

**THIS BROKEN VESSEL:  
LIVING RELIGION IN AN INDEPENDENT PENTECOSTAL CHURCH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

MARSHA M. MICHIE: *This Broken Vessel:  
Living Religion In An Independent Pentecostal Church*  
(Under the direction of Glenn D. Hinson)

In collective worship and in their everyday lives, religious believers continually fuse together the ideas and practices they encounter in their community and society, in their places of worship, and in their personal experiences of the divine. This dissertation, based on six years of engaged, intensive ethnography with a community of Pentecostal believers in the southern United States, flows from the proposition that people's individual religious identities are not simply products of their faith community. Rather, religious people constantly negotiate individual and communal religious identities, and both are continually changing as they shape one another in dynamic relationship. In this work, three spaces of religious practice serve as lenses through which to view religious identity production. The first, music and musical worship, offers a perspective on the crucial role of music in the church and its often transformative role in individual and collective identity formation. The second, a creative effort at evangelistic outreach through drama ministry, presents an opportunity to look at the choices a body of believers makes in order to present itself and its vision of Christian life to the surrounding community, and at the ways that individual and group identities change, conflict, and grow through collective creativity. The third space of religious practice, entrances and exits from the church community, invites a closer examination of the ways that relationships between individual and communal religious identities are built and dismantled, and the ways that identities are formed as narrative

constructions. All of these spaces of practice and identity production take shape between the individual, the social, and the divine, as believers continually take into account their relationships not only with other believers and non-believers, but also with God and lesser supernatural agents. Taking seriously these believers' accounts and insights reveals understandings of the everyday process of building religious identities that have much in common with complex social theories of identity and everyday life, but are in some ways broader and more holistic.

To my mother and father, who have found their faith's common ground for over fifty years.

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Credit for remarkable insight and wisdom goes to these dear friends; any errors of description or interpretation are mine alone.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Welcome into this place.*  
*Welcome into this broken vessel.*  
*You desire to abide in the praises of Your people.*  
“Welcome Into This Place,” © 1991 Orlando Juarez

On a sunny day in 2003, I sat in a familiar chair in Bill Kaufman’s office at Mt. Pisgah Chapel.<sup>1</sup> Bill, the church administrator at Mt. Pisgah during my fieldwork from 2001 to 2007 in this independent Pentecostal church in central North Carolina, had already become a dear friend, as had his wife Dot. That day, Bill and I talked about his background and how he came to be at Mt. Pisgah. Although he was raised Methodist, he had attended a local Church Of God with Dot for many years until both decided they had outgrown its moral “legalism.” A few years ago, they went in search of a church that would be “Spirit-filled” like the Church Of God, but more open in its structure and its attitudes toward doctrinal issues. Bill was happy in, and committed to, his new church home. Still, he brought a perspective on his individual faith and on the purpose and administration of the church that was, in many ways, foreign to the pastor and other longtime members.

Shaped by the values instilled during his Methodist upbringing, Bill took a more intellectual and less emotional approach to serving God than many Pentecostals. Drawing on his long experience as a corporate executive, he applied business principles not only to the

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<sup>1</sup>The names given in this work for the church, its pastors, and its members are all pseudonyms.

budgeting and management of the church's everyday functions, but also to the problem of fulfilling the Great Commission to "go forth and make disciples of all nations," which he believes is the primary purpose of the church.<sup>2</sup> Reading widely in evangelical Christian literature, he integrated perspectives from several different denominations into his own unique take on Christian life, both personally and as an administrator.

Is Bill a Pentecostal? He was reluctant to answer that question. But even if we were to answer it for him, what would that tell us about his religious life? And what would it tell us about how he saw himself as a believer, and how he saw the very different religious beliefs and practices he encounters among his fellow congregants? Would we better understand how the church's institutional and communal life both influenced and reflected his identity as an individual believer and an administrator? Classifying Bill, or his fellow congregants, as "Pentecostal" does not really clarify our picture of their religious lives. To get at these questions, we must move beyond classification to an understanding of religious identities formed by everyday practice – a task which is the goal of the following chapters.

## **Background**

### *Pentecostalism: A brief outline of a religious movement*

Many people associate Pentecostalism with the Bible Belt, but it was in Los Angeles, on April 9, 1906, that one of the most famous occurrences of "speaking in tongues"—the single most distinctive practice of Pentecostalism—happened. There in a small wooden bungalow, a prayer group of African American laborers experienced a "new Pentecost" (Cox 1995:45). That first small group expanded so much that before long they moved from the home where they had been worshipping to an abandoned warehouse on Azusa Street in Los

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<sup>2</sup>The Great Commission was set forth in Matthew 28:16-20. Here, and in the chapters that follow, I rely on the New International Version (NIV) translation of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

Angeles, and crowds of people sustained the revival for nearly three years (Cox 1995; Hollenweger 1997).

