paul announced that he had chosen to "take the risk" and include the *Friends* clip to illustrate Mathew's injunction to pluck out your offending eye²⁵. His plan was to temporarily lift the mood of the audience immediately following the clip with a joke before the message began. As the clip ended and the lights slowly rose, Paul appeared from offstage wearing a black eye patch over his right eye offered

²⁴ Staff members argued in effect that by dipping to such a low point in advance of the sermon the emotional arc from high to low to high again would be too difficult to pull off.

²⁵ The passage is from the Book of Mathew chapter 18 verse 9. Decisions about what audio, visual, design, and lighting elements to include in the weekend events are normally finalized weeks in advance. The last minute inclusion of this clip highlights the seriousness of this particular choice for the staff.

the audience a facetious apology for his appearance citing the rough week he had just endured.

The display of emotion

Like many contemporary conservative protestant churches, the physical space of the worship auditorium at River Chapel is visually muted. Flat black paint covers everything overhead. The walls, carpets, and upholstered chairs are all varying shades of grey-toned blue. There are no sacred symbols or images on display, no statues, relics, or structural embellishments of any kind. At River Chapel all visual stimulation is created electronically and entirely focused on and around the stage. The clips from television and films, like the clip described above, are displayed on three 60" plasma displays suspended above the stage and two massive projection screens high on the walls to either side. When the band plays the set of praise songs that opens each weekend ritual, the plasma displays above the stage are filled with song lyrics superimposed over computer generated (CG) graphics while live video feeds of the band's performance is projected onto the screens at stage left and right²⁶.

When the band plays a "performance song," often a top-40 hit selected like the video clips for its accessibility and interpretative connection to some aspect of the week's message, all screens display the live mix of video feeds rather than a combination of words and images. During these songs audience participation is implicitly discouraged. Audience members are not asked to stand

²⁶ These live feeds are referred to as "Imags" for Image Magnification by the production teams. For a detailed view of how each aspect of production is presented over the course of one worship event see the sample call sheet included as Appendix A.

and the lyrics of performance songs are not displayed²⁷. The house lights are once again completely darkened (0% intensity). These video images of the performers are captured using three broadcast-quality high definition cameras positioned on motorized tripods around the auditorium and two stationary cameras onstage²⁸. Each camera is operated by a volunteer wearing a headset connecting her or him with Mike, the staff video director, and Chad both seated at a video production console located below the stage. From here they can view a bank of monitors displaying the feeds from all five cameras as well as any computer graphics. A portable television sits on top of the production console and displays a wide angle shot of the entire auditorium. Mike and Chad can consult this monitor to see their video composition as a whole and to make adjustments over the course of the event.

In his role as director, Mike instructs the camera operators to compose various shots of the action on stage by modulating camera angle, focus, and zoom while Chad operates the video console mixing the five feeds in real time as the band performs. These shots are often composed to bolster feelings evoked by the other elements in play at any one points in time. For example Mike, Chad, and the camera operators will often create a soft focus close-up shot of the vocalist to convey intimacy throughout a song with lyrics written in the first person about the singer's desire to be near to god. When sequenced with shots of other

²⁷ Periodically people attending the church have complained about the words to these performance songs not being displayed on at least some of the screens.

²⁸ The cameras are high definition Sony DXC-D50s popular with many documentary film makers and small production studios. The onstage cameras are less expensive Cannon XL2s marketed as high-end consumer electronic equipment.

individual players or the band as a whole, this close-up becomes a kind of visual riff that is returned to again and again. The riff is particularly affective during verses when the singer occupies center stage as a lone supplicant longing for a personal connection with god.

Like the musical dynamics and instrumentation used in contemporary praise songs, the video production mix projected onto the screens more or less follows a set of recognizable conventions borrowed from television, films, and music videos. The visual language used for the praise songs that open and close each service can seem even more powerful when juxtaposed with the procession of gently fading images described above. For example, sharp and rapid cuts among shots of the musicians are conventional for the faster paced, up-tempo numbers that open and close each worship service. These visual conventions serve to add a sense of energy and tension in the representation of the action onstage. For example, picture the common recurrence of an off-axis shot of the lead guitarist's hands slightly distorted and mixed into the flow of images as he works through an intense solo.

This brings me to a brief aside in my discussion of the video production techniques. In the section on audio production below I spend a good deal of time describing the use of machines for processing and shaping sound produced within the auditorium. I am able to do this because I have some familiarity with this technology. But, it is worth noting that similar effects can be applied to video as well, and the creative arts staff loves to incorporate these "special effects" into their productions. However, despite their enthusiasm staff members tell me they

have to self-monitor to ensure these techniques are subtle enough so as not to distract or turn off audience members. Among these, one interesting though difficult to describe effect presents the illusion that the action captured by the cameras is occurring slower than, but still in sync with, the music being played. This is almost always applied to shots of the drummer and has the effect of exaggerating his movements somewhat. Every time I have been in the audience and this shot appears during a praise song, I have felt strongly compelled to dance with the unnervingly slow image of the drummer by moving my body in time with the down beat. This is true despite my really not liking the music.

Watching the creative arts staff produce their own music video provides an opportunity to see how they use these special effects in an even more dramatic way. Here they compose a short video in which a young man sits in a chair strumming an acoustic guitar and singing a simple ballad. His performance takes place in the middle of a public plaza in the daytime. The staff took the equipment to the nearby capital city to film this video. To capture the feeling they wanted to convey, they filmed the man lip syncing and strumming the song at half of the normal speed at which it is played. Then they synchronized that film footage to the song as it is play at regular tempo. When the composition is then played together with its soundtrack, it appears as if the young man seated in the chair is playing and singing at a normal speed while the activity in the background transpires in fast-motion. Chad, the lead for these in-house video productions, explained that they wanted to convey “that sense of just being alone in the world and how it’s sometimes hard for people to just slow down long enough to connect

with something outside themselves.” Interestingly enough they also tried the reverse of the same technique but said that clip did not capture the feeling that they were going for.

I will offer one final illustration of how the staff uses their video production system to display emotional moments again drawing on an example from the “Pluck Out Your Eye” service discussed above. As I mentioned, for this service The Creative Arts Team had decided to have the band perform “*Guilty*” by the 1990s era industrial rock band Gravity Kills²⁹ as the piece that will introduce the topic of the sermon (see appendix B). During the week leading up to the service, Mike tells me that the song feels “hard and fast, so the cameras will be zooming in and out really quickly to capture the momentum and feeling with lots of hard cuts between camera shots.” Additionally, the creative arts team chose to drive home the point of the Gravity Kills number and the message for the week by inserting a computer generated graphic at key moments of the song. Mike explains, “we have a CG (a computer graphic) that is just the word GUILTY in white block letters over a solid black background. So, we’re going to flash that randomly across all the screens during the chorus when Mitch is singing the lines ‘I’m guilty, he’s guilty, and you’re guilty too.’” This song was performed early in the service and was used along with the clip from the television program *Friends* to set up a tense and charged emotional atmosphere in which audience members feel the gravity of the message discussing the dangers of letting one’s eyes get the best of them.

²⁹ This song was released in 1996 on the band’s self titled album Gravity Kills under the record label TVT. The original song can be heard here: <http://www.myspace.com/gravitykillsband>.

To musically resolve this tension and dovetail with the uplifting theme of renewed commitment to and connection with god that concludes every service, the creative arts team chose to close with the popular rock ballad “It Ends Tonight” by All American Rejects. Again Mike describes his video production techniques for displaying the feel of this song in comparison with the opening song. “This one is a slower pop song, and so the feel will involve some slower fades in and out of the different shots and more close-ups of the band members.” Through series of slow dissolves between alternating close-ups of band members and long steady shots of a lead vocalist lit with a deep blue spotlight, the video production staff works to communicate the application of the weekend message to those gathered in the auditorium; through participation in the life of River Chapel they can overcome the difficulties of lust and sexual transgression (represented this weekend by loosely coupling adultery and men’s consumption of Internet pornography) and feel peace. When displayed alongside and above the musicians’ and the speaker’s performance onstage the video system provides access to a powerful language for articulating the trajectory of feelings one might adopt for experiencing grace and connection with god.

Lighting the way

While people are the center of the action that is displayed on stage and screens providing the visual focus in the worship auditorium, the production of the worship environment is less obviously, but no less pervasively, constructed through control over both ambient room and stage lighting. In the auditorium dozens of multicolor directional lighting pots are suspended from the rafters

above as well as in front of and to the sides of the stage. These and the overhead lights in the auditorium are all controlled by a large console, not unlike an audio mixing console, located in the back of the room.

Christie is the full-time staff person on the creative arts team dedicated to lighting production and design. As with the video production staff, Christie has several volunteers working each weekend to operate the control console. Together they carry out the partially automated lighting programs that she spends large portions of her workweek designing to support the songs, videos, and message for each worship service. Christie creates these programs and designs to work in tandem with the other elements of production. Like the others, she is casually articulate and detailed in describing her role in the production in terms of the feelings she can generate with light. Christie is careful in describing her work for me, and it is worth quoting her at length from one of our formal interviews. Here Christie describes the broad contours of how she uses light to structure the flow of the service using only the overhead lights that provide the ambient light in the auditorium:

“At the very beginning when people are walking into the auditorium we want it to be more brightly lit. We want people to feel OK coming into a bright welcoming space that isn’t florescent. We try and pick light fixtures that use certain types of light bulbs that cast a softer light. It feels welcoming. But then as the service starts we’ll progressively lower the light in the room so you become less and less participatory and more and more engaged within yourself, and pay attention within, and process internally. So, by the time we get to Patrick’s message the room is pretty dim, because we want people focusing on him and focusing on what he’s saying. And then again as we come back out of the service the light is stepped back up so that when we’re walking out the room is again brightly lit.”

These changes in the level of light in the auditorium, from bright to dark to bright again, are rendered in percentages that Christie programs into the computer-controlled lighting console that in turn controls the house and stage lights. The changes Christie describes above are keyed to moments in the services as the songs, video clips, and spoken portions are presented. Each week the creative arts team creates a cue sheet to indicate exactly when, for example, the house lights will be lowered from 60% to 40% to 20%, and when in turn they will be raised again. A volunteer, or sometimes Christie, monitors the system making adjustments and cueing changes as needed during the event. An example of the lighting changes can be seen on a cue sheet taken from the “Pluck Out Your Eye” service included as appendix B.

Christie describes the specific lighting decisions beyond controlling the house lighting during the services as having control over color, intensity, focus, and movement. She describes how she uses these properties of light in conjunction with the other aspects of the service in terms of her ability to “...communicate with the theatrical concert lighting.” She tells me that when she is designing the lighting for the services: “I’m thinking about colors, I’m thinking about intensity. I’m thinking about who is lit, who is important in this moment. Do I want the song to feel fun and lively and energetic? Or is this a moment where I want it very dark and almost oppressive?” I asked Christie to help me understand her lighting choices for creating two of these moments over the course of a special weekend dedicated each year solely to the creative arts staff. Drawing on a service she was particularly proud of, Christie illustrates one moment of

high-energy celebration she sought to create in conjunction with a lively pop/reggae song by the band Ozomatli and then one of low-energy introspection during a Christian-rock ballad that followed.

Christie recalls that for the upbeat song, “I chose reds and oranges and yellows, things that convey bright sun. I had them flashing and changing and moving very quickly though the whole song. By complementing the energy of the song with those bright fast moving colors I think I was able to increase the energy of the song. I chose the reds and oranges and yellows to communicate that this is a bright happy time, this is a celebration!”

She juxtaposes this celebratory atmosphere with the lighting she chose for a popular Christian ballad during which her goal was to “communicate intimacy, create an intimate moment.” In a completely darkened auditorium, this song was performed by a female lead vocalist accompanied at first only by a softly strummed acoustic guitar. Verses of this ballad are addressed to those who would suggest that Jesus of Nazareth was a great teacher, a prophet, but nevertheless not of divine parentage. These verses alternate with a chorus asking listeners “what if you’re wrong?” As performed in this service, each return to the chorus becomes more pronounced by degree as instrumentation is built up. The song concludes with a full-throated chorus and refrain backed by several singers and the full band. Christie describes her lighting program for this performance piece as a build toward this climactic moment where:

“We wanted to create a moment of just overwhelming love and try to help people experience God’s love and fullness. So the entire song was lit with blue, which holds the moment down... kind of keeps the moment squelched a little bit. But, then at the climax of the song the whole room

turned to yellow, all the light turned yellow. It evoked that sunrise experience, that awakening. So with light we were able to communicate first that almost sad, low feeling, that kind of down... We moved from that introspective feel and then rising into this love, adoration feeling.

Christie concludes, "So I think light can create energy, but can inhibit energy too I think. Sometimes we want that. Sometimes we want to keep the energy way down here, to help people to feel that feeling of alone-ness and sorrow."

Creating sound connections

Of all of the elements employed in the production of worship at River Chapel, music is the most prominent and one most immediately bound to time and affect. Among all of the staff, special attention is paid to song selection, arrangement, and order. The weekend worship rituals always begin with two, sometimes three, songs performed live by a large rock-style band, including an electronic drum kit, two keyboards, two guitars, bass, percussion, and backing and lead vocals. During the upbeat songs that open and close worship events participants are encouraged to stand and "get into the spirit." Phil, an electric guitar player who frequently leads one of the bands, argues that these praise songs are chosen for their up-tempo joyful qualities to help people to get into the mood to meet God "even if they haven't been listening to the words, or they have been thinking about the fight they just had, or worrying about their boss." In addition to contemporary Christian music, popular songs from secular music charts are performed regularly. These "performance songs" usually follow the display of a television or film clip while the lighting in the auditorium remains reduced to a minimum and audience members are seated. Performance songs frequently serve as transition points following the high of the praise songs, cueing

the audience into the low-arousal introspective state that accompany the messages and prayers. As such, they are a crucial component of the Up/Down/Up emotional narrative generated throughout each worship event.

Like video clips and lighting designs, the selection of particular songs is governed by the message themes created by Patrick and the others on the pastoral advisory team. The creative arts team members choose songs that they hope will illustrate the message and connect with a shared personal problem or its solution. Importantly, the songs selected do not necessarily represent the problem or its solution discursively. This can be done in the message itself. As the examples of the performance songs discussed in this chapter illustrate, music is often chosen because it dynamically evokes the (often negative) feeling of having a particular problem or the (always positive) feeling of renewed commitment, resolve, and optimism at being able to overcome a particular problem. Similarly, excerpts from popular television shows and movies are selected for their portrayal of contemporary experiences, both in terms of the action and dialogue on screen as well as the emotion evoked by the scene as a whole.

In the excerpt below, Phil describes how he restructures one of his favorite popular Christian praise songs to build toward a climactic feeling similar to the one described by Christie. Like Mitch, Phil is responsible for the orchestration of the songs that will be performed during services where he is acting as music

director³⁰. I asked Phil to walk me through his process as he puts together a praise song with large dynamic changes. He tells me:

“With the song “How Great is Our God” I like to start out with just acoustic guitar in the first verse. Then on the third line of that verse I bring in the bass. And, the bass fills it up just a little bit, but the lines, notes and words are still smooth and light. Then we sing that first chorus with just high hat and kick drum. There’s no snare or toms hitting. There’s a little bit of keyboard and the electric guitar plays a scarce picking part. So while their participation is still small, by now the instruments have all come into play. What I’ve seen this do in the congregation is to create an inviting feel to sing the chorus. To just sing this chorus, even if they haven’t been listening to the words, or they have been reading the program or thinking about the fight they just had, or worrying about their boss. Your heart doesn’t have to be in it yet, but here’s the invitation to sing: how great is our God. And each time the verse comes around I purposefully add in parts. So the snare starts playing a backbeat. The bass moves into a different finger pattern. The electric guitar starts to strum. Then we hit that chorus and really open it up. We try to give people an understanding, here is the invitation to how you could worship. Here is the offer to sing to your God, and the backup vocalists add the harmony at that point. And then finally, when we get to the bridge and final refrain I move it to a driving beat that has kick drum on all four beats per measure and strums of quarter notes on all guitars, and an organ patch for the second keyboard player. And it opens everyone up to celebrate. Because the words are “name above all names, worthy of all praise, my heart will sing how great is our God.”

With the possible exception of the local university’s outdoor summer amphitheater, River Chapel is the most well-equipped venue for the production of live music in the community. Convex arrays of loud speakers hang from the ceiling at both stage left and right. Another array is centered above the stage for a separate channel of audio. Four 18-inch subwoofers are built into the walls on either side of the stage, and sets of speakers similar to the hanging arrays are built into the stage front. These, coupled with sets of time delayed speakers

³⁰ All of the people who play instruments are men. The only exception to this is the keyboard. Women sometimes play the keyboard. Interestingly enough this is the instrument most closely associated with “traditional” church.

positioned toward the rear of the auditorium, ensure, as Jerry the staff audio engineer explains, “the quality and impact will be the same regardless of where a person sits.” This system is powered by nearly two dozen amplifiers hidden in racks above and behind the stage, and controlled by a 48 channel digital mixing console. At several points before being reproduced by this system, the music and talk created by performers onstage are shaped and enhanced by digital and analogue sound processing units. Combined with sound synthesis, this technology allows for nearly unlimited possibilities to create and shape the aural environment within the auditorium. By way of very brief example, using simple reverberation settings the performance onstage could be made to sound as if it were occurring in a vast underground cavern, a tightly insulated closet, or in the very thin and poisonous atmosphere on Mars. This level of control could present a paralyzing number of decisions for creating the sound of River Chapel worship, but Jerry has designed an accessible and consistent sonic palate from which he works.

One evening after a day spent reviewing field notes from this project I was listening to LP records with my partner, Elizabeth Marino. As we were listening to and talking about the music, it occurred to me that the sound of the albums offers a clue as to how to think about the role of sound in understanding a place like River Chapel. That night Elizabeth had pointed out that the records that we were listening to from the 1990s all had very similar production techniques. The cumulative effect of the techniques to which she was referring is to make the individually recorded musicians sound as if they are all present on a stage or in a

large room together with the listener. Producing the records we were listening to commonly involves recording the band playing together and then going back to record each instrument separately from one another and from the vocal tracks. Artificial reverberation is then mixed in with these final “track” recordings to simulate a unified performance space, often with acoustic characteristics quite different from the room in which the track recordings were actually made.

In this genre the relative mix of instruments is normally kept even (no one instrument dominates) and each player is positioned on the simulated stage with a consistent field of depth from the listener. For example, the sound of a bass guitar is often placed on one side of the sound stage while lead guitar sounds fill the other. A lead human voice is almost always placed in the center and slightly forward relative to the other instruments. This acoustic illusion of a live band playing on a nearby stage is then reproduced in the home or car through a speaker system. It bears repeating that these are the norms for a particular genre of recorded music produced at a particular time. For contrast, think of the placement and relative volume of the sounds, often not produced with percussion and stringed instruments, that constituted the dance music, hip-hop, and rap of the mid 1990s. The recording production techniques used to produce the popular rock records of the 1990s are essentially the same techniques used for producing the sound of worship at River Chapel.

Jerry, the lead sound engineer for the church, once described for me a significant technical difference between the work he does at River Chapel and how he has shaped sound for bands performing at local rock venues like The

Down Beat. He describes this as a difference between mixing sound and providing sound reinforcement. Jerry told me he prefers to “do sound” at River Chapel because there he is mixing much like in a recording studio. He went on to explain that at a venue like The Down Beat, sound from musicians’ instruments is projected from amplifiers on stage often with such volume as to be heard by the musicians over one another. This sound is then captured by microphones placed near the amplifiers and further amplified or reinforced through the in-house amplifiers and speaker system. The audience hears a mixture of the sound coming from the stage and the sound coming from the house amplification system. Further complicating matters, particularly for engineers working in smaller venues or venues with poor equipment, is the system of “monitor” speakers musicians use onstage to hear the mix of music they are creating together for the audience. This subsystem is reproducing the same sound as is being captured from the stage and projected out to the audience. Problems can arise when the microphones located near musicians’ amplifiers pick up sounds from this monitoring system as well. A similar danger is present for any vocal microphones on the stage. In either case when microphones meant to capture musicians onstage instead capture the sounds from the monitoring system a feedback loop of sound production and reinforcement is created. One might be familiar with its shrill and often painful presence, especially noticeable in quiet moments.

The sonic environment at River Chapel is much more tightly controlled. Production equipment installed in the main sanctuary is designed so that very

little sound comes from the stage. Players rarely use speakers onstage and there is no open-air monitoring system. Instead the musicians hear themselves and their fellow players through a monitor system that fits directly into their ears. Each musician can make their own monitor mix using a small mixing board located on a stand near their area of the stage. This gives them control of the relative volume of the all instruments in their own monitor mix independent of the signals being sent to the amplification system. Unlike listening to a favorite band at The Down Beat, listeners in the River Chapel sanctuary will hear the same mix and the same sound effects no matter how close or far they are from the players.

Recording a band's performance and providing live sound reinforcement of the type described for The Down Beat require somewhat differing arrangements of space and equipment. When I first visited the church to get a feel for how I might begin this project, the audio equipment used to mix, shape, and record sound was located in an enclosed room built into the back wall of the auditorium. By the time I had begun regular fieldwork visits this equipment had been moved to a large open booth in center-rear of the listening space. In a previous iteration of the sanctuary, used before the current auditorium was built in 2003, live performances were reinforced and recorded from an open balcony-like booth located above and to the rear of the room.

The enclosed room was created when the new auditorium was built after many of the creative arts and senior staff members began advocating for the value of creating “excellent³¹” audio (and later video) reproductions of their

³¹ “Excellence” is an important term at River Chapel and I return to it often here and in other chapters.

worship services for distribution. However, the mix that may sound good to listeners in the auditorium when amplified through the house system will rarely sound the same when recorded. The enclosed room built into the back of the new sanctuary was designed with a tinted glass wall facing the stage that provides a modest acoustic barrier separating the audio engineers from the live performance space.

Essentially a recording studio, this configuration allows the engineers to create a desirable mix for the recording medium, but it interferes with their ability to listen to and adjust the mix for the audience present in the auditorium. When the staff at River Chapel eventually opted to close the loop between the musicians, microphones, monitors, and speakers they in effect created a giant bedroom recording studio with seating for 800 listeners. Because creating a mix suitable for recording no longer required isolating the engineers from the live sound reinforcement, the equipment used to mix, shape, and record sound was moved out into the audience's listening space allowing Jerry and his team of volunteers to use their equipment to create one "excellent" mix for both mediums.

These tools of sound design and recording have changed somewhat since Alexander Graham Bell's first experiments at attaching a stylus to human ears amputated from donated corpses (Sterne 2003)³². The greatest shifts in the way we create and listen to music have come through innovations in three overlapping domains: storage, synthesis, and digitization. Bell, along with his partner Clarence Blake, was among several scientists working toward making sound visible to the eye. Based on Leon Scott's phonautograph, Bell and Blake's

³² For an article-length cultural history of Bell's "rather curious machine" see Sterne (2001).

initial technique involved attaching a stylus to the membrane of the human middle ear. This membrane, thought to be more sensitive to variations in sound, vibrates when sound waves hit it, normally allowing one to hear. On the “ear phonograph” the membrane in turn vibrates the attached stylus. Bell placed the stylus on a piece of glass covered with a fine layer of soot. When sound waves hit the membrane the stylus “recorded” the sound as a pattern on the glass. Bell’s interest in making sound visible originated in the problem of deafness. He hoped to build on his father’s work by teaching deaf children to speak through the practice of modulating their voices such that their recordings would match the patterns produced by his new hearing machine. As his project evolved, changes in the recording medium allowed for the audible reproduction of recorded sounds. Bell’s “machine to hear” for the deaf eventually became a machine that *sounds*, thus gradually and radically altering cultures of sound throughout the 20th century³³.

Comparing River Chapel’s sanctuary to a bedroom recording studio is appropriate because both have been made possible only recently due to the rapidly declining costs of sound design and recording equipment over the last thirty years. Like most all consumer electronics, the quality of and number of available products has risen dramatically while the previously prohibitive price of this equipment has continued to decline. For example, if you include the computer on which I am writing this dissertation, I have the equipment to produce

³³ Bell’s “ear phonograph” also led directly to the development of the telephone and by extension the contemporary global telecommunications complex. It is sometimes fun to consider for a moment how success in the quest to translate sound for the eyes effectively collapsed the barriers of space and time. These are two essential characteristics of sound itself.

a reasonably high quality rock recording (or techno, hip hop, experimental, etc...) complete with CD reproduction and album art in my spare room. Many of my friends do as well and unlike me, they have even signed record deals with labels based on their work³⁴.

As with many of these cottage industry artists, Jerry has taught himself how best to build up a mix for the system he is working with. I asked him to describe how he does his work each week and he offered to teach me “run sound” just as he regularly teaches his many volunteers. I agreed and began sitting beside Jerry during rehearsals, watching and listening as he made adjustments to his mix. Jerry tells me he likes to begin by bringing the drums up to their full volume first. This serves as the reference point for the other instruments. He then increases the volume of the bass guitar just to the point where the instrument begins to drown out the heavy thud of the kick drum. He then pulls the sliding fader controlling the bass guitar volume back until as he puts it, “I start feeling the kick again, and then I know I’m right there.” He continues, “There’s something musical to be able to just feel the beat... between the breaths of it, you just feel that bass at the same time, the absorption of it.” He then brings the acoustic and electric guitars into the mix, placing them left or right in stereo space according to their positions onstage. The piano and keyboard get similar treatment, and finally lead and backing vocals are brought up to a level where they can be heard clearly.

³⁴ Search out the album “Thermos” by Son of Bison for an example of amateur bedroom recordings that were picked up by a distribution company specializing in film soundtracks.

Having created an initial mix of the instruments and vocals, Jerry then begins to add effects to the mix before sending the signals through the house amplifiers and on to the house speakers. The mixing board Jerry is working on is capable of full surround sound and the auditorium has speakers placed stage left, right, and center as well as sets to the left and right in the rear of the auditorium. Again this equipment allows for an enormous range of sonic possibility, and Jerry could mix the instruments in any way that he wants. For example should he wish to produce the illusion of a trumpet sounding from the top of a far off hill beyond the back wall of the auditorium he could do this with a few twists of the knobs. What he does, however, is to recreate that 90s style rock album soundstage. It is the youthful sound of high-production value alternative rock. It is a sound that was adopted with great success by a large number of Christian bands seeking to cross over into the popular music charts. It is also the soundtrack of adolescence for most of the 30-something members of the creative arts staff (Levine 2006).

Controlling the dynamics of a performance is an important piece of the audio engineer's craft just as it is for the musicians themselves. In both Jerry and Phil's discussion of song dynamics, their concerns revolve around creating an emotional flow, a building and releasing of tension, joy, or sorrow over time. Using his own body, tastes, and technical expertise as a point of reference, Jerry explains the importance of producing an aurally dynamic worship event as an effort to move people in the audience. He tells me, "I think I sense it in myself that if I don't do this work, the services might not be received as they could be...

Maybe as moving, because I feel like that is music's big thing. It seems to be a moving element; it touches people in a way. Or it brings them to a place to where when the pastor starts speaking they are ready. He doesn't have to fight for that, now he can just let the words flow and they can just be received..."

During our interview, I asked Jerry a question similar to one that people often ask me, "why would a church put so much investment, both of time and money, into such a production?" He testifies to the mission of River Chapel, telling me:

"I think that's it's probably the reason I love this place so much is that when I see all this stuff sitting here, all these cameras, all this gear, all this effort, all this work, all the time they prepare, writing the synopsis, getting the sermon ready, working up the songs, practicing the licks, it's for the one person. That one person who's off in the corner who comes up and says they've recommitted themselves or that this has changed their lives. Not that we necessarily made the change. But, that through us they were able to see something beyond the physical life. You know, the seeker that's felt alone for however many years they've been alive? To see that one person be changed. I think that's what it's all about."

All the members of the production staff similarly testify that their jobs are more than a technical craft of production. They describe their work and the results that they produce as a spiritual practice and a crucial effort to produce a connection between their god and the people gathered in their auditorium.

Constituting traditional authority for postmodern people

One could frame all three strands of the conservative evangelicalism described above as falling somewhere along a continuum defined by more conventional or innovative in their *practice of tradition*. At one level the debate about postmodernism among conservative evangelicals is a debate about truth and authority. This debate is carried out among movement leaders and

intellectuals in books, journals, and popular Christian magazines, at conferences and meetings, and across the internet. But, it is also a debate about how truth and authority are to be made a real and felt experience for adherents through the work of “doing tradition.”

Cultural analysis in the literature on tradition has shown the empirical value of conceptualizing tradition in processual terms (c.f. Hobswam 1983; Anderson 1991). For example, in their book on the role of music in social movements, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) work to reclaim the concept of tradition in order to demonstrate how tradition is an active and critical component for mobilizing social movements, even when those movements advocate rapid progressive change. Arguing that the concept of tradition has been too closely associated with conservatism and defined as a static body of beliefs and practices in the popular as well as the scholarly discourse, Eyerman and Jamison look to Raymond Williams to redefine tradition as an active and continuous process. Traditions, they argue, are highly mutable and in a dialectic relationship with the present. Traditions draw in the past to constitute present experiences just as present experiences are used to (re)constitute the past through their practice. Eyerman and Jamison conclude their argument for reframing tradition by writing, "It is the passing on, the collective remembrance, in short the conscious process of diffusion that we see as being central to the notion of tradition" (1998:27). Practicing tradition is the process of collectively articulating

pieces of the past with the present in order to project toward the future³⁵. But, Williams points out, in its usage the word tradition “moves again and again toward age-old and toward ceremony, duty, and respect” (1976: 269).

As with many rituals both sacred and secular, collective worship events at River Chapel do the work necessary to carry tradition forward by combining the materials of the past and the present. To this end River Chapel is not that different from the generations of congregations that came before. They employ a strategy and long standing evangelical method of engaging unbelievers and believers alike by using the popular vernacular of the time. Following generations of evangelists, River Chapel’s leadership frame their work as “offering an ancient path toward a more fulfilling life for lost of the world.” For example, one of Paul’s favorite rhetorical questions to use in the many versions of Learning the River Chapel Way is to ask his audience, “Would I work this hard to convince you if I didn’t believe my way provides *more life*. No!” He fills in the silence exclaiming an answer to his question, “God cares about each one of you so much that He gave up His only son for you to have more life!” Staff members are frequently directed to evaluate, monitor, and adjust their work by considering on how it might “authentically reach the seekers where they are,” and help them to “buy into the reality of the cross.” It should come as no surprise then that they are deliberate when choosing materials that they hope will ensure that their

³⁵ Additionally, it takes two generations to make something a tradition (Hobsbawm 1983). And traditions are an important piece of collective identity (Anderson 1991), and may be increasingly salient for personal identity in late or post modernity.

audiences quickly feel an emotional connection through and with the environments they have created.

Emotion is a key analytic dimension for unpacking the “tradition work” that rituals do in making abstract forms real for practitioners in any religious culture. To see this process in action we can look to the worship rituals occurring each weekend at River Chapel as the more or less formal activities where the abstractions of “postmodernism,” “truth and authority,” and “God’s love” discussed above are presented as an available experience for those in the audience. To be sure, the weekly worship rituals at River Chapel are intended to convey meanings discursively through the logical presentation of a subject, its compliment and conclusion. But as embodied practices they also constitute and carry affective states and dispositions through time.

Creating “postmodern worship” at River Chapel means employing the elements of popular culture to create environments where skeptical unchurched visitors may experience feeling connected with god. Much of this discussion of River Chapel’s engagement with postmodernism goes on in formalized classes and among staff members in offices throughout the week. To hold the more philosophical and strategic “how to remain relevant in the postmodern world” conversation in the regularly occurring weekly worship forums or even in the mid-week ministries and groups would violate many people’s “expectations of what a church is supposed to be like,” according to staff members. Indecently this is said without a hint of irony. Unless someone attending the church seeks out this conversation by taking a class or attending a lecture, a visitor may never even

hear much of the discussion I have detailed above. However they will engage with an environment intentionally designed for them to feel connected each weekend that they return.

Up/Down/Up: A narrative structure for feeling connected with god

Accessibility is a key logic governing the production of religious culture at River Chapel in the same way that it is a key logic governing the production of many hit pop songs. Almost every moment of the weekend worship ritual at River Chapel is planned, scripted, and rehearsed weeks in advance with the explicit intention of providing a “safe space” where the skeptical postmodern seeker could potentially experience a personal connection to god the very first time one walks through the door. The sign that marks the entry drive to the church proclaims “one visit could change the way you think about church.” This phrase, appearing on stationery, shirts, coffee mugs, posters, and web pages serves as both an invitation to the public and a call to action for staff and volunteers. Through learning The River Chapel Way, I learned how much they worry that they might only get one opportunity contained within one hour to impress a skeptic coming through the door for the first time.

In creating an accessible experience where worshipers might feel a connection with god very quickly, worship planners draw on the language, tools, and contents of mass media culture to articulate a ritualized one-hour emotional journey. This journey arcs over from high-energy expressions of joyful praise to a low-energy period of introspection and back again in a space designed to maximize control over light and sound. Their use of light, sound, and references

from popular media thus provides audience members with cues for a series of ideal affective states that may be adopted throughout the ritual experience (Neitz, Bradley, and McElmurry³⁶). To visualize this progression over time one might picture the plot diagram for a bimodal distribution. I refer to this pattern as the Up/Down/Up narrative structure. This emotional narrative characterizes the structure of the worship experience much like the narrative structures (Somers and Gibson, 1994) that give shape to our understandings of the world and our place in it.

The debate among religious elites over convention and innovation in the practice of tradition might be usefully understood a fight over which rituals will carry specific emotional narrative forms through time. One might ask why this particular religious culture practices tradition through a particular emotional cycle. Rituals provide a space where narrative forms and emotional forms combine together to carry through time, and it may be that the Up/Down/Up form resonates with a central narrative of the religious culture: the ritual evokes the emotional pattern of the conversion experience where one moves from being fallen to living in a state of grace. This is an experience and emotional trajectory that is central to popular evangelical “religions of the heart” (Finke and Stark 1992, Marsden 1980, McLoughlin 1978) and plays a defining role in the character of the church. Though now identified as “non-denominational,” River Chapel remains culturally and theologically Southern Baptist, and the belief in redemption and salvation through an unmediated relationship with a personal

³⁶ “Religion and Emotion: Advancing a New Framework for Understanding Religious Cultures” (2007 unpublished paper) also SSSR Meetings 2007 session title “Uses of Emotion in Megachurches” Mary Jo Neitz, Nancy Martin, Kevin McElmurry, Karen Bradley.

god is core to their theological teachings. The emotional trajectory suggested by participating in worship at River Chapel emulates the structure of this Christian narrative.

One might ask what the relationship is between this particular way of doing tradition and the social location of and characteristics of the participants. Insiders to this culture account for this question by arguing one of two points. They argue that their choices in content reflect the tastes of the congregation and surrounding community (their "target audience"). For example, were this church to be located in west Texas, it might literally rather than figuratively be a church friendly to the cowboy seeker³⁷. Or they give a version of the old adage "birds of a feather flock together." But, is there a way to get at the middle class, white, suburban-Midwest character of this way of doing tradition that does not reduce to market strategies or individual preferences to be with others like one's self? At the local level then, the tension between innovation and convention may be understood as a sorting of religious seekers based on emotional forms.

³⁷ For a literal "cowboy church" see: <http://www.cowboychurchministries.org/>

Chapter Five: Modes of Connecting in the River

“I just know that church this evening will take me from a slightly elevated stress level to, I can handle my stress level. At least that’s what I am planning on because that is what usually happens. I most always feel refreshed after RC Live” (Participant from the River Chapel Live Worship Journal Project).

In the previous chapter I have described many of the particularities of the media this group use in the course of doing “tradition work” through ritual practice. I have described how they use a rock-style musical performance, a concert atmosphere, and the excerpts from popular television programs and films to produce a ritualized emotional cycle that can be characterized as following an Up/Down/Up narrative structure over the course of one hour. While this weekly ritual production at River Chapel is potentially very stimulating for audience members, by and large it also appears that they remain very passive throughout the experience. The Up/Down/Up narrative is performed for people who for the most part remain still and silent while serving as an audience. It is a worship practiced in a mode that I have characterized as Alone/Together. This relatively passive, potentially anonymous, potentially temporary, low stakes, low obligation mode seems to resonate with interpretations of changes in many voluntary organizations (cf. Wuthnow 2002; Roof 2001).