Despite the storied importance of this event in the history of Pentecostalism, the Asusa Street revival was not actually the first modern appearance of the tongue-speaking phenomenon. Charles Fox Parham, a white evangelist in Topeka, Kansas, along with his students at Bethel Bible College, had prayed for and received the gift of tongues in 1901 (Blumhofer 1993).<sup>3</sup> Parham later taught his understanding of Holy Spirit baptism—the experience that confers the spiritual “gift” of speaking in tongues—to William J. Seymour, the African American preacher who began the Azusa Street revival. The sharing of this religious experience between the two preachers was to foreshadow one of the most remarkable features of early Pentecostalism, especially at Azusa Street: its openness with respect to race, gender, and class.<sup>4</sup> The Azusa Street revival included people of all walks of life; women frequently preached and testified in public; and people of various races worshipped together—none of which were common practices in American religious institutions of the time (Cox 1995).

Historically, Pentecostalism traces its roots to the holiness movement in the late nineteenth century (Blumhofer 1993; Hollenweger 1997). One element of the holiness movement that helped shaped Pentecostalism was the idea of entire sanctification, a concept meaning that after a Christian is first converted and forgiven of sin, s/he may also receive

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed, it appears that Parham had himself heard about an even earlier incident of tongues when, in an ecstatic experience in 1895, a young missionary trainee reportedly gained the ability to speak multiple African dialects that she later used on the mission field (Conkin 1997).

<sup>4</sup>This statement is not meant to gloss over the racial and gender barriers that have existed within the Pentecostal movement since its beginnings with Parham. Rather, it acknowledges early Pentecostals’ recognition that the gifts of the Spirit operated in African Americans, Latinos, women and people of every social class, leading them to place less emphasis on these divisions than did most other American theologies and denominations of the time.

later blessings that lead toward complete spiritual purification. From this tradition came the idea of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (described below), so central to Pentecostalism (Conkin 1997). Pentecostalism also inherited from its holiness roots the belief that the Second Coming of Jesus was close at hand, and that believers would be “raptured”—removed from the earth to heaven—before this event and the “tribulation” that would precede it (Wacker 2001). The holiness movement also included beliefs about faith healing, so important in later Pentecostal doctrines, and about the power of the immanent Holy Spirit given to believers—the seed of a doctrine that would become central for Pentecostalism (Blumhofer 1993; Butler, et al. 2003).

Probably the most important single feature of Pentecostal belief and practice is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals believe that Holy Spirit baptism is a gift from God, one that He gives to any believer who requests it.<sup>5</sup> Most say that this experience happens after salvation and water baptism (although some Pentecostals, particularly “Oneness” Pentecostals, believe Holy Spirit baptism is part of being “saved”). Most Pentecostals also believe that the initial sign of Spirit baptism is speaking in tongues—although this, too, is a matter of some debate (Conkin 1997). Nevertheless, tongues is the most commonly practiced of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and nearly all Pentecostals who believe they have received Spirit baptism have spoken in tongues at some point. (Other gifts of the Holy Spirit include healing—both physical and spiritual—by “laying hands” on a sufferer, interpreting messages spoken in tongues, and prophecy.) Scientific studies have not confirmed the claim sometimes made among believers that the Holy Spirit can confer the ability actually to speak and be understood in another language; indeed, the phonemes used in glossolalia (the linguistic term

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<sup>5</sup>God is always referred to with male pronouns in Pentecostalism, although He is believed to encompass the best qualities of both male and female genders. In keeping with this practice, I refer to God with the words “He,” “Him,” and “His” throughout this text.

for this phenomenon) are generally those of the speaker's own language (Samarin 1972). But believers themselves say that the language they receive from the Holy Spirit is not necessarily an earthly language, but a "Spirit language" or "divine language." In this case, only God or someone with the spiritual gift of interpretation can understand what is being said.

Most aspects of Pentecostal faith and practice are centered around two intertwined spiritual priorities: submission to God's will, and "seeking God's face," an expression Pentecostals often use for entering into an experiential engagement with the divine. In order to be closer to God, a believer must submit to Him—first accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, to be forgiven of past sins. The subsequent "walk with God" as a Christian entails continually submitting to God's will for one's life. A "broken vessel," in this formulation, is someone who is admittedly incomplete and imperfect, and willing to be molded by the hands of a divine Potter. Those who are willing to humble themselves in this way find that God draws close and they experience Him directly, comforting, guiding, giving strength. Spirit baptism is only one aspect of this ideal of living continually in an intimate relationship with God. In worship, for example, Pentecostals often signal this relationship by raising their hands as both a sign of praise and an act of surrender, giving themselves wholly to God. These spiritual commitments, along with a strict moral code and a dynamic worship style, set most contemporary American Pentecostals apart from other Christians more than any other feature. Most Pentecostals today practice a fairly typical conservative Christian morality and, as a rule, take a dim view of tobacco and alcohol—even though older strictures forbidding women to cut their hair or wear pants have faded in all but a few Pentecostal denominations. The most exciting side of Pentecostalism, however, emerges in communal worship. Music

and preaching are usually lively, and clapping, singing, shouting, speaking in tongues, and dancing “in the Spirit” are all very common during services, which tend to have a strong emotional component.