Wanting to understand how the invested long-term members who worship at River Chapel describe their experiences of practicing worship, I asked core

members if they would be willing to keep a written journal of their experiences. I chose people to approach for this project from a list of River Chapel Leaders that was generated in 2003 as part of the continuing effort to build connections between the small core of paid staff and the many people who regularly attend services on the weekend. The list is comprised of people who had been attending and active supporters since the early days of the church and those who had more recently become more invested in the congregation by providing financial and volunteer support. The former were added to the list by virtue of their tenure in the congregation. The later became part of the River Chapel Leadership after completing the 10-week Leadership River Chapel course (described in the following chapter) and signing a covenant of commitment to the church.

Of the 70 people I approached for inclusion in my journal project (described in more detail in the methods chapter), 23 returned journals to me at the end of the two month period. I transcribed the handwritten journals into word processing documents for coding and analysis. Below I present data from the journal project to offer a better understanding of how participants engage with the production of worship at River Chapel. I show how the Up/Down/Up narrative structure operates not as discreet elements, but through the juxtaposition of and transitions between high and low affective states. I argue that people at River Chapel engage worship as a time for forging connections with god and as a time for practicing a reflexive project of managing emotion. Following the discussion of data drawn from the journal project I bring in interview data with periphery

members to highlight practices of connection and emotion work beyond the walls of the auditorium.

Creating Core Connections with “RC Live”

While it may seem like the work performed for audiences at River Chapel is all encompassing, listening to individual audience members describe their experiences *Alone/Together* reveals a great deal of intention in their engagement with the *Up/Down/Up* emotional narrative. While I have discussed how the specific properties of the ritual production in the worship services provide an opportunity to feel connections to god and others while together, these worship events are also an opportunity for audience members to engage in a reflexive project of emotional management while alone. For these people, religious practice in part means following an emotional arc that moves them out of their everyday routines and concerns and into a state where they are prepared to meet god and work on their feelings.

I chose to have more invested members participate in the worship journal project because I was curious how these people were able to find a spiritual home in a church for the unchurched. This has been a concern of River Chapel’s staff as well. Prior to starting River Chapel Leadership to facilitate investment among peripheral members, they had begun holding a mid-week worship service on Wednesday evening as a time of “praise, worship, and renewal” apart from the weekend services. The service is held on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month and is advertised around the church as “RC Live.” In creating this service, staff members imagined RC Live as another bridge

between themselves and the many people coming to their church on the weekends. They also selected this mid-week worship as the time for offering the sacraments of communion at the church. Under the administration of the previous pastor communion was held as part of each weekend service. During the transition period described earlier, the sacrament was moved to the mid-week service to consolidate a layer of membership between the staff and the periphery as well as to not, according to Patrick, “be off- putting to the unchurched members of the community.” As I was learning more about the culture of River Chapel, I chose to ask those who are presumably not put off by the rite of communion to journal about their experiences as part of this church-within-a-church.

The content and pacing of the mid-week worship varies slightly in comparison with the weekend worship events. However, the Up/Down/Up emotional structure is always replicated. Both the weekend events and the RC Live events are strictly kept to one hour. Normally the creative arts staff does not include television or film clips in the RC Live experience. Visual elements are still used to contribute to the service. The screens are used for image magnification, tracking the activity of musicians and speakers on stage as well as for the display of still pictures, song lyrics, and key pieces of text such as quotes or citations. There is often more musical performance at RC Live while the spoken portion is more abbreviated and focused on reminding those present of the previous weekend’s message.

Similar to creating the flow of the weekend services, the staff production crew and teams of volunteers work to begin each mid-week service with an upbeat, high-energy tone. During the midweek services this continues a little longer than on the weekend (about 20 minutes), usually the time it takes for the band to play three or four popular rock-style songs and the first speaker of the evening to offer a welcome and then begin to transition the service to a more somber and reflective tone. It is during this relatively low affective state that whatever message for the evening is delivered by the senior pastor or another male staff member³⁸ and communion is served to the congregation by a group of volunteers. Despite imagining RC Live as a time of community for the invested membership of the congregation, staff members leading the service always offer detailed instructions to the audience on the procedures for taking communion (moving to the front, queuing, returning to a seat with the elements) while diagrams depicting the auditorium and the expected flow of people are displayed on the screens. As with the weekend services, lighting is used as a key element in the production of RC Live as well. Both the ambient and stage lighting follow similar patterns to those found in the production of the weekend events. By the time the instructions for communion are given the lighting in the auditorium is quite low. The band then plays two, sometimes three upbeat praise songs following the time for communion. These songs complete the emotional cycle and the audience is dismissed on a high note.

³⁸ As discussed below, during the time I was conducting research at River Chapel the senior staff made the decision to allow women to lead the church in worship and teaching. However this did not in fact happen in the time I was there.

The length of the communion period has occasionally become a contentious topic among staff and audience members. Those queuing for the communion elements, particularly those seated in the rear of the auditorium, often complain that the time allotted for communion is too short to do the work that they would like to do through the ritual. The struggle over time allotted to the individual pieces of the RC Live ritual suggests two things to consider. One, audience members are reflexive and intentional in their engagement with the pieces of the worship events produced by staff and volunteers at River Chapel. And two, for audience members, the period of low affect and stimulation, while less spectacular, is no less important in the satisfactory completion of the Up/Down/Up narrative structure. The power of this structure cannot be reduced to any one of its components, but must be understood as it moves people through transitions. I will return to a discussion of the communion time below. However, first I present a few excerpts from journals selected to represent how people discuss their engagement with the production of RC Live. Of course there were a range of particular responses to my questions. But, the following offers both detailed and succinct examples of very common themes.

Robert: "I guess the best way to describe the changes in how I felt over the course of the night would be fluctuations between analytical, emotional, and spiritual stages, with intermingling of all mixed in. The first song was essentially adapting from movement and rush to movement in a fixed place. Not sure how to characterize that. Just a transition. From that point on, for the most part I was moved to feelings of praise, gratitude, and so forth. A sense of progress slowly but surely grew over the evening. The only thing I can specifically remember for an example is the post-communion song being especially appropriate, as holiness is definitely what I need. And what I need to want more."

And here is a description of the arc in the words of another journal participant.

“The music is powerful. Patrick’s speech always brings things to a quite solemn place. After everyone finished communion, Samuel and group rocked the house again. Everyone clapped and sang and swayed. It was hard to sit still.” [J15 1.1] The worship event is an opportunity to engage with the production and have one’s emotional state altered by other peoples’ efforts. For example, one participant wrote: *“The way I felt did change. Felt down before. I was tired for a difficult day at work. The praise music and the team’s effort to engage everyone in worship energized me and I worshiped God clapping and singing with joy. I felt God’s presence.”*

In writing about the events that transpired at that evening’s worship service Joyce acknowledges the names of many of the production staff and the work that they do to create the worship experience³⁹:

“Phil led the band and we started with the song “Giving It All.” Phil’s wife, Shannon, sang back up and our new asst music pastor was on acoustic guitar. Andrew was there and Jerry was mixing the sound. It sounded phenomenal. Phil encouraged the congregation to engage in the music by using our hands, hearts, and voices.”

Despite the bi-monthly opportunities to move and be moved by the production of worship at River Chapel, I often read about participants’ difficulties

³⁹ While many people discuss the positive relief they feel from the stress of their daily rounds, some like Joyce find themselves in sudden need of relief through the experience of worship. In her first journal entry Joyce revealed that her husband has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer that week and she was unable to attend the mid-week worship service. Following a service two weeks later she wrote, *“I came to Community Live so thankful to be able to come and worship the Lord. I was looking forward to going all day & was grateful to have gone. Alan is having chemotherapy for lung cancer tomorrow and I was needing to meet God and affirm my love for Him and trust in Him.”*

in making time for this experience during a busy work week. Many participants reported feeling stressed out from their day at work and did not want to go to the church to attend RC Live. Then they go and have a positive experience. This experience is described in various ways, but the main theme is feeling stressed and busy from work and family commitments, not wanting to go to the mid-week service, going anyway and feeling revived and rejuvenated.

Laura describes her feelings of ambivalence writing,

“After a long day I’m amazed at how just showing up changes how I feel by the end of the evening. I was tired and pretty drained from work. I’d actually considered calling it a day and going on home. After the service I was really glad I’d come. I was no longer tired. I felt so much better. I was rejuvenated!”

Angie tells a similar story involving the pressures of managing work, family, and friends (and geography). She writes,

“It is pretty typical on Wednesdays for it to cross my mind to skip the service. I usually work until 5 and so does my husband. We have to pick up our son, eat, feed him and get over to church (which is around 20 min from us). Today, since I knew I had to take the baby by myself the thought had defiantly crossed my mind not to go. I also had to meet friends for a quick dinner at 5:45ish. That added to the temptation, especially since I left the restaurant late. I have learned over the last two years (how long I’ve attended) that I always feel rejuvenated after the service and that the more I feel I don’t want to go, the more I need to. Tonight was no exception. I felt full of energy after the service.”

In what may be the most essentially distilled expression of this common theme in the journals, one middle-aged father writes, “Before – I didn’t wanna go.

Afterwards – Thank you God for this experience.” Many reported that this feeling could last long after the service has concluded and the worshipers continued on with their daily rounds crediting this period of “rejuvenation” for getting them

through the rest of the week. But, sometimes the hassles of life in Midwest City intrude all too quickly following the time spent in the church. After the second journal service Robert writes, *“I’m not sure why, but my mood changed a little on the way home and I feel irritated. I think because someone rode on my bumper all the way down Providence and my mellow mood became frustrated.”*

For people both inside and outside River Chapel (Christians and non-Christians alike), one troubling idea is that the experience of god is being manufactured and is therefore not an authentic experience. It is an easy and often leveled criticism of churches like River Chapel where the worship experience is produced with so much technology and expense. The people at the River Chapel have often expressed a concern with assuring one another and me of the “authenticity” of their experiences worshiping at River Chapel. The reverse is often true when I describe my research to acquaintances not affiliated with River Chapel. One colleague, a committed Christian in his early 30s went to a service at River Chapel on my suggestion. He later told me he felt it “was too much like a show, and did not really feel like church” to him. Other friends and acquaintances seem fascinated by what they have heard of the church, but usually dismiss the popular worship services as crass commercialism or a technologically updated version of the slick snake-oil huckster’s show. At the risk of redundancy I again turn to a musical example to consider the problem with “authenticity” as a way of thinking about the experience of religion.

One fairly obvious reason the performance of top-40 rock songs work is because people come to River Chapel with the expectation that the music played

in a church will be spiritual. This context (the church) allows many songs that would otherwise be considered secular, to be heard as sacred. First person songs of endless devotion are as easily heard as praises to god as they are to a distant lover. In addition, River Chapel's transition period coincided with changes in the Christian music scene more generally. Christian music became much more diverse and widely available in the mid 1990s. And the 1990s was a tremendous time of growth for the Christian music industry. Interestingly, secular popular music took a turn toward the introspective during this time period. The lyrical content of many songs from this time period took a decidedly introspective turn, replacing the 2nd or 3rd person pronoun with the 1st. This was the time when Nirvana's album *Nevermind* became number one on the Billboard 100 the first weeks of January 1992. This spike in sales is rumored to have come from young people returning the Michael Jackson album *Dangerous* they had received as Christmas presents in exchange for the new sound that would become popularly known as "alternative" or "grunge."

River Chapel's musical style stems directly from this resurgence of popular rock music in the early 1990s⁴⁰. While this music was based on the earlier wave of 1980s underground musicians exemplified by The Pixies, this music came to be known later by the music industry label "alternative." A well-known band that crossed the line from one to the other by circumstance of their timing was Nirvana, though they retained many of the (less accessible) harder

⁴⁰ The cost of making music has dropped as equipment costs decreased (financial costs) and music making came to be defined by popular genres rather than classical art music requiring less "investment" in Becker's (1995) sense of time, effort, and recognition.

edges of the underground rock style. While the actual music changed somewhat under the industry banner of “alternative,” a more important agent facilitating the wider accessibility of the genre was the quality of the recording and live sound production introduced by the major labels. This, combined with a lowering of the overall cost of higher quality recording and sound reinforcement equipment, tamed the sonic qualities of the music (explosive volume changes, unchecked feedback from guitar amps, and the piercing sibilance of multiple cymbals) while still allowing the outlaw, rebellious, masculine character of the sound to remain in the distorted guitars, driving beat, and raw vocal style. River Chapel is characterized by this “alternative” style music tamed by the production quality that is characteristic of the early 1990s⁴¹. For example, they use a multiband compressor on their entire live mix to ensure that the overall volume and impact of the music remains relatively constant over the length of any one song and across all songs. They use reverb and delay to expand the space and place the instruments and vocals in a sound field that creates the illusion of a live stage.

Finally, beyond adopting a style and quality of sound from specific genres located in the history of popular music, the characteristics of the melodies and harmonies are worth considering as well. The literature focused on representational aspects encompasses research into an individual’s implicit or explicit awareness or determination of aspects of musical works, for example rhythm, tone, harmony, (as well as) genre, and style (Juslin and Sloboda: 2001).

⁴¹ The move represented by River Chapel and Willow Creek is part of the dynamic leading to the growth of the Emergent Church. For the Emergent Church, being cool and accessible may be viewed as inauthentic insofar as they are seen as tactics in use by large religious organizations.

In addition to genre, the intervals between notes on the scale evoke specific emotions as well. An interval of a major 3rd may suggest a happy and buoyant emotion. Intervals of a major 4th or 5th are more open and evoke in the Western ear a more hopeful and joyful emotion⁴². As I mentioned previously, Beach Boys are often credited as popularizing the major 4th interval in rock music⁴³. In the 1980s The Cure and The Smiths use these properties of scale to great effect by juxtaposing the lyrics and the intervals. The Cure often sang joyous love songs set to minor key music, while The Smiths wrote biting sarcastic lyrics to upbeat major key tunes.

I suggest that River Chapel sounds inauthentic to some (for example my partner Elizabeth and I) because they are trying to retain that raw emotive sound characteristic of “alternative” music while still taking advantage of the accessibility provided by the high quality production equipment and “open, happy” musical intervals. This makes it sound inauthentic to us because it sounds like they want to be both accessible and raw. In our ears those are two separate musical intentions. To us The Smiths employ a juxtaposition of happy melodies with sour lyrics to create an ironic sound, but the River Chapel technique feels simply uninspired.

⁴² To the untrained listener this is easily recognized by comparing the feeling one gets when listening to “happy” tunes in a Mexican restaurant vs. the ambiguous interpretation of music composed with an Eastern scale heard at one’s favorite sushi place.

⁴³ Gregorian chant used the open 4th and 5ths as well, but still sound like somber tunes because of their dirge-like tempo and meter.

In the sense that I am talking about it here, authenticity is a feeling. Whatever intentions or techniques lay behind the production processes, authenticity is always in part embedded in the bodies of those experiencing the production. And, no cultural production is without its techniques whether these are explicitly acknowledged or not. Therefore any ritual, tradition, or religious experience may be charged as being inauthentic. Take for example the rather unusual request made for audience participation in the second of the RC Live events documented by journal participants.

During the second of the four services covered by the journal project, Paul presented a message about the turning point in the relationship between humans and god represented by the death of Jesus, the Christian new covenant. He brought his family dog Sophie to illustrate the difficulty of giving up a prized family animal as a sacrifice to god, difficult but still only the loss of an animal he argued. The death of Jesus, he continued, represented a reversal of this sacrificial order. “The greater was sacrificed so that the lesser could live,” he repeated as he walked the length of the stage. After returning to this line several times he insisted that everyone stand up and cheer as loudly as one could for the gift he said was represented by this reversal. The cheer was repeated three times and after each Paul goaded those in the darkened auditorium saying their shouting and clapping was not enthusiastic enough. This was not a spontaneous outpouring of joy, but it was still an outpouring of joy nonetheless. It was obviously and deliberately created *and* it was “authentic.”

Many people commented on Paul's discussion from that evening mentioning in different ways their own experiences of this joyous outpouring. I had spoken with some journal participants prior to enlisting them to write about their experiences for me, including Mike. When we met he had been an active and invested member of the church for three years. In conversation he often testified to the impact River Chapel has had on his life by helping him to feel a part of something bigger than himself. Here is how Mike related the events surrounding Paul's communion message in his journal.

"Paul spoke about the sacrifices in the Old Testament where the lesser would die for the greater to live. When we come to the New Testament, God died for us. The greater died so the lesser would live. Paul used the physical illustration of his dog Sophie to show the emotion that would have been involved in the sacrifices. It also showed the trauma associated with them. Sin was horrible and a horrible price had to be paid. Communion was next on the agenda, but just prior to communion we had a huge outpouring of joy for what God has done for us He has paid the price for us. That is what is represented in communion."

"The Quite Climax:" carving out space to meet god

Communion is conducted as the "Down" moment framed in the Up/Down/Up narrative structure. It is a period of very low affect. The music during the time for communion is often performed by a soloist using a keyboard or acoustic guitar. This communion music does not follow the structure of contemporary popular song, but instead tends to be improvisational variations on a simple theme or melody almost always played *adagio*⁴⁴ and in a minor key. There are no lyrics for these pieces. The same theme is played throughout the

⁴⁴ This is slowly and stately, meaning literally "at ease." On a metronome this would be between 66-76 beats per minute (BPM).

time it takes for the 400-500 people present in the audience to make their way to the stage row by row and receive the sacraments from a volunteer standing at the head of each aisle. Participants then return to their seats and the music continues until everyone has made their way through the line. In addition to being slow and somber, the communion music is played much longer than the popular format songs preceding. In the following worship journal passage listen to the way Alan, a local business owner and father of two, draws connections among the feelings of the worship music, his own feelings, and the feeling conveyed by the short sermon delivered to introduce the communion period at the halfway point of the evening.

“I entered with stress from the day and in a generally bad mood due to some work situations. The praise songs opened my spirit and put a smile on my face. During the talk I was really kind of zoned in and emotionless. I was soaking in the points and following everything but not really connecting until the point was made that Jesus took the bread and wine to the disciples and they were amazed that the highest being was now being sacrificed for the lowest. This caused me to reflect on how negative I can be and miss all the blessings that are in my life. Before I was hurried and self focused (what can I do to make my life better and look better), and annoyed by “distractions” (kids, dog, traffic). Now I have forgotten about all the little stuff from the day. I relaxed my mind and heart and focused on the message and the music. Then God sort of took over my mind. I am thankful for my wife, kids, and opportunities at work. As long as I am responsible to the best of my ability I do not need to worry. He has a plan that will provide and get us through. It may not be my plan, but it will work. I am excited about tomorrow and going home to see my kids tonight.”

Alan’s use of “connecting” here means connecting emotionally, and he sustains a distinction between paying attention to the message and connecting emotionally. Though already feeling happy and open listening to the opening praise song, he describes his peak moment as occurring during the period of quiet reflection following his receipt of the communion. Alan reports that he was brought to a low

point in the middle of the Up/Down/Up structure, and this changed his feelings about his family and his job that night.

Remember Robert as the man who reported disappointment at losing his high after a service when he was tailgated on the way home. Here Robert summarizes that evening at River Chapel referencing the quiet peak provided through the narrative structure: *“I was in pretty good spirits before, they were raised a bit during the praise and worship and I hoped things would keep up, but went down a bit after. Communion was the peak.”* Even though the message and communion time constitute the low affective point in the Up/Down/Up emotional narrative, for many this time constitutes the critical moment for doing the work necessary to reorient one’s feelings.

This theme of communion as the quiet climax of the worship event appears in many journals. And people are conscious of its importance for a successful evening participating in the worship event. Many people make references to sitting up close to the stage so they will queue earlier and thus have more time for the communion. For example, Laura acknowledges the importance of choosing a seat near the front of the church to extend her experience of the climactic moment while those seated further back in the auditorium are still queuing to receive the communion elements. For example one woman wrote, *“During the communion and time of reflection I had a little difficulty focusing so I was glad I sat near the front and so that extended time helped make communion a special time with God.”*

There have been periodic complaints from audience members that the communion time was too short from people seated in the back of the auditorium. Paul made a specific request that the musician play longer during the instrumental part for communion to give the people in the back a chance to take their time during this important period in the service. I take this as evidence of the importance of timing and the way that audience members are conscious of how the flow of time produces this climactic moment as well as how this flow is controlled by the staff.

Finally, raising a recurrent theme that is part of Learning the River Chapel Way, Eric comments on the “fine line” that the production staff must walk between being challenging and “watered down.” He contrasts the worship services with those of the Catholic church he attended as a child saying,

“And you know, growing up Catholic, it's love your neighbor over and over again. And, you know, I couldn't tell you what he talked about five minutes after the service got over. Whereas at River Chapel, I'm like the whole week, I'm remembering. Especially some services hit you harder than others, for sure. But you can, you know, I can think back about certain messages and really apply them to my life, which is cool! And that's the whole point, I think.”

I will return to the tension Eric raises in the following chapter. But Eric's comments are also interesting because he is suggesting is that what makes River Chapel services effective is the emotional impact of the messages as they are delivered in the quiet moments. They “hit you hard.” This hard hit is the quiet climax of the service and is given its emotional force by the Up/Down/Up cycle. Eric describes the service of his childhood Catholic church as emotionally flat and therefore not “*challenging*,” meaning in this case that while River Chapel

may appear to be simple entertainment to some, it feels like a powerfully authentic experience to him. It is interesting to note that Eric's interest in a challenging service directly replicates popular evangelical authors' calls to reconfigure worship in order to appeal to men, as discussed in the opening chapter.

Encounters beyond the auditorium

It would be a mistake to consider the emotional culture of River Chapel as constituted entirely within the building, equipment, or even the people who make up the church. It has become an axiom that emotions are social. One way this becomes clear is to listen to how members of River Chapel talk about their perceptions of how "other people in the world" may think and feel about them. For example here is how Alan describes the feeling of acceptance offered to reluctant converts, alcoholics, and "even some who've attempted suicide."

River Chapel has developed an accepting environment. You don't have to fit in to attend. You don't have to be "churchy." Even with a messy background these people and more are welcomed and accepted for themselves. River Chapel does not soft sell the Bible, but we let God work on the sin through His ways. We show love and admit our own faults.

Later Alan describes his own experiences at River Chapel as "safe and comfortable." He continues, "*I am a long time church-goer and when I began attending River Chapel six years ago I felt an immediate connection. People care and are friendly, but not stuffy and pushy. I walked in and felt cared for but not imposed upon.*"

For the remainder of this chapter I will turn to the people I spoke with who constitute River Chapel's membership broadly speaking, those whom I have described as comprising the periphery as well as others at the core. The material presented below offers a view of creating connections at River Chapel beyond the walls of the auditorium. I interviewed 31 people (10 women, 21 men) who range in their level of activity in the life of River Chapel. Some, like Eric below, have been active members of the church for most of its 20 year history. Others, like Cindy or Diane, have been attending the services on the weekend for under a year and are still finding ways to build connections. When looking for interview participants I tried to find variation in "investments" within the lengths of time people have been affiliated. For example, while both are "new" to the church, Cindy has become actively invested in River Chapel very quickly. By contrast, at the time I spoke with Diane she was still trying to decide if this church was right for her. I conducted interviews with 15 people who attended the Welcome to River Chapel evening seminars held once a month in the spring of 2007. Though I often referred to them as my "new people," many of them had been regularly attending the weekend worship events for two or three years before deciding to "learn more about The River Chapel Way."

I sought out variation among those who had been attending for longer periods of time as well. Many of these people were also volunteers or small group participants (some of whom appear again in the following chapter), but not all. And again, some of the short time attendees had quickly become active volunteers and class members. I have selected from among these various

interviews to highlight the ways that people in various relationships orient themselves to some of the central themes I have been developing in my analysis of the culture of River Chapel.

Cindy's story

Cindy's story illustrates some common themes for understanding the trajectory some members follow into more active engagement with and investment in River Chapel. She found the church shortly after moving to Midwest City for a job after college graduation. When we spoke Cindy was interested in telling me how much River Chapel and her new found friends have meant to her. Cindy came to River Chapel for the first time to play volleyball on a Thursday night. She has since begun to identify herself as someone "born again" and was planning to become baptized the next time the service was offered.

Cindy told me she had found her way into River Chapel through her love of volleyball. When I spoke with her she had been living in Midwest City for about five months. She told me she had just relocated from a small town about two hours away where she had attended college. In her early twenties and a recent college graduate, Cindy had moved to Midwest City to pursue her first "real job," as she put it, working for one of the major hospitals helping patients without insurance navigate the labyrinth of paperwork required to apply for state and federal assistance. She told me that she very much enjoyed the city and her new job, but that she was having a difficult time because she knew no one in the city.

Went I met Cindy in the coffee shop popular with many River Chapel members she was on her way to join her teammates for a volleyball match at the church that evening. She had agreed to meet me for an interview about her experiences with River Chapel even though, as she warned me, she was “still pretty new and didn’t really know what to say.” I had identified Cindy as someone potentially interesting to interview when she attended the second of the newly begun Welcome to River Chapel evening seminars. Even though these are primarily staff-led didactic events, Cindy took whatever opportunities were presented to declare her excitement at being a new member of the church. At this time I was in my last stage of interview data collection and was gathering people from these seminar / orientation sessions to speak to me from the position of new attendees, those whom I knew comprised the largest portion of the church and the one furthest from the “core” (see illustration 1).

Like many people I came to know at River Chapel, Cindy told me that her parents had reared her as a Catholic. She recalls occasionally attending mass, but aside from the beauty of the building, never really finding much interesting about her time spent there. She describes her family’s religious identity telling me “most of my family doesn’t attend regularly. I don’t know why. Just not a priority I guess. Which is no big deal. I mean obviously they are Catholic. They have their faith. They just show it in a different way.” “To each their own,” she concluded reflecting on her new-found excitement for River Chapel. Cindy often repeated this trope in describing the identities of her friends and family in relationship with her own, identities and relationships made salient through her

increasing affiliation with River Chapel as well as by my interview questions. “But just being at River Chapel,” she continues, “I talk about it with them all the time now.” Through high school and college Cindy did not consider herself to be a part of church in the way she has become since moving to Midwest City. She attended her parents’ church when home from school for holidays or special occasions and even briefly looked for a church in her college town. She told me she never felt comfortable or welcome in those places because she felt that everyone already knew one another and were looking upon her as a stranger. “Besides,” she told me, “I was always really busy with volleyball practice and the team, and tournaments, you know.”

When we spoke Cindy had been living in Midwest City for five months. Shortly after arriving she began to look for a team or a league where she could continue to play volleyball. She and her two younger sisters had all played for their high school, an activity she now credits with taking them away from attending their Catholic church on Sunday. After graduation she went on to play at college with a partial scholarship. Wanting to continue playing and wanting to meet people in her new home, Cindy submitted her name and email address to a website run by the city’s parks and recreation department. A short time later a man emailed her asking if she would like to join him and two other players to form a team to play at River Chapel the following Thursday. Cindy accepted the invitation and now testifies to the instant connection she felt, telling me, “So I met him and the other two people playing on his team and they made me feel like I’d known them for years. I was like, that’s awesome! It’s so hard to find people like

that anymore! I thought if they go to River Chapel and they're like this, I'm sure most other people that attend probably are too. And it definitely is, so I never really looked anywhere else." Cindy credits this decision as one that led directly to her recent decision to become baptized in the church during a service that will take place the week following our interview.

Cindy tells me she now spends up to four nights a week at River Chapel, including the Thursday night spent playing Volleyball with her team. She has also joined the social group for twenty-somethings that meets on Tuesday evenings and regularly attends River Chapel Live, the mid-week communion service every other Wednesday. Again contrasting herself with her family, Cindy tells me, "I think they're really surprised because I've never been like this about my faith and getting involved like this. For them, church was Sunday morning and that was it." She tells me that she expects her family to be surprised at the style of church that has captured so much of her attention as well. She is excited that her parents and siblings are planning come to the church for her baptism. But, she is also a little apprehensive about what they might think of her new life.

Cindy tells me that since coming to River Chapel she feels like she has been born again. "I go back home and see people and they don't even hardly know me," she explains. Adding, "I'm just a totally different person." She continued explaining that since coming to River Chapel she had come to realize there was always something missing in herself, that all her life she had felt somewhat discontent.

Like so many I have talked with at River Chapel, Cindy frequently draws on a dichotomy of traditional and non-traditional to discuss her current experience in relationship with both her past impressions of going to church as well as how she imagines other available church experiences in the local church scene. I have tried to maintain that sense of fluid yet persistent conversational markers throughout my own discussion of the church in my research notes and papers. I have also wanted to account for the reflexive incorporation of the many ways in which members imagine others' talk about River Chapel's self-styled particularity ("one visit will change the way you think about church"); the back and forth of conversation quickly becomes complex. As with my previous discussion of "postmodernism," I have tried to keep these terms as close as possible to their usages on the ground. At River Chapel, terms like these serve as common if not completely shared touchstones for an ongoing conversation embedded within a broad discourse about religion in "the world." The process of trying to capture at least part of this conversation and represent it for others is best served by unpacking these key touchstones locally. I have also tried to supplement what is learned by listening to language in use by paying careful attention to how "traditional, postmodern, seeker-oriented, different, experience," and so on are realized through practice. Many times I have blurted out in half expressed exasperation, "it's not for nothing that they do all this stuff." While wholly inarticulate in the moment, I have meant to point out the tremendous investments of time and energy poured into producing highly polished events and environments seven days a week. Whatever the terms of the conversation mean

to individuals, participating in these productions is a large part of what people experience as religion. I argue that paying attention to these production processes and products allows one to hear a part of the conversation the people at River Chapel hold without speaking a word.

For Cindy, traditional church is that beautiful brick building with the stained glass windows where she was baptized as an infant and occasionally went with her family as a child. It is the place where she remembers people dressing up and holding long discussions of old stories that she now says “didn’t have any relevance for life.” It is a place that she remembers as competing for and eventually losing out to her interest in playing volleyball. This church is where her mother and father were married when her grandmother was still alive and active in the parish. Cindy tells me it is also the place she hopes to one day be married to her future husband.

Diane’s story

When she was a little girl, Diane would accompany her grandmother to a small white clapboard Baptist church where she remembers mostly doodling in a notebook as the minister gave his sermon. Neither of her parents was particularly religious, and apart from these times with her grandmother, Diane never pursued religious or spiritual activities until she was in college. There she recalls spending some time with a campus Christian group, “not going to church or anything, but mostly just doing activities on campus that the group sponsored.” She tells me the group was a good way for her to meet people on campus. And while she did not want to give up her Sunday mornings every

week, she very much enjoyed the times spent bowling, watching movies, and attending Bible studies with her new friends. After graduation Diane worked for a few years before enrolling in a graduate program in mathematics at the University of Texas in Austin. About to turn 30 years old at the time of our interview, Diane had just moved to Midwest City a few months before to begin her career as an assistant professor of mathematics at the university.

Like Cindy, Diane tells me her story of becoming affiliated with a church through her social connections. When she was a PhD candidate in the last year of her program she was invited by a fellow graduate student to attend the Austin area megachurch The Gateway⁴⁵ (Gateway Community Church). She told me she only half-heartedly accepted, but when she went with him the following Sunday morning, she was surprised to find that “it seemed like he just knew everybody there.” She described the worship she encountered among her new group of friends as energetic and fun. Diane remembers being pleasantly surprised by the message she heard because, “Like, I grew up in the Baptist Church and there was a lot of gloom and doom... you have to believe in Hell and those kinds of things. But the message at Gateway was very much about ways to live your life.” It’s just more practical kinds of applications,” she concludes. Diane offered an example of one of these messages on the importance of

⁴⁵ Gateway Community Church strongly resembles River Chapel in philosophy and mission. Characteristic of this movement among conservative Protestant churches, Gateway’s aesthetics and self presentation are designed in reference to their location. Their website is directed to those area residents “whether you are searching for the first time or have lost count, you are invited to join us as we seek God together.” “No perfect people are allowed,” and visitors are instructed to “come as you are.” The ad declares, “It’s an Austin thing.” River Chapel and Gateway are similarly organized. Both even have satellite campuses linked by telecommunications technology. (<http://www.gatewaychurch.com/>)

creating a strong foundation for life like a building's foundation by having a strong relationship with god and the people around you.

Diane recalls worshiping at Gateway in a large auditorium with tiered rows of theater style seating. The room was arranged around a prominent stage flanked by projection screens and lit with concert lighting. A rock-style band played a combination of upbeat praise music and current popular songs drawn from top 40 rock radio. She tells me she remembers hearing a familiar song from the radio in her church for the first time and thinking, "Oh my God, I can't believe they are playing that in church!" She tells me she was amazed that "something playing on the radio recently could be played in the service and it really applies." She continued to attend the Gateway for the rest of the time she lived in Austin and even enrolled in one of the many classes offered there, an activity that she assures me is "not really her type of thing." After relocating to Midwest City for her job, Diane began intentionally shopping around for a similar place "to get connected like I did at Gateway." At the time we met, Diane had already made visits to several of the churches in the local religious scene of which River Chapel is a player.

I met Diane in her office and it became clear to me early in our conversation that she did not really like River Chapel. I was surprised and told her as much. Finding people who do not like the church they are attending at the time is difficult when doing a congregational study in an environment defined by a religious free marketplace. Except in cases of sustained factionalism and intra-church conflict, when individual people or families do not like what is going on or

do not feel like the church suits them, they leave. Identifying these people then becomes difficult. Even when a congregation is divided over the future of the church, catching the period before the resolution, often a split, involves good timing. Of course I have heard plenty of complaints about River Chapel from the people who go there regularly. As I describe elsewhere, members often complained about the smoke machines in the auditorium, or the scheduling of the evening classes. But these people were quick to frame their complaints in the language of sacrifice for success in their mission to reach the unchurched. And as I make clear in the chapter on power dynamics at River Chapel, there is really nothing they could do to effect in their experience except leave the river. When I spoke with her, Diane was new to the church, unfamiliar with its mission, and unimpressed with the worship.

“Relevance” is felt as well as understood

Despite citing the importance of the “relevant” real-life messages offered in the weekly worship services, the people I talked with were often at a loss to tell me much of the content of those messages. However, they were very clear in telling how the messages made them feel. Just as Eric linked authenticity, relevance, and impact above, I would hear testimony as to the emotional impact that the service had on my interview participants far more frequently than a recounting of the sometimes nuanced logical steps of a message planned weeks in advance. I had one such conversation early on in my fieldwork when I was standing in line waiting to get my cup of coffee before finding a seat in the auditorium. I must have rolled out of bed late that morning, or maybe I just had

the look of a bedraggled graduate student in my eyes. Whatever the reason, a man standing behind me felt compelled to comment as I gazed toward the large machines at the front of the line. “One time Pat took away the coffee without warning,” he said to the back of my head. “Oh?” I replied, “What was that about?” Turning around, I recognized the man’s slightly wrinkled features and the one silver earring I had always thought made him curiously attractive. “Well, he did it to illustrate the message for the weekend,” the man explained. “Huh,” I mustered, glancing back to check my place in line, “so what was the message about?” “Oh I don’t know. Something about feeling what it’s like to sacrifice and give something up. It worked though! I really missed the coffee. Glad it was back the next weekend,” he concluded. I had poured my cup by then. With a nod I made my way past him and on in to find my seat. I took a quick note on the program waiting there for me and made a decision to ask this question again from time to time.