*Pentecostalism on the American religious landscape*

The last four decades in the U.S. have been remarkable for the scope of their religious ferment and institutional upheaval (Fitzgerald 1981; Miller 1997). This period has seen a particularly strong emphasis on self-understanding and a drive toward individual spiritual “quest”—a mood that has permeated the American religious landscape (Roof 1999). This phenomenon points to intensified pluralism in the “spiritual marketplace” of the contemporary U.S. (Roof 1999; Swatos and Olson 2000). The idea of a “spiritual marketplace” suggests that Americans now have the ability and freedom not simply to choose from an array of fully formed religious traditions, but, more significantly, to assemble a unique spiritual path using elements from many different traditions—a process, furthermore, that can be carried out independently of traditional religious institutions (Bellah 1985; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Zinnbauer, et al. 1997). In response to these developments, many scholars in anthropology, folklore, sociology, and religious studies have called for research that moves beyond drawing institutional contours and analyzing doctrinal thought to studying the everyday religious lives of individual believers (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Tyson, et al. 1988). This dissertation, based on six years of engaged, intensive ethnography with a community of Pentecostal believers, flows from the proposition that people’s individual religious identities are not simply products of their faith community. Rather, religious people like the members of Mt. Pisgah constantly negotiate the relationship between individual and communal religious identities, and both are continually changing as they shape one another



in dynamic relationship.

The essential feature of Pentecostal worship is seeking an intimate relationship with God, a direct encounter with a deity who is palpable, available, and personal. In its encouragement of an unmediated experience of the divine, Pentecostalism privileges a uniquely personal spiritual life over one that is primarily experienced through community, even though the invitation to seek God's face takes place within a community that brings individual paths together in fellowship and worship. In the current period of religious change, this emphasis has resonated with the prevailing mood of spiritual "quest" to impact worship practices in nearly every Christian tradition, becoming an increasingly significant influence on the way spiritual life is experienced and explained in the U.S. and around the world. In 1998, historian Vinson Synan estimated that about 25 percent of Christians worldwide (450 million people) were Pentecostal or charismatic, and the explosive growth of Pentecostalism still continues (Cimino 2001; Hutchinson 1998; Jenkins 2002). Part of Pentecostalism's attraction appears to be that it invites believers to seek a direct encounter with God, yet defines this search in highly individualistic terms. In this way, it makes space for a spiritual *bricolage*<sup>6</sup> that becomes a creative, personal journey toward God. Indeed, this is one reason why Pentecostalism is probably the fastest-growing religious movement in the world today (Cox 1995; Crapanzano 2000; Hollenweger 1997).

"Seeking God's face" in Pentecostal worship occurs within a belief system that is centered on submission to God's will. "Lord, help us to get out of the way," a frequently echoed prayer asks. While Pentecostal believers are encouraged to do the work of learning

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<sup>6</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) used the term *bricolage* to produce an analogy between "primitive" mythical thought and a peculiarly French occupation, that of the *bricoleur*, a kind of handyman who fashions useful things as needed from "whatever is at hand." What the *bricoleur* creates, as well as the creative process itself, is the *bricolage*. Since Lévi-Strauss's initial analogy, *bricolage* has been used to describe improvisatory culture-making of all sorts.

about and obeying God, in the end this activity by itself produces no spiritual insight, conversion, or triumph; it simply opens the door for God to take over. And take over He will, Pentecostals say, if they subdue their own “fleshly” desire to be in control; this is no distant deity but one who is an active force in the world.