What I learned doing this is not surprising. Memory is a tricky thing. As one older member I was quizzing gently chided me, “I barely remember what I had for breakfast, much less the details of that message.” However, the terms people did use during their moments of recall where as often linked to talk about feeling as they were to talk about doctrine. Lessons “learned” were accessible because people could recall how they felt about and felt implicated in the representations of “real life” during the worship services. I think this is key to understanding the importance of “relevance” in this particular religious culture. As I suggest with my example above, this is even true of the many men I spoke

with who so often proclaimed to be “more of a thinker and not the feelings type” when I asked them to describe how they felt over the course of the previous worship service. While the chapter on production practices describes in detail the techniques for and investment of resources made in “creating environments where people can experience the relevance” of god for their lives, the stories men told me about their paths to and investments in River Chapel varied somewhat. I will conclude here by introducing Bren, a man I met while participating in the Wild Men Reading Group as part of the Men’s Ministry at River Chapel. Along with Cindy and Diane, Bren’s story is telling as it highlights many of the difficulties of feeling connections beyond the auditorium. During our interview he reported, *“The first thing that struck me [about River Chapel] was that I could take coffee into the sanctuary,”* Brad laughed. *“I mean like, duh... if I could choose anything I’d be sitting at home reading the paper and drinking coffee.”*

Bren told me if he could pick any church to visit just for a day it would be an Amish worship service, even though he speaks neither Dutch nor German. Despite thinking of himself as a fairly introverted person who “really doesn’t like people very much,” he said he would be willing to do something like that just for the adventure of it. Bren had just recently completed the semester-long Leadership River Chapel course and had been telling me about his experience completing the assignment to visit two other area churches and discuss their findings with the class. Like many people I spoke with, Bren had chosen to use the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about WayCross Church. WayCross plays

a large role in the cultural imagination of River Chapel as it is their largest competitor in the local scene. The two churches are similar in size and composition, but differ somewhat in style and approach. I will return to the relationship between River Chapel and WayCross later. But, from what I gather from Bren and other people I spoke with, members from each church have migrated to the other and each in turn serves as a foil for other to define their adherence to the true calling of evangelicalism. The men sometimes made jokes about WayCross, but as Bren told me, “Yeah, everyone thinks it’s funny, but not really.”

Bren was born in the 1960s in Minnesota and went to college in Wisconsin. He was reared by his parents in a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church that he describes as “very conservative, traditional, and most of all boring.” Aside from fond memories of candlelight services on Christmas Eve, “the rest of the time, it’s like none of this means anything.” I asked him to explain what he meant and he continued, “It’s like church by the numbers, or people going through the motions. It feels like that to me. You go and stand and sing some stale songs and drink some weak coffee and then go shake hands with friends and then we’d go home.” With emphasis he concludes, “That’s not a church.” Bren recalls that he had always considered himself a believer, but that by the time he left for college he was done with organized religion. “These people had nothing for me,” he remembered. “It just felt so fake and so hypocritical. Maybe I was connected with these people, but I didn’t respect them. And so I left.” After that, Bren tells me, he did his own thing through college and in the years after.

Brad met his wife Michelle while attending a friend's wedding in Dallas, and after carrying on a long-distance relationship for a year he relocated to Texas to be with her. He tells me that Michelle was very involved with the Methodist church there where she had grown up. Each week she would go to the services on Sundays and he would stay home to drink coffee and read the paper. But after the first of their children were born Bren recalls thinking, "Ok, now I have to set an example and attend church as a family. He explained, "I kind of resolved myself to getting dressed up on Sunday morning to go drink weak coffee and sing some stale songs." This family experience turned out "to be a little more relaxed" than his experience growing up in his parents' Lutheran church, but he was still bored and felt like he was just going through the motions. Bren recalls being particularly bored with the preaching, telling me "preaching is just preaching, you know, the pastors talk in that pastor voice the way that disc jockeys talk in that disc jockey voice." But he attended regularly as part of his family responsibilities (Edgell 2005).

Meanwhile, Bren tells me, he was becoming increasingly excited by the tape recorded sermons of a Willow Creek Community Church pastor that his dad had been regularly sending him in the mail. This pastor spoke in a decidedly different voice that Bren described as "very real, very engaging, and so easy to listen to." When Bren and his family decided to relocate to Midwest City he searched the Willow Creek Association's membership list for a member church in the area.

Bren tells me he does not think people get too many chances to start with a clean slate in life, and moving to Midwest City was going to be his. One part of this new life he had decided to rewrite would be his experiences of connection within the community. Though he had been dutifully attending the Methodist church in Texas with his wife and children, he characterized that church as “her church.” It was always her church and “her circle of friends” there and not his, he tells me. After settling into their new home Bren’s wife suggested that the family attend the Methodist church downtown, and Bren countered with a suggestion that “we just give this other thing a try.” He recalls, “So I just kind of made the decision that this time around I’m going to do whatever I gotta do to get plugged in.” River Chapel was on the membership list of the Willow Creek association, and Bren chose the church as his place for plugging in to his new city. Already familiar with the structure of the seeker-type churches from his explorations of church websites on the internet⁴⁶, Bren knew that getting connected at River Chapel would take deliberate effort on his part. In fact, he once complained to me that this was both a positive and negative thing about River Chapel in his estimation. They have made it very comfortable for people like him to come in and hang out anonymously, but it is also just as easy to leave again having never spoken with anyone. To get past this problem quickly, Bren and Michelle filled out informational cards that are always available by the doors leading into the auditorium. They requested to be connected with a “small home group” for Bible study and fellowship. However, as I have described the history of the church

⁴⁶ I was surprised by the number of people I met who spent time at home or at work listening to podcasts, watching videos, and reading materials on the websites of churches similar to River Chapel but located all over the country.

includes a virtual elimination of the small home-based group ministry. There simply were no groups for Bren and Michelle to join. After several attempts using the cards, they gave up but continued attending the weekend services together and taking turns going to the mid-week River Chapel Live while the other attended to their children's' soccer practices and cub scout meetings.

One Wednesday night after the River Chapel Live service Bren was standing in the large foyer looking for someone to talk with. He tells me that he had made a promise to himself that afternoon to approach someone at church that night and strike up a conversation. Before he had the chance to make his move, Richard, a long-time staff member and leader of the men's ministry, approached him and introduced himself. Bren told Richard of his problems he and his wife were having getting connected into the life of the church and Richard invited him to a weekly lunch he had been having with a couple of the other guys around the church on Tuesdays. Bren concludes, "And that's continued now for over a year. It was like, cause I made this effort to get connected, I've gotten connected." While the Tuesday lunches have continued, Bren and Michelle's efforts to become involved in a home group were still ongoing when I spoke with him last. Through his new connections Bren learned of the men's ministry activities and began to take a class each semester with the other men.

I met Bren in one of these classes, his fourth semester enrolled in the men's ministry and my first. Bren tells me that our class was structured much like the others but had a slightly different and slightly unsatisfactory feel to it. (I personally found the experience very uncomfortable for reasons I will discuss

below.) The men's evenings are divided into two parts. First is a gathering of the entire group of men that have signed up for the semester. Between 60 and 80 men met in what was then the gymnasium of the church, but since has been converted into a larger version of the video café, a space to observe the service on large projection screens while sitting at round café-style tables. When everyone had chosen a seat from among the many rows of folding chairs, the evenings would open with an ice-breaking activity. For example, once we were asked to pair up and complete a wilderness survival exercise in which we prioritized a list of supplies available from our hypothetical mountain plane crash⁴⁷. Another time we formed teams based on the color of the balloon lying in our chairs. In a circle we worked together to keep all of our balloons from touching the ground using only gentle bumps from our hands and feet. A short talk would follow, often either from a guest (staff member) from the church present that night or from Richard. When Richard spoke he worked to create a mood that I can only describe as part locker room pep talk and part vulnerable appeal for the men present to do more to integrate god into their daily lives. The theme that semester, represented on posters, PowerPoint slides and handbills, was football. It was fall, and Richard frequently extolled his men to "get in the game" at work, at church, or with their families. When guests spoke they gave their testimonies as to how the church had changed their lives. Recordings from popular blues artists (for example, BB King, Stevie Ray Vaughn) were played over the sound system to open and close this portion of the evening. Following

⁴⁷ The prize that night was a pair of tickets to an NHL hockey match the following weekend. My partner and I lost because he gave high priority to the pistol and I gave high priority to the map. As it turns out, neither were essential for our surviving the exercise.

the large group meeting the men then broke up into smaller groups of eight to twelve for various classes.

On the first night I attended the fall men's ministry meetings I was asked to sign up for a class. I was offered a variety of choices including a study of the book of Galatians, a course called "The Bible for Dummies" based on a book in the popular "For Dummies" how-to series, a course for fathers wishing to create stronger relationships with their adolescent daughters, and a course based on reading *The Way of the Wild Heart* by the popular evangelical author John Eldredge⁴⁸. Three other possibilities were "Discipleship" parts one and two (a two-semester series focused on theological and philosophical training for the men who were becoming active lay leaders in the congregation), and two groups meeting to watch short excerpts from the NOOMA videos that offer "everyone a fresh look at the teachings of Jesus"⁴⁹. I chose to sign up for reading *The Way of the Wild Heart*; after all the subtitle of the book promised "a map for the masculine journey," and I was there to learn about men. I remember stopping to refill my coffee (this time with decaf) as I made my way out of the gym and down one of the long halls lined on either side with classrooms. This space was newly built during the time I was doing fieldwork. Previously it housed the children's spaces collectively known as Kid's River. A new 2.8 million dollar wing was added to the building to upgrade the Kid's River facilities, and old space was remodeled to accommodate classes and group meetings. Some were furnished

⁴⁸ There was a \$20 registration fee for the semester. Richard would not let me pay. The church leaders often waived fees and provided me material support like this. I was grateful then and still am now.

⁴⁹For more on NOOMA videos see: <http://store.flannel.org/about-flannel>

with couches, comfortable arm chairs, and low tables. Others contained rows of desks and chairs. All were equipped with video monitors and small sound systems. The room where Bren and I met with seven other men to read and discuss “The Wild Heart” of men was furnished with portable wire frame chairs and low tables.

After the semester had ended I asked Bren for his thoughts about the class. He told me he was disappointed and that it had not been the same experience as his previous semesters with the men’s ministry. He remembers the first class that he took as being “very intellectually oriented” and more focused on the book they were reading together. As it turns out, this class was led by the author of the book they were reading, a local amateur theologian in the congregation who had self-published his reflections on the nature of god. Feeling good about the evenings he had spent with these men at the church, Bren told me he signed up again the following semester, this time to study and debate the “five points of Calvinism.” This class was led by an energetic veteran leader of the men’s groups named Taylor. Bren remembers that this where when he first become convinced that River Chapel was for “true Bible-believing Christians” and not just for “Christians who think the most important thing are seekers and the friendly Jesus and all of that.” He told me he felt comforted to learn that “There is a Bible and there is a set of beliefs here [meaning at River Chapel]” that he was familiar with from his experiences growing up in a conservative synod of the Lutheran Church. Bren framed his understanding of

the River Chapel Way for me by opposing the lessons he learned that semester to his previous church experiences telling me:

“Lutherans, I mean that doctrine is front and center, and it was approached from a perspective of traditions and formality and all of that. And, at River Chapel it’s approached from the perspective of people and contemporary culture and music, creative arts, and so forth. But when you get through that, you find yourself back at this doctrinal place, the same set of core truths. It was a lot harder to find coming at it from the River Chapel direction, but I think when I got there it was more relevant.”

He recalls that semester going so well that eight of the men from the group decided to “stay together” to read another book the following semester. After agreeing to continue on again for a third semester together, Bren tells me “things just kind of fell apart.” He attributes the breakup of the group to circumstances, telling me that Taylor was unable to lead the men because he had left for the spring to tour Europe, and the remaining men could not settle on a good book to read together. Over time their numbers declined so that “by the end of the semester two of the other guys and I would meet up for a bit at the church and then go out to a movie or to get a beer or something.” Bren tells me even these outings did not last beyond the transition to another new semester.

As is often the case in college classrooms, the students in what we later dubbed the “Wild Men” group sat in the same seats week after week. Thomas and David, our co-leaders for that semester, encouraged us to mix it up by choosing different seats the early weeks, but gave up as we settled into our routine. On that first evening the chairs had been arranged into a small circle interspersed with two or three low tables each with an open box of Kleenex. At

the time I had never engaged in any kind of group therapeutic setting, but the sight of the tight circle and the tissues evoked a slight feeling of trepidation at interactions I might encounter. I was also concerned with how to represent myself to my classmates. I was unknown to them just as they were unknown to one another. Despite my methodological training and my commitment to never treat the people who let me into their lives as mere subjects, I can honestly say I was deciding who I was in that room moment by moment. When it became my turn to introduce myself to the group I refused to simply pass as a skeptical seeker and instead very briefly presented myself as an academic with a research agenda, asking all of them for permission to participate in the group for my study. In the moment, glancing back to the boxes of tissues on the table and then around the circle of men's faces regarding me with polite attention, I also promised not to quote directly from the conversations in the room or to identify any particular member of the class. Instead, I suggested I might ask them to meet with me individually during the following semester to talk on the record about their experiences. They welcomed me exactly as they had the three men who introduced themselves before me, but I can still remember how flushed and hot my cheeks felt. And, again I learned a lesson that semester that continued to surprise me over and over; despite feeling, and asserting, my distinct identity, my presence and my agenda would always be understood as an expression of god's promptings to a seeking soul at River Chapel.

I spent those evenings in our Wild Men group seated across the circle from Bren. He had caught my attention during our second meeting when we

began to discuss Eldredge's book because he was the only man to raise (gently) critical questions concerning the author's version of the "masculine journey"⁵⁰. In the text Eldredge presents a developmental model of proper masculine growth over the life course that is "God ordained... [and] woven into the fabric of our being, just as the laws of nature are woven into the fabric of the earth" (2006: 19). One's progressive initiation from one stage to the next stage was often, Eldredge argues, stunted by faulty male role models and mentors in one's life leaving "a world of uninitiated and unfinished men" (20). Each chapter of the book is dedicated to one stage and concludes with suggestions for what may have gone wrong in the readers' initiation process and how they might get back on track. Eldredge laces analogies and illustrations drawing on a range of "universal experiences" for example, the plot lines of several blockbuster action movies, weekend trips to Starbucks, shooting firearms, and trying in vain to finally land a prize trout. As it turned out we rarely discussed the specifics of the chapters we were reading each week. Over the course of the semester, the book served primarily as an entry point for the majority of the men in the class to discuss their relationships with their own sons or fathers.

Bren describes this direction the class took as somewhat disappointing and offered me a few explanations for why this experience was not as good as those earlier courses. Thomas' strong personality, Bren suggested, was probably better suited to his ongoing interests in the church's recovery ministry rather than leading a discussion group centered on a book. In addition, he

⁵⁰ In his book Eldredge presents a developmental stage model of proper masculine growth throughout the life course.

suggested, there were early winter storms and our reading schedule was disrupted. Our group was not composed of the desirable mix of people new to the church and invested members. In fact, I was the only man not able to identify as a life-long Christian. And most importantly, Bren and I agreed, the book lent itself to the kind of therapeutically oriented discussion that often in fact developed during the group sessions. In the midst of our conversation Bren explained, “It wasn’t discussing the text, it was the presentation of a key principle and then people would tell how they felt about it and how their life story is about that principle. And with a text like that it’s hard not to be revealing.” He continued, “When Eldredge says people carry around these scars then it becomes all about revealing your scars.” He contrasted this with his previous experience learning about and debating concepts of predestination and election, telling me “the discussion got very animated and it drew people in, but in kind of a safe way. You weren’t talking about your own stuff you were talking about the material. And whenever things did become personal, it had a real authentic feel to it.” On the recording I used to transcribe our interview I can hear Bren lean in slightly as he offered, “Sometimes in this class I felt like people were sharing just to be seen sharing. I don’t know if that makes any sense, but it felt a little like lines that had been delivered before.” In our classes together I remember noting that Bren stuck very close to the text. When we met again for our interview, Bren told me he hadn’t signed up for the men’s ministry that semester. He was thinking of taking Learning the River Chapel Way the following fall.

Below I introduce Jacob, another “wild man” from the group who was very interested in revealing his scars to the others. But before I do I would like to return to Bren and Michelle’s efforts getting connected to offer a window on one other aspect of River Chapel that I would like to bring into this discussion. When Bren and Michelle relocated from Dallas to Midwest City and began attending River Chapel on Bren’s suggestion, the church had no formal structure to support small home-based groups. As part of the transition into the organizational form of a church like a river, the staff had decided to stop efforts to recruit members by forming new small groups and, according to Patrick, “to let the existing groups carry on until they ran their course and dissolved naturally.” Since that time there has been a nearly constant effort on the part of the core to find ways for the people who comprise the periphery to become more deeply invested in the life of the church. Twice the discussion surrounding these efforts became particularly weighty as a lack of financial support for two major building campaigns was understood as a result of poorly constructed bridges between the periphery and the core. I cannot say that home-based groups are necessary for a church structured like River Chapel. However, I will suggest that these groups may offer a mode of feeling connected that is not available elsewhere in the organization, except for possibly the back offices and volunteer spaces where staff and other core members do the daily and weekly work of producing religious culture for the congregation at River Chapel.

Bren recalled that after he and Michelle had both committed to attending the weekend services, the midweek service whenever possible, and classes (he

through the men's ministry and she with the women's groups), they still felt that they would like to be a part of a home group. Bren had already been lunching weekly with Richard and a few other men when he decided to approach Richard personally with his request. Restarting the small groups had been an ongoing concern of many staff and invested members since the failure to meet their fundraising goals for the River Kids addition to the building, and a growing worry that the core staff was, according to Paul, "finding it increasingly difficult to effectively communicate our vision for the church to the people only coming on the weekends." The staff had begun a new initiative and Richard asked Bren and Michelle to join a 12-week training class on leading small groups that was forming at his house. Along with 10 others, they met weekly and agreed to recruit people from their networks in the church to form separate home groups when the training was complete. The plan was to then make a public call for those interested in home groups in the coming months. Of the original new home group leaders, Bren tells me, four groups were actually started. One couple from the training ended up moving away and four other people just lost interest, as he remembers. When the public call for participation was made in a weekend service, Bren continues, "60-some people signed up the first weekend, so we were hammered trying to come up with enough leaders to run all these small groups, and find spaces for them and so forth." I spoke with Bren about this almost a year before ending my time at River Chapel. I checked in with staff members one more time about the problems with the small groups in those final weeks. They offered accounts of difficulties of limited resources and personnel,

but ultimately returned to their “wish that people would just step up, take some ownership, and figure out a way to make things work out for themselves.” Bren and Michelle were still meeting with three other couples who are similar in age. He told me “The kids love it, they look forward to it and the adults need the break. We really just get together, talk and drink wine. We like it, it’s a night out.” Bren was still having lunch on Tuesdays with his male friends and Michelle found another way to get connected. While still regularly attending River Chapel, she eventually found her way back to “her church” and began volunteering regularly with members of the downtown United Methodist congregation.