Given this Pentecostal focus on spiritual surrender, it may seem paradoxical that even within the small community of conservative Christians that is Mt. Pisgah Chapel, these God-inspired, God-directed religious beliefs and practices take a wide variety of forms, both within the congregation as a whole and within individual religious lives. One church leader at Mt. Pisgah, for instance, criticized the so-called “Oprah” attitude that one religion is as good as another, but was nevertheless a fan of the rather un-Pentecostal self-help guru “Dr. Phil” McGraw, a frequent “Oprah” guest; she even recommended his books to other church members. This leader, like many other members, chose to read widely but critically—to “eat the meat and spit out the bones,” as she put it. Another church member grew up as a Catholic. Although she considered herself a full convert to Pentecostalism, she nevertheless rejected or mediated several key doctrines taught at her new church, including strict creationism. These thoughtful improvisations extended even to seemingly spontaneous acts of worship. Actions such as speaking in tongues, dancing, or being “slain” (falling to the ground) were part of individual and communal bodies of practice in which church members and leaders carefully negotiated where and when such displays were appropriate. These multiple paths to understanding and experiencing God engendered both creativity and contradiction, for individuals striving to know God as much as for a church struggling to build and maintain community.

Figuring in the presence of divine will, as Pentecostals must, complicates the picture

of individual and communal religious identities. For Pentecostals, religious choices (indeed, life choices) are ideally directed—or at least influenced—by divine will, and individuals building religious identities take into account not only influences from people and institutions, but also communications from God that they may receive through Bible reading, dreams or flashes of inspiration, or perhaps even an audible voice. Religious groups, too, must take these various influences into account. A small community like Mt. Pisgah Chapel encompasses a diversity of religious paths, even among a group of people who believe the same unchanging God is guiding each of them. Religious communities must work to construct a sense of unity through a stable collective identity—an identity that, nevertheless, must constantly evolve in response to the needs of its constituents. In so doing, they negotiate diverse and sometimes conflicting religious identities, a process that requires them not only to negotiate between, but also to assess the authority of, various claims to know the will of God. In other words, if the messages one believer claims to have from God contradict those of another, a church community must decide whether to accept neither claim, only one, or both—fashioning an interpretation appropriate to that decision. The opportunities and challenges of hearing from God make the study of individual and collective religious identities a complex but always fascinating topic.

## **Literature**

### *Anthropology and Pentecostalism in the United States*

While scholars in religious studies, sociology, history, and folklore have produced several ethnographically astute portraits of segments of the Pentecostal movement (e.g., Griffith 1997; Hinson 2000; Lawless 1988; Nelson 2004; Poloma and Hood 2008; Sanders 1988; Wacker 2001), anthropologists have increasingly ignored American Pentecostals since

the 1970s (among the few exceptions to this pattern are Abell 1982; Bialecki 2009; Peacock 1988; Radice 1984). This lacuna stands in sharp contrast to a thriving ethnographic literature on Pentecostalism's spreading influence worldwide (Austin-Broos 1997; Brodwin 1996; Coleman 2000; Meyer 2006; Toulis 1997). While U.S. Pentecostalism has witnessed a decrease in anthropological interest, fundamentalism in the U.S. has seen a recent surge in such interest (Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000). Although the two movements are often lumped together—and indeed they overlap in significant ways—fundamentalism is more aptly characterized by its biblical literalism and political involvement than by the intimate religious experience at the core of Pentecostalism. The relative lack of recent anthropological interest in Pentecostalism's U.S. adherents is remarkable, given the now staggering worldwide influence of this American-born movement (Cimino 2001; Jenkins 2002). While the goal of this project is not to develop a complete ethnographic portrait of U.S. Pentecostalism, this in-depth examination of a Pentecostal church community will offer an anthropological perspective on the movement that can complement existing ethnographies of its worldwide manifestations.

### *Ethnography and religious experience*

I situate this study within a field of ethnographies that examine the experiences of a particular group of religious believers, generating insights about religious life that can be utilized in understanding other communities of faith. Ethnography is ideally suited to the task of understanding everyday religious practices and experiences, but ethnographers have often employed theoretical models that disregard people's own accounts and interpretations of their religious experiences (Brodwin 2003; Ewing 1994; see also Hinson 2000). Drawing on theoretical and ethnographic traditions extending from Emile Durkheim (1915) and E. E.

Evans-Pritchard (1937) through Clifford Geertz (1973), anthropologists have frequently looked through ritual, myth, and belief to other cultural structures that they presumably signify and represent (especially social structure, political power, and cultural norms). This interpretive move often assumes, somewhat condescendingly, that the understandings of these newcomers/outside to a tradition are deep and nuanced, while those of believers themselves are shallow and simplistic, rather than the other way around. In so doing, it has historically privileged an elite, frequently male, usually European or Euro-American perspective over those of the colonized, marginalized, or merely poor peoples whose beliefs and rituals are under study. As Katherine Ewing argues, a refusal to engage religious experience on its own terms “constitutes a hegemonic act, an implicit insistence that the relationship between anthropologist and ‘informant’ be shaped by the parameters of Western discourse” (1994:571).