Though Bren had chosen a church in which he felt he and his family could get connected and make a home in their new community, he still found it difficult to forge the kind of ongoing face to face relationships despite following the path laid out by River Chapel staff. Reading groups and classes had often proved either temporary or altogether unsatisfactory. And while the large worship services were exciting, comfortable, and relevant, they could not provide him with the dialogue and debates he so clearly enjoys in his life. Though I never spoke with Michelle directly, I suspect that her sense of getting connected reaches beyond the walls of the auditorium and classrooms into the city.

In the following chapter I discuss another environment for making connections, the classroom spaces where members are taught The River Chapel Way. I briefly situate the theology and philosophy of the church leaders in the broader evangelical tradition and describe how these lessons are taught to

members as an ongoing process of building connections between the small core of staff and the periphery of un-invested members.

I situate River Chapel as an outgrowth of the broader changes in US evangelicalism in the past 30 years. Particularly important here is the influence of Willow Creek on the movement. Throughout this dissertation I have tried to make it clear that there is a long history of evangelical church leaders and itinerate pastors continually trying to make the evangelical message of individual transformation and salvation through a personal relationship with the divine “contemporary, relevant, and attractive.” Willow Creek is a good marker for the contemporary move to “reach the seeker,” by drawing on the materials at hand in a post-industrial society. Just as the groups described by Butler, Wacker and Balmer regarded the new frontier on West as well as the established South as “mission fields” ripe for the spread of the evangelical message (187:2007), seeker churches like Willow Creek and River Chapel are working to evangelize middle-class suburban families on the electronic fields of mass media.

Chapter Six: Exploring the Banks of the River

“The decades between the turn of the nineteenth century and the opening of the Civil War witnessed an explosion of reform efforts. The largest and most systematic projects- centering in the 1820s and 1830s- stemmed from broadly evangelical groups, first the Congregationalists and Presbyterians then the Baptists and Methodists” (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer 186-7:2007).

Beginning with the Reformation, the term evangelical was used in a broad sense to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. In Germany and Switzerland, and especially among Lutherans, the term has continued to be used in this broad sense as a marker of their history (Marsden 1991). Various strands of these religions of the heart have a diverse history stretching back to Great Britain of the 1730s (Bebbington 2008). Then as now, many adherents consider important characteristics of evangelicalism to be: a belief in the need for personal conversion (or being "born again"); some expression of the gospel in effort; a high regard for Biblical authority; and an emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus (Eskridge,1995). Bebbington has termed these four distinctive aspects “conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism,” saying, "Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism."(2008:3) In fact it is these four principles that form the core theology of the River Chapel Way. Yet, despite Bebbington’s relatively straight forward criteria, the term evangelical has encompassed a variety of religious forms and relationships within a changing cultural context.

In the 1920s US, conservative factions of the Presbyterian churches in the northeast held the view that liberal parties in their denomination had surrendered their heritage as evangelicals by becoming too accommodating of modernist and scientific understandings and values of the world. They criticized modernists' interpretations of the Social Gospel as it had been developed by Protestant social activists of the previous century and they advocated for sharper distinctions between the religious and the newly emerging popular commercial culture. They advocated a return to the "fundamentals" of their faith.

The religious sensibilities of fundamentalist and fundamentalism gained currency as a movement based on scriptural inerrancy and popularly associated with William Jennings Bryan, among others. In his dissection of conservative religion and politics "Under God" (1990), Garry Wills traces the terms and the movement to a faction of the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1910, which drew up a list of five defining qualities of "true believers" published in a mass-circulation series of books called "The Fundamentals." A World's Christian Fundamentals Association was founded in 1918. Fundamentalism also appears to have been used first in connection with the (American) Northern Baptist Convention of 1920 to describe the more conservative delegates who desired 'to restate, reaffirm, and reemphasize the fundamentals of our New Testament faith.' The term has only been applied to non-Christian traditions, particularly Islam, since 1957.

As conservative church leaders and spokespersons disagreed among themselves about how a 'Christian' ought to respond to an unbelieving world,

many within the churches urged engagement with modern society directly and on its own terms, and they began to express reservations about being known to the world as fundamentalists (Karl 1947). In what has become a common critique among contemporary conservative evangelicals, evangelical theologian Kenneth Kantzer suggested that even early on the term fundamentalist had become "an embarrassment instead of a badge of honor."⁵¹ For their part, early fundamentalists saw the evangelicals as often being too concerned about social acceptance and intellectual respectability, and as too often accommodating to a perverse modernity that needed correction. Similarly, interfaith or ecumenical efforts were often subject to criticism from fundamentalists on the basis that these threatened to water down a true faith.

The divide instituted by a fundamentalist split in the Presbyterian General Assembly was replicated across many denominations in the first part of the twentieth century. Those who held onto evangelical as an identity moved to distinguish themselves from their fundamentalist counterparts by seeking to engage the modern world as well as more liberal Christians in a positive way. Over time this stance has often been characterized as remaining separate from worldliness but not from the world — a middle way between modernism and the sectarian impulses of fundamentalism (c.f. Shibley 1998). These early evangelicals sought allies in their own denominational churches and liturgical traditions, while also later joining with varieties of charismatic traditions.

⁵¹ Kenneth Kantzer Reflects on His History with the Magazine and the Evangelical Movement "At his retirement from Christianity Today, the editor recalled the most significant changes on the Christian scene during his tenure." June 1, 2002

However, at the outset their move against fundamentalism was to operate within their respective churches, not to begin something new.

In the United States the popular discourse surrounding evangelicalism flows primarily from the evangelical/fundamentalist controversy of the early 20th century and has developed in a context of relative religious pluralism characterized by competition (Finke and Stark 1993). This discourse has proven to be a sometimes difficult material with which evangelicals might fashion a recognizable tradition in the wash of competition for the public's attention. Through debates over identity carried out in the popular media, evangelicals have often sought to capture a middle ground between the theological liberalism of the mainline denominations and the cultural separatism of Fundamentalist strands of Christianity. In a triangulating move borrowed from politicians, advocates have recently sought to identify their faith as "the third of the leading strands in American Protestantism, [that straddles] the divide between fundamentalists and liberals" on the contemporary religious scene (Mead 2006).

It is also worth noting that evangelicalism has always been a global movement with varied local expressions. The ambivalent identity characterized by the evangelical/fundamentalist split in the US does not capture the dynamics of the term or of the faith traditions in places where a fundamentalist reaction to early Western modernity was not as strongly felt. For Example, worldwide Pentecostal-based evangelical theologies are spreading rapidly. Christian churches in Africa exhibit rapid growth and great diversity in part because they are not so directly tied to the European and North American evangelical heritage.

Global parachurch organizations such, as The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) founded in 1951, represent several multinational networks that “together to give a worldwide identity, voice and platform to more than 420 million evangelical Christians,”⁵² apart from US based organizations like the National Evangelical Organization.

In the contemporary political climate and as read against the particular religious history in the US, debates persist among religious elites as to how the various forms of their conservative religious culture might sustain an identity as evangelical while avoiding the historical and popular baggage the term carries. Partisans of the spirit of evangelicalism if not the term, for example the emergent church movement, sometimes position themselves as a version or manifestation of post-evangelicalism, whereas historically Mainline evangelical Protestants (and even some Catholics) continue to identify under the broader umbrella of the “evangelical left.” Recent authors of the “Emergent Church” like Dave Tomlinson or Brian McLaren often characterize theirs as an unbounded movement comprising a range of dissatisfaction among evangelicals; dissatisfaction with the rhetoric and the culture of evangelical popularizes as well as the practices of the baby-boomer mega-churches. However, they too claim a unique understanding of and engagement with “the secular culture.” For example, in illustrating an incorporation of evangelical culture and their own engagement with secular philosophical traditions, Tomlinson writes that “linguistically, the distinction [between evangelical and post-evangelical] is similar to the one that sociologists make between the modern and postmodern eras” (2007:28).

⁵² See <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/aboutwea/> accessed on October 10, 2008.

While many public figures, both conservative and liberal, in the US have worked to refrain the meaning of evangelicalism, these historical realignments have nonetheless been strong enough to create significant ambiguity in the term (Marsden 1991). As a result, distinctions among “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” and “mainline” religious cultures are increasingly complex (consider, for example the attempts to locate the “Emergent Church” movement on this spectrum). In the North American context and particularly in the United States, the term “evangelical” often continues to be equated with Christian Fundamentalism generally and particularly with the politically active Christian Right.

The term evangelical has come under increased scrutiny during the last quarter of the 20th century and first decade of the 21st as it has played a very public role in electoral politics. Religiously motivated political activities have often centered on so called “values” issues where activists have sought to assert particular interpretations of scripture into law. For instance, based on their belief that marriage is defined as only between one man and one woman, many evangelicals tend to oppose state recognition of same-sex marriage, thereby depriving a large portion of the population of the benefits attendant to a legal status. Evangelicals, at least in their political presence have also sought to severely restrict women’s rights. Though less well publicized, evangelicals tend to be somewhat economically conservative as well.

This recent and probably temporary alignment of conservative evangelicals and the Republican party in electoral politics has been popularly characterized as an attempt to institute theocratic rule through a kind of

Christian-fascism (ex. Phillips, 2006). While it is true many conservative evangelicals advocate that Christianity should enjoy a privileged place in American public life in accordance with its importance in American life and history, this is again not without precedent. The image of the US as a “city upon a hill” and a beacon to the world stretches back to a speech given by John Winthrop to his puritan followers in 1630. Yet despite popular fears of an evangelical takeover represented by Phillips’ book, the political Christian Right as it was constituted most recently in support of George W. Bush’s presidential campaigns was not composed entirely of conservative evangelical Christians. In an article appearing shortly after the 2004 elections, *The Economist* reports that, “The implication [of the empirical data] is that Mr. Bush's moral majority is not, as is often thought, composed of a bunch of right-wing evangelical Christians. Rather, it consists of traditionalist and observant church-goers of every kind: Catholic and mainline Protestant, as well as evangelicals, Mormons, and Sign Followers” (2004:30). Although evangelicals are currently seen as being active in the political Christian Right in the United States, there are those who seek the political left and center as well.

Distinctions between conservative evangelicals and others who would claim evangelical identity follows a political terrain thought to compel social and cultural (and thus political) positions among professed followers. To the extent that conservative evangelicals find common ground with conservative segments of other religions (especially other forms of Christianity), alliances inevitably form,

sometimes counter intuitively against the more moderate or liberal strains of evangelicalism with whom there may still be significant theological overlap.

The political identities of individual evangelical congregations are not always clear either. Recently evangelical megachurch pastors like Rick Warren⁵³ and Bill Hybels have sought to expand their congregation's social agenda to include poverty, combating AIDS in the third world, and protecting the environment. Their efforts have garnered criticism from many who would claim to speak for evangelicalism citing this as another example of efforts to advance evangelicalism's stature in the secular world at the expense of "traditional values."

Over the last 30 years these popular representations of and debates over evangelical and fundamentalist identities have had implications for local congregations. While many who would identify as evangelical seek to maintain an identity as theological conservatives, they often work to distance themselves from negative perceptions of the "fundamentalist" posture of antagonism toward the social context, for example by advocating involvement with the popular media culture rather than separation from it. Similarly, many express discomfort with the strident political rhetoric of Christian Right while still personally agreeing with their agenda. As I will discuss below, the people I met at River Chapel often expressed ambivalence about their identity as evangelicals and suggested their preference that their public identity should stem from their unique "ability to

⁵³ River Chapel did not offer any of the Purpose Driven programs in the church during the time I was there. But a wealthy member of the congregation was so taken with the book *The Purpose Driven Life* that he made free copies available through the church bookstore to anyone who should want one.

connect scripture to the problems of real life,” as opposed to placing emphasis on how believers might construe the political implications of their faith commitment. Furthermore, while the most invested members and staff were always quick to pledge their adherence to the simple fundamentals of their faith, ‘fundamentalism’ always carried the air of a dirty word at River Chapel.

How does this socially and politically conservative congregation retain its identity and its agenda to make personal change in the hearts of unchurched seekers while distinguishing themselves from the popular image of the Christian right in the contemporary US? My work shows how a local manifestation of this cultural movement has been fairly successful at negotiating this terrain, at least in the current religious scene found in Midwest City. As I have argued in the previous chapters, they do it by rigorous adherence to the River Chapel Way of reaching seekers. They do it using secular music. They do it using the forms and contents of media culture. They do it by beginning with the ‘felt needs’ of the people in the community. They do it by being on the Chamber of Commerce. They do it over coffee and scones in strip-mall coffee shops and with LAN parties and Guitar Hero contests at the church.

As I have already described, leadership at River Chapel is unapologetically authoritarian. There is a clear “River Chapel Way” to do things, and members who do not agree are sometimes characterized as selfish or as uninterested in the true mission of the church (to reach the unchurched seeker). For example, a video clip called “Me Church” was often a point of reference for characterizing both the other churches in Midwest City as well as the people

around River Chapel who would ask to make change⁵⁴. River Chapel does not model democracy, though people who do attend are encouraged to participate. In fact learning the River Chapel Way is in part learning that membership in the church is defined solely by one's participation and not by the signing or transfer of official paperwork. But members also learn that they should not expect to change much of anything about the church. They learn that even the church board only serves in an advisory capacity. This organizational hierarchy and control plays out continually in all aspects of church life, from the staff meetings, the classes offered to new and more deeply committed members, as well as the worship services for children, teens, and adults.

My most intensive exposure to the River Chapel Way came in the form of a 10-week leadership training class. In what follows I try to convey a sense of that experience as I participated alongside my classmates. I made audio recordings of several of the sessions but not all. Where I directly quote classmates or staff, these have come from recordings or notes I made while participating.

Assimilation into Leadership at River Chapel

Nancy is often described as “the mom” of the church. A member since the early days when River Chapel met in the local hotel conference center, Nancy is credited with, and often responsible for, keeping everyone on staff organized. She carries out the day-to-day logistics of scheduling, arranging transportation, food, and other necessities that allow the senior staff plenty of room to “cast

⁵⁴ You can watch the video clip here. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FTtShavPes>

visions” for the church. Her voice pokes through the chatting and laughter to call the spring semester Leadership River Chapel class to order once again: “Ok, guys find your chairs. Got your assimilation questions going? You guys are really good workers. It’s really fun to watch you guys come in and go straight to work on your questions.” From the opening meeting of the 10-week series the class was given a small stack of paper stapled in the corner with each participant’s name followed by a set of multiple choice questions designed to facilitate introductions among class members.

Our task this evening, and every evening thereafter, is two-fold. We are to circulate around the room asking each person the four questions printed on our worksheets in order to meet all 23 of our classmates. Additionally, it was explained, this will give us practice in getting to know the unchurched visitors who may come for the weekend services. As Leaders at River Chapel we will be expected to greet new people we see, and these four questions should serve as our model. It took most members all of the 11 class meetings to complete their assimilation questions. I later learned that even though this group of people had been nominated to take the Leadership River Chapel class based on their consistent involvement in the church through volunteering and participation in weekday ministries, only two had ever met, and even then only briefly at a church-sponsored lunch last fall.

Find –*Name of Classmate*

Introduce Yourself then Ask

1) How long have you been coming to River Chapel?

Less than 6 months

Over 1 year

Over 2 years

Over 5 years

More than 10 years –if more than 10 years, what year did you begin attending?

2) How did you discover River Chapel?

Invitation

Driveby

Advertising

Friend

Other

3) What keeps you busy during the week?

Employment –Where?

Home/Family President

College –where?

Other

4) What Christian Formation groups are you involved with at River Chapel?

Community Live

Take Two

Website

Men's Ministry

Connect 4

Single Friends

Recovery

Off Campus Small Group

Other –what?

Not including myself, 35 people originally signed up to be a part of this semester's Leadership class, 25 women and 10 men ranging in age from mid-

twenties to mid-sixties. This is the largest class that the staff has ever had. Now in its sixth semester, the class had previously been limited to 15 people.

However, the expanded enrollment does not represent an increased interest on the part of church attendees, but rather an increased effort by the staff to again build a bridge between “the core” and 2,000 or so people who regularly attend the weekend services. Staff members invited more people to attend the class as a way to facilitate connections between themselves and the large audiences drawn to the weekend worship events. The “problem” of creating connections between the core of the church and the surrounding concentric circles is a continuing theme in the organizational life of River Chapel and a recurrent focus of attention for the staff.

In the opening weeks of this session of Leadership River Chapel the extra-large class lost a couple of members. Four of the women dropped out of the class after the first session due to difficulties balancing family responsibilities with the time commitment required by the course. Two more were able to remain in the class, but only attended a few of the sessions. About 29 men and women met regularly on Thursday night from 7:00 – 10:00 pm for 10 weeks in order to learn to be leaders at River Chapel. Beyond being exposed to the rationale and philosophy behind this particular manifestation of the seeker movement, class participants will, upon completion, be expected to sign a “leadership covenant” and join the “leadership community.” As described in the previous chapter, this community is intended to serve as an intermediary between the widest concentric circle and the core.