Nevertheless, an important and growing body of ethnography takes believers’ accounts and interpretations of their own experiences seriously; the present study is grounded in this body of work (see, e.g., Brown 1991; Csordas 1994; Grindal 1983; Turner 1994; Turner, et al. 1992). Dealing squarely with religious experience is particularly crucial for ethnographies of Pentecostals and charismatics. The central feature of Pentecostal and charismatic practice is seeking the face of God—struggling to achieve and maintain a deeply personal experience of the divine (Brown 1991; see also Lawless 1988). My interest in the everyday practices that believers employ in clearing a path between themselves and God is aimed at understanding precisely this struggle.

*Christian religious practice, secularism, and pluralism in the United States*

Many believers, at Mt. Pisgah and elsewhere, feel that Christianity is losing ground in

the United States. Their fears are partly in response to the exploding variety and availability of religious options, especially in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Many Christians—particularly Pentecostals and other theologically conservative Christians—interpret this rapidly expanding “spiritual marketplace” as part of a cultural assault on their faith that is leading to a decline in the numbers and fervency of the faithful. Whether or not this is the case, recent studies of American religion have left little doubt that change *is* evident in the *character* of American religious life.

Fluidity and pluralism are now the very marks of religious life in what is often called the “spiritual marketplace” of the contemporary U.S. (Cimino 2001; Finke and Stark 1992; Roof 1999). It is worth noting, however, that “there is a substantial body of evidence that pluralism of belief—including disbelief—has been an option throughout history that is simply intensified by globalization” (Swatos and Olson 2000:15). Nevertheless, within the Christian context particularly, intensified pluralism in the U.S. has meant a decline in denominationalism, so that “fewer people think their own denomination has a better grasp on the truth than other denominations,” and in response, “growing numbers of churches might be characterized as open systems, attempting to embrace everyone” (Wuthnow 1993:49; see also Chaves and Stephens 2003). While this study is not concerned specifically with globalization, the modern project, or the secularization debate, these processes have shaped the religious landscape in the U.S. and around the world (Asad 2003). In this “globalized” religious environment, individuals are more likely than ever before to create their own

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<sup>7</sup>In this feeling they echo some of the long-standing debate among social scientists about processes of secularization in the Western world. However, recent perspectives on the secularization debate have noted that a break in the monopoly of Christian churches on the religious life of Americans is not the same thing as a decline in religion (Swatos and Olson 2000). In addition, some social scientists have noted that the belief underlying the secularization argument—that religion is in dramatic decline in the U.S.—is based on two mistaken assumptions: that most Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries were religious, and that fewer Americans hold to religious beliefs today (Chaves and Stephens 2003; Finke and Stark 1992; Greeley 1989; Miller 1997).

*bricolage* of religious beliefs and practices (Bibby 1987; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Roof 1999). Indeed, I argue in this work that even in a theologically conservative Pentecostal church that espouses a relatively strict moral code, congregants feel and exercise tremendous freedom in choosing and melding uniquely individual composites of practice and belief.

*Practice, religious identity, and everyday life*

A practice-oriented approach to everyday life—with all its predictability and spontaneity, its constraints and loopholes—examines the interplay of culture, social positioning, immediate context, and individual experience in producing individual and collective action. Pierre Bourdieu argued that his pivotal concept of *habitus*—a system of acquired dispositions, conditioned by past experience but in turn generating new practices and, hence, new experiences usually in line with those of the past—provided a means to transcend old dichotomies of social science: “of determinism and freedom, . . . or the individual and society” (1990:55). Following Bourdieu, Holland and colleagues highlight the role of improvisation in their concept of “history-in-person.” They note that “individuals and groups are always (re)forming themselves as persons and collectives through cultural materials created in the immediate and the more distant past” (1998:18; see also Holland and Lave 2001).

These practices are not consistent strategies, but improvisations that seize upon opportunities with whatever tools are available, leading to a complex synthesis of cultural elements that “takes the form, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is ‘seized’” (de Certeau 1984:xix; see also Holland, et al. 1998). Recognizing the context-sensitive, dynamic nature of these improvisations necessitates that any attempt to understand them must focus attention onto individuals in

everyday interaction. In the context of religion, this entails acknowledging everyday religious life as it is constantly refigured and reinterpreted by religious people themselves. By extending a practice-centered approach into the study of religious life, this study answers the call to move beyond typologies to the richness and variety of spiritual experience (Tyson, et al. 1988).

No matter their denominational label or institutional affiliation, individuals do not simply act as passive receptors for received doctrines. People regularly cross doctrinal and institutional boundaries, combine “official” religion and “popular” or “folk” practices, and even freely blend “sacred” and “secular” in building their distinctive religious identities (Orsi 1997). Like any *bricolage*, these religious makings are both enabled and limited by the resources at the disposal of the *bricoleur*, who continually works to fit together the pieces she has by using the tools she has. Influences from religious institutions and from the broader cultural milieu combine with personal experiential knowledge and inner reflections; all of these, in turn, are experienced from within an individual’s *habitus*—her “history-in-person” that incorporates everything from her gender, race, class, ethnicity, generation, and region to her family life and religious upbringing (Bourdieu 1990; Holland and Lave 2001). In the spiritual arena, as in all others, our field of vision is made possible—but also constrained—by a cumulative *habitus* that filters perception and structures possibilities for action.