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to two goals, first to describe for readers the rationale and philosophy behind the River Chapel Way of doing seeker church⁵⁵. Second, I show how people from a variety of contexts and backgrounds engage with the material presented. Until now I have been describing the Leadership Class as the context in which this learning work is done. But over the years I have been conducting research at River Chapel I have observed and participated in an almost constant restatement of the principles upon which River Chapel is founded. I have observed this in day-long seminars addressed to the local pastors' association, three-hour orientation sessions geared toward new attendees, and even in a weeks-long series of staff meetings meant to refocus staff on "the DNA of River Chapel." As much as I can, I would like to take the reader to each of these contexts to get a sense of who these audiences are and to hear how they react to the rationale behind "doing church" at River Chapel. With the exception of some members of the pastors' association, the audiences are already inclined to agree with the leadership's strategy for the church. They like life at River Chapel, and they have enrolled in the course to move closer to the core of the church. But in the process of learning the material, liking the church becomes buying in to the mission of the movement for many. And that move, I argue, represents a step closer to the core. This constant restatement of the rationale for seeker-style worship,

⁵⁵ Though I have been attentive to the theological teachings and traditions at River Chapel I have focused my study primarily on the active processes and practices of cultural production. However, I will try to point out the relevant literature used by the pastoral staff leaders to support these practices where appropriate. I treated these books as primary sources of data whenever they appeared in the life of River Chapel.

combined with a push for greater involvement from those already attending, is a key dynamic for the life of River Chapel.

Though often restated in different contexts, the material presented is little changed. It may be abbreviated for shorter sessions or less invested audiences, but the metaphors, illustrations, and anecdotes remain the same. So too, do the key points church leaders seek to convey. This presents an organizational problem for writing the chapter. I do not want to bore readers with the repetition of these multiple restatements, and yet I do want to convey some particulars from each context. The bulk of the material presented here comes from the Leadership Class described above. This was the most intensive and detailed restatement of The River Chapel Way I participated in during my research. I organize this chapter around the key points as they were presented in that class. I bring in the other contexts and the voices of those present in them wherever they might shed light through contrast or similarity.

Meeting the Leadership Class

In the spring of 2006 the members of the Leadership River Chapel class met in “The Studio,” a large meeting space that had served as the main worship auditorium for the first incarnation of the church. Now this room serves as a large classroom or meeting space for various groups throughout the week. There are fifteen round tables with four chairs each in the center of the room with four taller café style tables and stools arranged along the two longest walls. At the front of the room is a low riser that serves as a stage above which hangs a large white projection screen. Sets of speakers are arrayed along each side of

the screen and the sound and video for the room is controlled from an enclosed booth in the rear. The main lighting for the room is a mix of florescent and incandescent and can be dimmed or brightened. A small set of stationary color lighting pots are affixed to a rafter at the front of the room and pointed at the stage. The carpet is mostly blue, interspersed with brightly colored geometric shapes. Combined with the angular blue walls that define the stage area, the room has a distinctly 1980s era MTV aesthetic. This room serves several purposes throughout the week. Many of the medium sized groups gather here, and until the fall of 2006, it also served as the “video café,” an auxiliary worship space where the weekend service could be watched in real-time through an audio/video feed coming from the main auditorium.

Looking out over the room from his perch on a stool in front of the stage, Paul begins by asking why the class members wanted to take Leadership River Chapel and what they were expecting from the class. The question hung there for a moment as no one, I suppose, wanted to be the first to speak out in a room of new acquaintances. Three of the class members, Amber, Daniel, and Marta are senior staff members at the church. Daniel and Marta are a married couple recently hired by the church to oversee the operation of the Capital City satellite congregation. Amber works as Patrick’s assistant and is attending with her husband as well. It was Amber’s husband Ray who first broke the silence. Flatly and with a clear Midwest accent he stated, “I want to know why you all do things the way that you do.” Ray had caught my attention early on. Obviously the oldest person in the room, he was also the one person I felt comfortable identifying as

solidly working class. This was neither the situation, nor the type of study really, where I would have the opportunity to ask such questions of those around me. But, Ray's boot cut jeans, tucked plaid shirt, and neatly styled (if slightly thinned) pompadour haircut were immediate and familiar cues. I would later learn that Ray was 20 years retired from work in the food service industry. Paul assured Ray that this is exactly what they would cover in the 10 weeks that the class had together, and after a few beats another man, Bart, an HVAC technician at the local university hospital enthusiastically chimed in saying, "I'm just honored to be nominated to take the class." He smiled as Paul explained that they should feel good about being there. The senior staff, he continued, takes nominations from those people who have already completed the class, as well as from other staff, but carefully vet each nomination before the start. Some nominees, Paul explained, are in fact asked to continue volunteering and attending services until they are better prepared.

Responses to Paul's query continue to trickle in, and after each comment or question, he assures them that they will be addressing their expectations over the course of the semester. Early on it is only the men who speak. Craig, an insurance agent in his mid-40s wearing a dark suit and tie says that he came because he wanted to get a better understanding of the ministry of River Chapel so that he could talk about it with his family. Paul asks if anyone signed up to learn to be a better leader. Everyone in the class nods, but Dan and Shelly, another married couple, responded that yes they had. Dan continued by reporting that often when he finishes playing guitar at the weekend services

people will want to talk to him about his playing and the church. He concludes, “I just want to learn the right things to say to them about River Chapel.” This becomes the theme for most of the conversation to follow this evening as both the men and the women begin to talk more readily about their desire to know how to explain the church that they are so fond of to their friends, co-workers, and extended families. Paul concludes, “in this class we’re trying to give confidence to you all that we are fully persuaded in terms of our theological and philosophical consistency and that these... that the *strategy* that you experience is well thought out.” This admittedly defensive goal for the class is in reaction to criticisms of River Chapel from other churches in the area as well as criticism to the wider changes within American evangelical culture more broadly.

An important dynamic to emerge from Leadership River Chapel is the degree to which learning the River Chapel Way is in fact learning to *justify* this way of “doing church” against the more “traditional” styles of worship members of the class had learned as children and adolescents. In fact the bulk of a subsequent class session, to which I will return below, was devoted to reviewing “10 Myths of the Seeker Movement,” an article written in defense of seeker style churches by Bill Hybels (1992). Jokes and references to the familiarity of the various “myths” [read critiques] peppered this session, often directed at absent parents, siblings, or members of “those other” churches in the community thought to be hostile to River Chapel’s presence in the evangelical scene. The majority of class members had extensive experience participating in religious institutions throughout their lives. And for many of them this meant growing up as part of a

Southern Baptist congregation in the Midwest. Learning the River Chapel way meant learning to explain and justify to one's self as well as family and friends why worshiping at River Chapel is a valid, and authentic, religious practice. In this class of emerging leaders in a church for the unchurched, I was one of three who had no personal religious background. Dan the guitar player introduced above and his wife Shelly told me they were unchurched as well and chose this - their first church- randomly from the phone book. In an interview Dan told me that he (they) stayed for the music.

Over the course of the class I got to know many of these new River Chapel leaders. Several like Miriam, Shauntel, Cindy, Dale, and Janice have been regularly attending the church for more than 10 years. Many more have been attending for more than five years. Marta and Daniel are new to this church, but not the organizational structure and style of worship at River Chapel. Last fall Daniel was hired by Patrick and Paul to take over duties at the newly founded Capital City Campus, a satellite congregation of River Chapel. Of those attending for a year or two several like Laurie and Eric, Grant, Michelle, Allison, and Tara are young professionals either starting careers or completing graduate degrees. Others like Craig and Ellen are established professionals working in insurance and law.

Figure 1: Leadership Class Members' Length of Time Attending River Chapel

Length Attending RC (in years)	Count	Names
<6mo	2	Marta, Daniel
>1 year	4	Ashley, Craig, Michelle T, Grant
>2 years	8	Laurie and Eric C, Alison, Bethany, Tara, Clarice, Ellen, Bart
>5 years	10	Susan B, Alexa, Laura, Janel, Amber, Ray, Bill, Shelly, Chris, David T
>10 years	5	Miriam, Shauntel, Cindy, Dale, Janice

Personal connections through friendship networks, workplaces, or the local university provided most people I spoke with their introduction to River Chapel. As is common in many evangelical scenes, I often found that people first came to this particular church because they were invited. Accordingly, most of the class had begun coming to River Chapel after being invited by a friend or acquaintance. For example, Eric and Laurie came to the church for the first time on the invitation of Laurie's brother. And both Ray and Dale first visited the church after their partners had already begun attending on a friend's invitation.

Now fully invested members, Dan and Shelly often testify with the story of how they picked River Chapel “blindly” from the phonebook and have attended regularly ever since.

Other members of the class had come to River Chapel after trying out other area churches with similar public identities. For example, Grant, a recent college graduate now working as an accountant, says that he first heard about River Chapel while attending WayCross Church. The mostly negative descriptions of River Chapel he had heard while attending there piqued his curiosity and he visited the church a short time later.

Another common story is one like Bethany’s. Having moved to the city to begin graduate school in microbiology, Bethany found herself “without many friends or much to do on the weekends.” About two years ago an acquaintance she had met working in the campus lab invited her to a weekend service at River Chapel. She remembers being hesitant but open to the idea. After all, she had not attended any church regularly since before leaving home for college. She agreed to attend the Christmas service with her friend and was “stunned” to see a clip from the film *The National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* displayed on the giant screens and integrated into the pastor’s message. “That was all it took, I was hooked,” she reported with a grin. Since that introduction she has regularly attended the weekend and mid-week services eventually becoming involved in the weekly women’s group and as a volunteer for the preschool children’s ministry. It was based on her work with the preschoolers that she was invited to take this class and become part of the leadership community. Church staff

frequently cites stories like Bethany, Dan, and Shelly’s as evidence of their success in reaching the unchurched members of the community.

Figure 2: Leadership Class Members’ First Encounter with the Church

How discover RC?	Count	Names
Drove by the church	4	Alexa, Shauntel, Janel, Bart
Advertising from RC	1	Janice
Friend’s Invitation	14	Susan B, Alison, Bethany, Laura, Ashley, Tara, Kim, Craig, Clarice, Cindy, Ellen, Chris, David and Michelle T,
Other	7	Eric and Laurie, Ron, Dan and Shelly, Dale, Grant

What keeps members of the class “busy during the week” varies somewhat. Most are employed full -time outside of the home. As the congregational survey showed, the majority of people at River Chapel have skilled or professional occupations and the majority have at least a college degree. Similarly with the Leadership Class, occupations include college professor, circuit court judge, accountant, insurance agent, realtor, health care professionals, day care workers, home schoolers, and home makers. Three of

the class participants are employed by the church. David and Kim are both full-time staff members, while Miriam works part-time in the administrative offices. Three of the younger women in the class are graduate students completing PhDs, two in microbiology and one in the psychology department. People who reported two categories (for example working part-time and homemaker) were entered in both categories in the table below.

Figure 3: Occupations of Leadership Class Members

Occupations	Count
Employed Full-time	22
Employed Part-Time	2
Homemaker	3
Student	3
Retired	1

All of the people in the class are involved in some other activities at River Chapel. Most report attending the twice monthly Wednesday night communion service called Community Live. Several are volunteers for one of the various “teams” around the church, for example the technology team, guest services team, or children’s ministry team. Both Website and Take Two are described as “medium sized groups” that meet during the week and are for women only. Website meets in the evenings on alternating Wednesdays and Take Two meets every Thursday morning. Similarly Men’s ministry is a medium sized group for men that meets every Tuesday evening.

Figure 4: Other Church Involvements of Leadership Class Members

Other Involvement	Count
Community Live	25
Take Two	5
Website	8
Men's Ministry	2
Connect 4	1
Recovery	5
Off Campus Small Group	6
Other: (underground, Tech Team, Children's ministry, Financial Peace, Café Support Team, Guest Services, Creative Arts Team)	13

“One another” vs. “As you go”

Religious cultures can provide people with institutional and personal resources for supporting projects of social change. These projects may be indirectly political and focused on advancing or regressing on issues of social justice, poverty, hunger, and environmental degradation. River Chapel is best described as supporting a political project that is directed toward actively changing individuals' lives through personal transformations of the heart. While the language in use at River Chapel suggests that they draw on a discourse of “expressive individualism” (Bellah et, al. 1985), the project of maintaining

engagement with secular culture by translating the language of mass media into evidence of god's plan connects them with each other and the city in particular ways.

“Doing church” like a river is one of the central metaphors that the church staff uses to describe their organization and the ideal relationships that members should have with one another. More than any other metaphor, “doing church like a river” captures the sense in which the people are encouraged to get onboard with the strategies and goals of the organization or move on to find another church. Church leaders view their work as a move to institutionalize continual religious revivals by drawing in ever increasing numbers of converts through an appeal to the “felt needs” of the community. As Patrick once put it, “a church like River Chapel is designed to create new people by providing experiential environments where skeptical people can experience God's grace.” The organization is successful, they argue, when it is able to reshape the character of the individual in it, sending new people out to other parts of the river. Staff at the church describe this institutionalization revivalism as a difference between a church based on “one-anothering” verses a church practicing “as you go,” the former resembling a lake, the latter a river.

In characterizing the failing “one-another” strategy of many churches for members of the leadership class, Paul cajoles his audience into giving up on churches organized like a lake,

“if we'll one another each other, if we'll love each other, support each other, build each other up, teach each other the Bible, then what will happen as a result is that people will see our love for one another, they will see how well the church is working and in the process of that we'll just

kind of, we don't really know how, but like by some magical way they'll just start flocking to the church and we'll have revival show up. So, let's gather around, and let's have great community and when we have great community the world will see that great community and they will say let me in. So therefore the world will be reached by our one another-ness because they will come to our experience after we build one another up."

Paul continues on in this manner making it clear that this is not the strategy of a river church.

Understanding the metaphors that church leaders use to think through and evaluate their goals and decisions are important. But how do members of a river church engage with and make sense of the leadership's metaphor for the first time? In what follows I show how people take time in the group setting to work out what a river church might actually mean to them. As a class we were asked to read a short piece about the difference between churches who are based on "one anothering" and those like River Chapel that practice "as you go." After several seconds of silence Bart takes the opportunity to point out the old truism that, "they say that you can never step into the same river twice." Another long silence follows. A woman timidly suggests that she "liked this part about that in the river model you don't have to be in the center to go somewhere, you can just get in the river even at the edge and you'll be taken somewhere." Paul affirms her response and Dale cuts in, "it's ok to lose a few people along the way who can't keep up. Because you just can't do anything for them. And this is your, this is your strategy for bringing people to Christ. And, if you can't accept it then move on to somewhere else. [Paul: Yes, find another branch] Yeah, go find a lake." Pointing to the contradictions built into the river model, Amber, a full-time administrator at River Chapel asks, "Some of the lake church ideas are good

though, you know. So how do you balance attracting people with doing your best to shape people?”

Describing River Chapel's target audience, goals, and strategy

The leadership at River Chapel describes their mission as reaching 10% of the unchurched people in Midwest City. As I have argued, this organizational goal is one key to understanding the continual movement of the evangelical culture of which they are a part and the particular local religious culture that they work to produce. However, I would argue that there is another deeply rooted force animating this culture work. It can be understood as another meaning in the desire “to be relevant.” As I have argued, being culturally relevant is a strategy for drawing in the unchurched seekers imagined as; hip, lonely, skeptical, Midwestern men. But being relevant to “the culture” also means retaining an influence in a society where the centers of cultural, political, and economic power are often unclear. The underlying goal and the fear it articulates is that the evangelical tradition must continually find ways to be relevant or, in the words of one senior leader, “risk losing even having a place at the table.”

Remaining relevant in this way presents itself as a problem faced by many (maybe all) carriers of “traditional” culture. How do they make their understandings of the world heard? In what ways do they revise those understandings in light of the world in which they actually live? And, how do they inscribe a coherent identity as carriers of a particular culture in the process? Continually answering these questions drives the production of this religious

movement forward on a scale of time and a level of culture longer and deeper than the targets, goals, and strategies of this particular church might suggest.

David, a 32-year-old real estate agent still dressed in his business attire, takes a pause in the classroom question-and-answer session to remark on the people he sees at the weekend services. “Alright so I’m impressed by the number of people that I see coming that I, just based on looking at them, wouldn’t really think that they would like the music or be into the music. Just from being here, I sort of thought that oh everybody would be young or something. But, I don’t see that.” Mitch, leader of the creative arts team responds, “Yeah, it’s interesting, because the funny thing about the target audience that we’re trying to reach in our community is that if you try to set any demographic over them, it really kind of breaks down pretty quickly. Like if you try to say we’re only gonna reach, you know, well educated people or... if you say an age group or age range, well that doesn’t really fit River Chapel either. And if you say socioeconomic groups or something like that, those break down pretty quickly in our context too.” Despite the senior staff’s image of the church as appealing to a very wide demographic profile, the congregation attending River Chapel overwhelmingly of European descent, upwardly mobile, with a least some church background. They are, however, correct in their assessment of the age range in the congregation. While the character of the services may reflect the aesthetic sensibilities of the thirty-somethings on the Creative Arts Team, this is certainly not a congregation full of the generation X. The plurality of the members,

and particularly those with the highest investments in the church, are from the baby-boom generation.

The leadership teams at River Chapel are unambiguous about the goal that they have for their organization. They want to produce “a product, a follower of Jesus who is living life to the fullest, impacting their culture in positive ways.” Virtually all of the resources of the church are invested toward this end. Patrick announced at the opening of one class session, “Jesus met felt needs in order to communicate to real needs. We’re not in the marriage reconciliation business. We are not in the pastoral care business. We are not in the child development business. What business are we in? We are in the disciple-making business. But we meet felt needs of marriage reconciliation, pastor care needs like marrying and burying as much as we can, we meet the child development issues, because they give us the opportunity to participate in the making of disciples. We’re meeting felt needs in order to have the opportunity to touch people. It’s when people hear the change, the truth of Christ inside of them that they become a better spouse because their yielding their rights to God. They’re becoming less selfish in the process. And as a result of that are better parents, better employees.”

The evangelical culture of assuming an unmediated connection with a personal god gets played out in two contradictory ways at River Chapel. On the one hand it makes being “like a river” possible through the assumption that everyone has an individual journey and the organizational affiliation is secondary.

But, on the other hand, this section of the river where the formation of people, the disciple-making, is strictly controlled by the staff.

Theology of the River

Addressing the class, Paul described the one branch of contemporary evangelicalism as being more committed to a strict definition of Biblical authority. “In this tradition,” he explained, “God’s revelation comes through the Word alone.” An expression of this position in the local evangelical scene is the Presbyterian CrossWay Church. Paul contrasts the leadership of CrossWay as more likely to be of the mind that the local church should present scripture as it is and serve those people who are already in the church until such time as the end comes according to god’s predestined plan.