The notion of religious identity is useful for imagining ongoing processes of building individual and collective religious lives. Holland et. al. (1998) propose “identity” as a way of understanding oneself that is neither entirely rigid nor completely unstable. Rather, identities become fairly stable over time through gradual processes of constructing them. At the same time, though, identities are always understood relative to a particular culturally figured



world; and, further, they are constructed heuristically along with that culturally figured world. As the “I”s change over time, so too does the “we” change—and vice versa.

The concept of identity offers a model through which to think about the interaction of individual and collective understandings and identifications that change through time. Manuel Castells argues that identities, as “people’s source of meaning and experience” (1997:6), mediate social action, and are themselves always being produced in and through those actions. Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of practice and Vygotsky/Leont’ev’s models of activity (Leont’ev 1974/5) both point to the need for a “third term” (Holland, et al. 1998:39) to address active engagement between actors and their social environment, an engagement that goes “beyond the linear logic of stimulus-response” (Melucci 1988:331). Ammerman (2003) has recently called for more attention to this dialogic, conditional, and constantly evolving nature of identity in studies of religious identities, which many assume must be totalizing even when other sorts of identities are not. As individuals build or dismantle relationships with various religious institutions and communities, their religious identities reflect and, in turn, shape these relationships. In the pages that follow, I examine the complex practices by which individuals build religious identities, and the equally complex practices of a religious community that continually (re)builds itself from the contributions and demands of a diverse, dynamic membership. These practices and identities take shape always in relationship—with a church community, with a larger community, and with God. Not surprisingly, religious identities at Mt. Pisgah Chapel are as richly diverse as the individuals and individual histories of the congregants themselves. This work attempts to outline some common features of these identities, though any single description of individual religious identity would be insufficient to make sense of this diversity. Rather than seeking to

delineate a particular identity that could represent every believer at Mt. Pisgah, in the following chapters I explore the complexities of religious identity production through a few of these believers, without claiming that they could possibly be representative of American Christians, Pentecostals, or even this single congregation.

### **Research site and methodology**

#### *Mt. Pisgah Chapel*

“To understand where Mt. Pisgah Chapel came from, you have to start with Jed Taylor,” said Ellen Haywood, Taylor’s daughter and current co-pastor of Mt. Pisgah. Jed Taylor had long felt “the call of God on his life,” Haywood recalled, but resisted that call until he saw his 16-year-old son accept his own calling from God and begin preaching. Taylor began preaching at a small rural church southeast of Raleigh, North Carolina, but soon became dissatisfied with working at someone else’s church and, in 1958, founded a church of his own in another small town closer to Raleigh, with twelve charter members. In 1966 this church moved to a nearby town with a larger industrial base, taking up residence downtown in an old Jewish synagogue. Taylor died in 1969 at the relatively young age of 58, but not before he had mentored his successor, Jim Haywood of Dunn, North Carolina—who married Taylor’s daughter Ellen and has pastored the church, now named Mt. Pisgah Chapel, ever since Taylor’s death. In the ensuing years, Mt. Pisgah has moved several times, finally landing at the rural edge of a suburban area within the “Research Triangle” of central North Carolina (of which Raleigh forms one “corner”). A few of Mt. Pisgah’s members, most of whom are white, come from nearby neighborhoods of middle-class residents (also largely white); even more members drive from other parts of the Triangle area or from more rural areas north of the church. Rarely do the residents of the newer and much pricier

developments that have sprung up nearby venture through Mt. Pisgah's doors, however; the congregation is more likely to include nurses and policemen than doctors and lawyers.

Membership and attendance at Mt. Pisgah Chapel varied during the six years of my fieldwork there. A typical Sunday morning service averaged between 60-120 congregants in the sanctuary, while three to five workers taught a separate children's service. Membership declined somewhat between 2001 and 2007 (when I stopped attending regularly), although it was difficult to obtain exact numbers. In 2003, however, the church administrator Bill Kaufman estimated that Mt. Pisgah had about 150 adult members, a smaller number than the roughly 230 "contributing" congregants who attended and contributed to the church but were not official members. This statistic, reversing the more common relationship between those who attend churches and their official memberships, points to two important features of Mt. Pisgah: a highly involved congregation, and one whose members are much more likely to have come from other churches or denominations than to have been raised in this one. These features, in turn, are those of a community of spiritual "seekers," religious people who are actively involved, individually and collectively, in building religious lives and "seeking God's face."