Paul’s position, and how he characterizes the theological position of River Chapel, is “Church Growth / Redemptive.” Here the revelation of god comes through the word as well as through human reason and experiences⁵⁶. Revelation is not in the word alone but also comes through the exercise of reason and the reflection on personal experiences. It is in this position that Patrick, Paul and the others have found the theological grounding for their use of popular media culture. As I described in the previous chapter, the people of River Chapel are often very aware that many in the local evangelical scene would criticize their worship practices as a pandering soft-sell of the gospel and as “church-light.” To critics –represented locally by congregations like CrossWay–emphasizing marketing strategies such as the importance of location, the quality

⁵⁶ Paul described this as a “Thomist position” (after the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas).

of programs, and creature comforts that may to help grow a church are seen as distracting from, or even worse, watering down the purpose of the local church which is to preserve the word; while the theology of River Chapel leaders frames the strategy of adapting to the cultural ecology as a component of revelation.

The search for theological consistency in implementing their strategy has had unexpected consequences as well. River Chapel's emphasis on the importance of reason and experiences for understanding god's revelation led to a year-long discussion on the question of the role of women in the leadership of the congregation. During this time, Paul told me that he, "had come to the conclusion that women can play the same roles in the church as men." He got to this decision, he explained, "by working through this Growth / Redemptive philosophy that is key to" River Chapel's theology. This is interesting because it complicates the assumption that all Willow-Creek-style churches are essentially conservative and simply wrapped in a different package. The philosophy that allows for the package to change also makes room for practical political change as well. The debate over the role of women in the church was made possible by the same commitment that makes it possible to play rock music and show Hollywood movie clips as an expression of worship. Paul's search for "consistency and authenticity" in his vision to reach the unchurched appears to have also opened up the possibility for, though by no means guarantees, changes in unequal power relationships between the men and women within the community.

Whether these relationships will actually change at River Chapel remains an open question. The church leadership has officially decided that women can hold leadership positions, but they may never actually fill any leadership positions with women. A change in official stance cannot predict changes in actual practice. It should be noted as well, it is the men in this community who did the debating, studying and ultimately deciding that women are allowed to occupy leadership positions. Clearly there are unexpected openings created by trying for internal consistency with The River Chapel Way, but how and when these openings will impact people's lives remains open to empirical investigation.

Politics and reaching the unchurched

Using Galison's (1997) metaphor of "trading zones," we might understand religious culture at River Chapel as continually working to translate between epistemic cultures that already partially overlap at "thick borders between subcultures of knowledge production where full paradigmatic translation never quite happens." Galison argues it is in these trading zones, or the overlap between epistemic cultures, where a Creole or pidgin develops to facilitate communication. New lay leaders learning The River Chapel Way learn to see themselves and their church as translating between evangelical culture (and epistemology) and the "emerging post-modern culture" by addressing the "felt needs" of the suburban seeker using the pidgin of mass media and personal stories with which "everyone can relate."

The senior staff frequently reassert to the rest of the staff and the core membership this understanding of "why we do things the way that we do." In fact,

all of staff meetings in the fall of 2007 were explicitly devoted to articulating (again) the “DNA of River Chapel” for the members of the church’s paid staff. Similarly, the Leadership River Chapel class is designed to provide members with a language and rationale for becoming invested in their methods of engagement. And the Welcome to River Chapel classes are designed to present the same curriculum in a briefer form for members of the peripheral audiences. It is not an overstatement to report that I have observed an almost constant training and policing of The River Chapel Way since I have been in the field. I think this activity speaks to a central concern for the organizational structure of River Chapel. How does an organization foster commitment and a sense of moral community while continually trying to appeal to the uninitiated in an environment where many of the terms for defining a coherent identity (ex. traditional, postmodern, seeker, evangelical) are densely layered with contradictory meaning?

During our conversations and interviews the people I met at River Chapel they often felt compelled to distinguish their church from ones affiliated with the Moral Majority and the Christian Right. This study took place in a time when the divisions that these two movements represent in national politics are polarizing for the electorate, though there is some evidence that the direct political power of the Christian Right constituency is waning as the 2008 presidential election draws near.⁵⁷ No doubt I was interested in mapping their location with reference to these popular conceptions as well. Like it or not I played the role of skeptical

⁵⁷ See New York Times article “Christian Conservatives Look to Re-Energize Base” by David D. Kirkpatrick 09/25/06; also “In Poll, Republican Party Slips as a Friend of Religion” by Laurie Goodstein 08/25/06.

unchurched seeker as I worked to “figure out” who these people are and what they are up to.

In making this journey I discovered one of the big puzzles for church leaders (and members as well) like those at River Chapel is that men like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson have become largely representative of conservative evangelicalism as a whole, while at the same time religion in the US has in some sense become synonymous with the evangelical movement as it has risen to prominence in politics, business, education and mass media during the last quarter of the 20th century (Lindsay 2007). Many among River Chapel’s membership seem to struggle with how they might distance themselves from the naked political ambitions of evangelists like Falwell and Dobson while at the same time embracing many beliefs they advocate. Many would like to reject the dogmatic image of conservatism these public figures represent while at the same time retaining a claim to “the fundamental elements of [their] faith” and the “good life” that adhering to these elements will bring to believers.

Learning the River Chapel Way in part is a process of learning to articulate their evangelical identity to themselves and others out of this complex discourse. When representing the theological identity of the church to themselves and others, beliefs are often summarized as “Biblicism, Personal Conversion, A Focus on the Story of the Cross, and a Mandate to Evangelize Others.” Just as in the formative period of early evangelicalism and again through the split with fundamentalism in the US, at River Chapel these fundamentals at once

distinguish believers from “secular” and well as other religious cultures while at the same time becoming the axis of negotiation with other cultures.

In response to those who argue that evangelicals should not seek to engage the culture but should instead seek change through the exercise of direct political power, leaders at River Chapel worry that this fosters a marginalization of their beliefs both because a vocal and strident minority would continue to speak for the larger tradition and because “maintaining relevance” is a process of engagement that requires flexibility to be sustained.

This division is also represented in the popular evangelical literature upon which movement leaders at River Chapel draw. For example, Christianity Today columnist Andy Crouch makes a distinction between those evangelical leaders who seek “the power of the poll and the ballot box, of school boards, legislators, and judicial benches” and those leaders who focus “more on the persuasive power of the imagination” (2005). Both strategies, he argues, draw their inspiration from the 19th century example of William Wilberforce’s focus on elites. Yet both, Crouch continues, could benefit from remembering “cultural transformation result[s] from the Christian community simply being itself” in times of great crisis (ibid). Leaders at River Chapel heed this call to create a community comfortable “being itself” by appealing to a population they see as defined by a hostile view of organized religion in part fostered by the prominence of men like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson.

At River Chapel efforts to create a good society are, for the most part, synonymous with modeling personal connection to god and fellow congregants

through effectively producing “excellent worship” for the unchurched seeker. Little public attention is given to political or social activism through the church. Leaders at River Chapel argue that the church helps people by connecting them with a loving god, and secondarily with one another. Projects that engage with the wider community get little attention and are usually short lived; for example a Saturday morning spent cleaning out a barn on the property of a group home for children followed by lunch. Evangelicalism has always been a religion of the heart, emphasizing social reform through creating a personal transformation in relationship with a personal god (Balmer 2000). In line with this tradition, the creation of better people is a defining characteristic of River Chapel’s efforts to sustain the encounter with “the culture.”

As with many groups trying to articulate a vision of the good society, the people at River Chapel are dealing with the enormous proliferation of and access to knowledge and information. River Chapel represents religious innovation using the materials of life in an information society. This, in addition to a particular variety of “multiculturalism” defined as a local awareness of and contact with people of color in Midwest City, are the two big issues with which River Chapel evangelicals seem to struggle. The overtly political aspiration for remaking the US as a Christian nation (the City on the Hill) through dedifferentiation is still a thread at River Chapel, but it exists in tension alongside a discourse of engagement with what they imagine to be “the postmodern mindset.” The congregation of middle-class baby-boomers at River Chapel is not comfortable with telling “the secular world” how to live. And yet they also feel

(each week) that whether “the secular world” likes it or not, they do have the “truth and authority as represented by the reality of the cross.”

The congregation that gathers at River Chapel fit the stereotype of the active grass roots Christian base of the Republican Party. They are a white, conservative evangelical congregation located in the heartland. They draw on a cultural repertoire that comes out of the Southern Baptist tradition. But they have an almost punitive avoidance of any potentially divisive talk in pursuit of their mission to reach the unchurched. For example, while I was deeply involved in fieldwork the state legislature passed an amendment to the constitution allowing stem cell research that follows established federal guidelines. Previously all such research has been banned in the state. This was a hotly debated issue that pushed local economic as well as “values” buttons. On one occasion I overheard a church member complaining to the leadership that he wanted the church to talk about this important issue in the services. He explained that had recently visited another local evangelical church where the leadership was talking about this issue publicly. His request was denied. Paul used the incident as a case in point – to me and to the man complaining – of the church’s commitment to lower all possible barriers potentially preventing the unchurched from finding a relationship with god. He carefully explained that River Chapel “would sooner loose members already invested in the church by forgoing the opportunity to take a public political stance than risk alienating the potential unchurched seeker who may come through the door.” It is not that politics are not present. Most people I spoke with advocated conservative political and social stances that they

attributed to their faith. But much of this goes unsaid in the public spaces of River Chapel.

Though thoroughly exploring evangelical faith and politics is beyond the scope of this project, I suspect those who are not comfortable with the always present but often unstated conservatism at a place like River Chapel either never move beyond attending the services, change their minds and positions, or self-select out as they move further toward the center. Regardless, River Chapel presents a different combination of politics and faith than might be found in congregations outwardly affiliated with the Christian Right. Their strong seeker orientation is not, I would argue, representative of the larger evangelical culture. But, it is a piece of it that complicates any picture of evangelicals in the US as monolithic, despite their recent portrayal in the popular press. Just as an aside, the day after the election legalizing federally approved stem cell research I joined Paul for a pastor's fellowship luncheon attended exclusively by other white conservative evangelical pastors from the local religious scene. Before we were served lunch several of the men prayed out loud asking forgiveness for the errors our state had made in the election.

As I described in the previous chapter, when I asked people to talk with me about their church experiences prior to attending River Chapel their descriptions include a category called "tradition" that carries ambivalent emotions based largely on aesthetic criteria. They rarely if ever would mention politics or even "social values" issues. Pop culture references and the degree of "churchiness" (meaning adhering more or less to the high church practices that come out

of a reform tradition) is the language these people use to make distinctions among past as well as potentially available religious practices. It is this aesthetic / practice piece that I have tried use as a material for interpreting the culture of River Chapel.

At River Chapel middle and upper-middle class, white, Midwestern men and women have fashioned for themselves a religious culture out of the discourses and narrative structures of a highly mediated post-industrial society. River Chapel has embraced modernity, even going so far as to characterize their stance as “post-modern.” They are comfortable using a variety of discourses and narrative structures drawing on the perceived logic of science, the familiar emotional resonance of pop culture, and motivating promise of therapy to articulate a version of conservative evangelicalism relevant and palatable to their imagined audience. Their move is not to reject modernity, but to selectively engage with change to construct a workable everyday religious culture.

Appendix A: Sample Cue Sheet

<p>Service Roles:</p> <p><u>Speaker:</u> Dr. Paul</p> <p><u>Producer:</u> Mitch</p> <p>Director: Mike Audio: Steve Lights: Christie CG: Ramona Video Dir: Chad Stage Man: Byron</p> <p>Video Suite Ext. 1130</p> <p><u>Band</u></p> <p>Lead: Mitch</p> <p>Kit: John Electric: Dan Bass: Tom Acoustic: Bob Keys 2: Vocals: Lori</p> <p>Green Room Ext. 1150</p> <p>Offstage: Tim V Café: Sherry Powder: Pam</p> <p>NOTES:</p>	<p>WALK IN</p> <p>PRAISE: Mitch <i>Love Like Rain – v-c-v-c-c-c</i></p> <p>WELCOME: Mitch</p> <p>PRAISE: Mitch <i>Unfailing Love—v-c-v2-c-b-c-c</i></p> <p>INTRO: Paul (<i>sub stage</i>)</p> <p>TITLE VIDEO</p> <p>SONG: Mitch <i>Guilty – Gravity Kills</i></p> <p>MESSAGE: Paul (<i>main stage</i>)</p> <p>VIDEO</p> <p>MESSAGE: Paul (<i>main stage</i>)</p> <p>SONG: Lori <i>It Ends Tonight – All-American Rejects</i></p> <p>MESSAGE: Paul (<i>sub stage</i>)</p> <p>REPRISE</p> <p>CLOSE: Paul (<i>sub stage</i>)</p> <p>WALKOUT</p>
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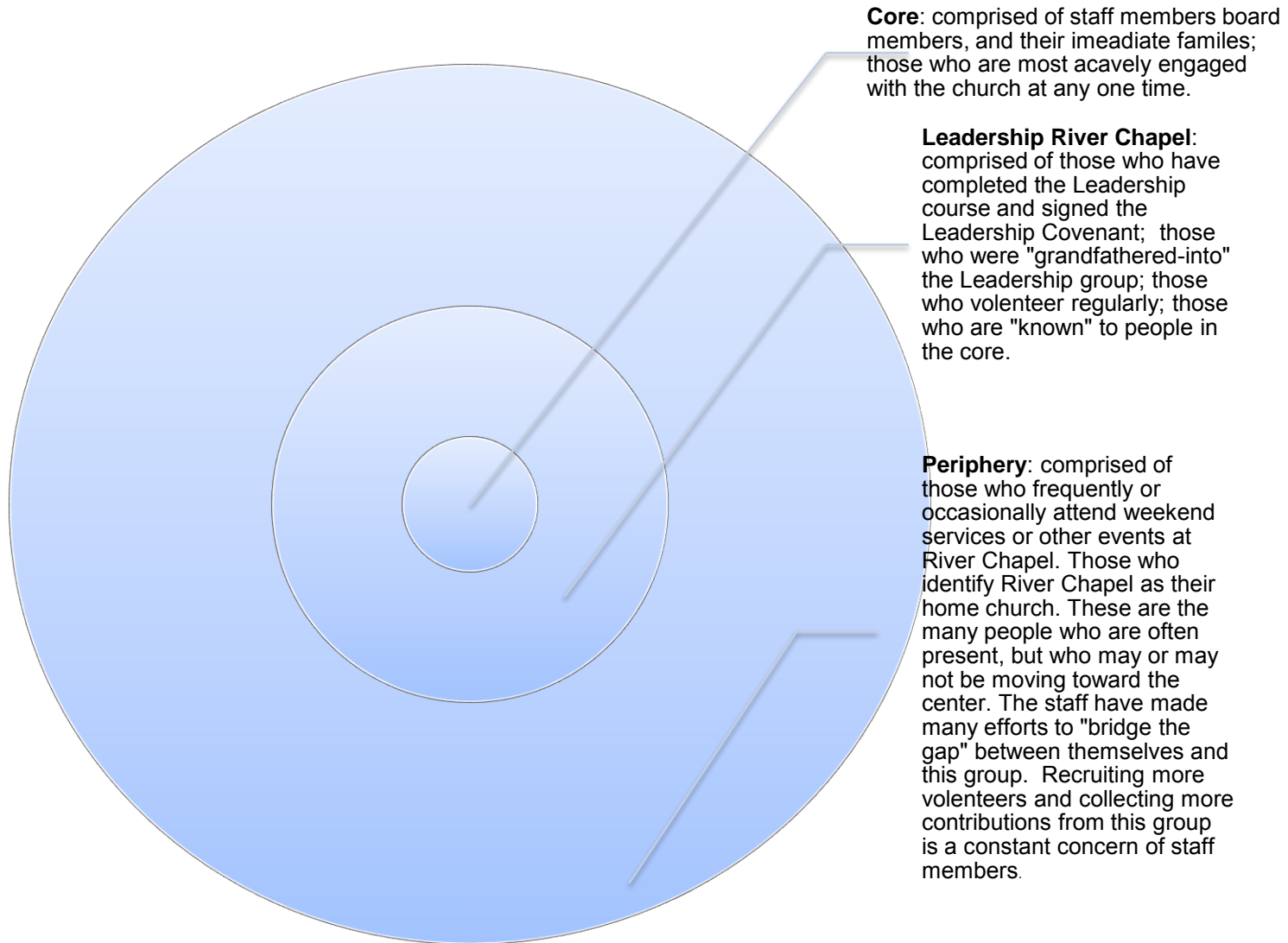
Saturday Call Times			
Director	2:30	Speakers	4:30
Lighting	3:00	CG check	4:30
Band	3:00	Run Thru	4:55
CG	4:15	Reset	5:45
Video Dir.	4:30	Dinner	5:45
Cameras	4:30	Service	6:30
Sunday Call Times			
Band/Tech	8:00	Run Thru	8:15
Speakers	8:10	Service	9:15

cue sheet : July 14-15, 2007 Notes:

Element	Min	Who	Where	Curtain	Audio	P Screens	S Screens	CG
Walk in					CD	announce	announce	announce
Love Like Rain		Mitch	Keys 1	open	Band	imag	CG	v-c-v-c-c-c
Welcome		Mitch	Keys 1	open	LV	imag	CG	
Unfailing Love		Mitch	Keys 1	open	Band	imag	CG	v-c-v2-c-b-c-c
Intro		Paul	sub stage	closing	wx	imag	Imag/CG	announce.
Title video				closed	video	video	video	
Guilty		Mitch	center	open	Band	Imag/CG	imag	"GUILTY"
Message		Paul	m. stage	closed	wx	imag	CG	CG
Video				closed	video	video	video	
Message		Paul	m. stage	closed	wx	imag	CG	CG
It Ends Tonight		Lori	center	open	Band	imag	Imag/CG	chorus
Message		Paul	sub stage	open	wx	imag	imag	
The end of Paul's message will include the offering moment at which time house lights will need to come up to 50%								
Reprise-It Ends				open	Band	imag	lyrics	

Tonight								
Close		Paul	sub stage	open	wx	imag	imag	
Walk Out					CD	announce	announce	announce

1. Figure 1: Social organization of River Chapel in terms of investment, activity, and "being known."



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