The long tenure of the Haywoods is no accident; this is Jed Taylor's, and now Jim Haywood's, church, and the visions of these two men sustain it—along with that of Ellen Haywood, who has been integral to the church community from its beginnings. Mt Pisgah is governed by a Board; during my fieldwork (2001-2007), the church employed, along with the Haywoods, a church administrator and several part-time employees (pianist, secretary, and groundskeeper/custodian). Other positions of leadership within the church (teachers, lay ministers, youth leaders, music leaders, etc.) were generated as circumstances required and

based on the talents and willingness of members. The structure of church leadership, therefore, is both flexible within—and indicative of—shifting community dynamics. While it is independently governed and organized, Mt. Pisgah has always been a member of the Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministers International, an international network of independent Spirit-filled churches on whose board Jim Haywood has long served. The church's influence has been felt throughout the area in television and radio broadcasts, outreach and educational programs, and most recently in the realization of Pastor Haywood's vision of an interdenominational, interracial association of local ministers who gather weekly to pray for the city and its leaders.

I have described Mt. Pisgah Chapel in the title of this dissertation as an “independent Pentecostal” church, and the two parts of this phrase are equally significant. The church's roots are firmly planted in the Pentecostal movement, and its leaders, Jim and Ellen Haywood, both hold clear Pentecostal pedigrees. Yet Mt. Pisgah's independence—both from denominational structures and from a strict adherence to older Pentecostal traditions—is just as significant a part of its identity, both historically and today. After all, the church's founding was itself Jed Taylor's statement of independence from an older structure—and from that time until the present, Mt. Pisgah has retained that independence. Indeed, the term “Pentecostal” appears nowhere in Mt. Pisgah's name or statement of purpose, although doctrines of sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are clearly set forth in the church's statement of belief. And while I would argue that all of the church's established congregants fully understand that these Pentecostal doctrines are fundamental to Mt. Pisgah, their prominence in public worship ebbs and flows over time—in certain periods receiving the lion's share of attention in sermons and lessons, and at other times being mentioned only

in passing.

In conversations with me, Ellen Haywood has sometimes characterized Mt. Pisgah as having “a Pentecostal flavor” rather than adhering to a particular model of a Pentecostal church. This statement likely reflects both the church’s tendency to attract congregants from a variety of church backgrounds and the Haywoods’ desire to escape any confining definitions of what a Pentecostal church should be. Mt. Pisgah, then, offers a particularly interesting site to study identity, since its peculiar blend of moral strictness and Biblical literalism, on the one hand, and its fierce independence and fluid structure, on the other, produce a fascinatingly dynamic interplay of individual and collective religious identities.

#### *Ethnographic fieldwork*

My ethnographic fieldwork at Mt. Pisgah Chapel began with a visit to a Sunday morning service in early 2001 with Dr. James Peacock, of UNC’s Department of Anthropology, and another graduate student. Dr. Peacock, along with Dr. Ruel Tyson of UNC’s Department of Religious Studies, had conducted extensive research at Mt. Pisgah in the mid- to late-1970s, much of which remains unpublished (Peacock 1988; Peacock and Tyson 1978). I was one of many students that Dr. Peacock introduced and continues to introduce to the welcoming congregation at Mt. Pisgah, and multiple class projects, an undergraduate honors thesis (Diehl 1997), and a master’s thesis (Price 1986) have emerged from this long and collegial exchange. In acknowledgement of this history, I continue to use “Mt. Pisgah Chapel,” the pseudonym that Drs. Peacock and Tyson chose for this congregation, in this dissertation.

Within a few months I had begun to involve myself in the church community, and over the next six years I attended nearly every worship service, along with countless

meetings, rehearsals, and social events. My fieldwork principally employed participant observation and open-ended interviews, within an approach that may be termed *engaged ethnography*. I took this approach because I found that both religious experience and the practices of everyday life were difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand from a position of distance. Bourdieu (1990) insists that the study of practice is the way to escape both the strictly objectivist view of the social world as rules and roles that are simply played out, and the strictly subjectivist view that simply records happenings without adequately examining their causes. But to engage in such a study, he argues, one must abandon a viewpoint “taken from high positions in the social structure” and, instead,

situate oneself *within* ‘real activity as such,’ that is, in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle. (Bourdieu 1990:52; emphasis in original)

With this admonition in mind, I define *engaged ethnography* here as taking responsibility for being an active partner in the relationships that naturally develop during the course of intensive ethnographic fieldwork. The term implies a sense of collaborative openness on the part of the ethnographer and the people with whom she works; it also suggests ethical responsibility (including reciprocity), reflexivity, and a human connection that goes beyond that of scientist and object of study.

These caveats, of course, do not erase either the unequal relation between the representer and the object of representation, or the fact that, in the ethnographic relationship, benefits mainly accrue not to the informants, but to the ethnographer, who “enjoy[s] inherent advantages by virtue of controlling the infrastructure and the output” (Toelken 1998:389). But since the “critical disruption” in anthropology in the 1970s, anthropologists have recognized that objectivist distancing and a lack of reflexivity, both in fieldwork and in

ethnographic writing, (re-)inscribe relations of domination over the peoples whose representations they construct (Clifford 1983; Fabian 1983; Holland, et al. 1998; Ortner 1984). An engaged ethnographer works to break down such distancing by becoming a “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1996), open both to ongoing human relationship and to collaborative effort in constructing ethnographic representations.

Conversely, while an engaged ethnography also faces the possibility of losing some part of the perspective that distance may allow, it need not fall into Bourdieu’s “subjectivist” trap of being an apologist for a people or a way of life (1990); rather, by creating a dialectic between anthropological theory and the perspectives enabled by a more intimate relationship with informants and their way of life, it holds the potential to build a richer understanding than either could offer alone.

My long tenure at Mt. Pisgah allowed me to participate in countless informal conversations with members of the church community, because of my participation in the formal and informal life of the church (see below). In addition to these, I conducted open-ended interviews with 25 different congregants, interviewing several people multiple times. Interviews emphasized configurations of religious practices, personal and collective religious histories, and definitions and constructions of synthesis within religious practice. In order to gain a perspective on the relationship between individual and communal religious lifeworlds, I selected interviewees of varying social distance from the church community, measured in terms of worship attendance, small group involvement, and length of association with the church community (Ellen 1984; Levine 1970). However, my pool of interviewees was somewhat weighted in favor of those who were highly committed to Christian ministry, since I made a special effort to interview the pastor and other ministry leaders in the church.

In the six years (2001-2007) I spent at Mt. Pisgah Chapel, I became a full participant in the congregational community. I regularly attended and took notes in Mt. Pisgah's Sunday worship services and Wednesday Bible studies, in addition to the numerous other rehearsals, meetings, conferences, and special events in which I participated. Although I began as an observer, over time I became a congregant and choir member; a soloist, pianist, and rehearsal leader; a member of the "praise team" that leads the music service; and, eventually, Mt. Pisgah's worship leader; additionally, I served in many other ministries. Through these increasingly more involved roles, I was afforded a remarkable opportunity to observe and participate in worship and church life from multiple positions and perspectives. As a congregant, I worshipped side by side with the church community, sought counsel from its pastors, offered and received prayer and encouragement, and enjoyed fellowship with other members. As a member—and later the leader—of the choir and the praise team, I came face to face with the issues that confronted church leaders as we facilitated the worship experience for members and guests. Through this engagement, I was also challenged to abandon purposeful distance and to productively reflect on my own assumptions and experiences (Hinson 2000; see also Brown 1991; Toelken 1998). Every aspect of this dissertation reflects the products of this challenge.

My intimate engagement with the Mt. Pisgah community through friendships, common practice, and personal experience has fundamentally shaped the framing of this text. Because I am now writing not only about research subjects but about some of my dearest friends and church family, I make every attempt to present them in their own words, in the context of my association with them, and within a fuller context of their personal histories and relationships with the church community—recognizing that even years of close



friendship do not negate the uniqueness and ineffability of personal experience. At the same time, I have chosen to include portions of my own story as a full member of Mt. Pisgah in the chapters that follow. I present my own narratives alongside those of other congregants, without any intention of displacing the stories of those whose experiences are necessarily different from mine. I recognize, of course, that even the stories of others appear here through the filter of my own experience. Rather than rendering this filter invisible by leaving out my own “particular angle of vision” as a “positioned subject,” I have made it an integral part of the text (see Rosaldo 1984:19). Particularly when dealing with a topic as personal and sensitive (and, as I noted above, frequently discounted by social scientists) as religious experience, including myself narratively in the ethnographic encounter better communicates the substance of lived experience, invites readers into that experience, and explores the connections and contingencies between my experiences and those of other Mt. Pisgah congregants (Ellis 2004).

### **Chapter outline**

The following chapters examine the ways that members of the Mt. Pisgah Chapel church community generate religious identities through everyday practices, and the practices through which Mt. Pisgah’s collective religious identity is both generated by and generative of those individual identities. Chapter 2, “‘A powerful instrument’: Music in Christian life,” focuses on music and worship, both for individuals and for communal worship services. Music is a crucial part of religious practice at Mt. Pisgah, in public worship settings as well as in individual lives, and this arena is particularly rich with examples of the dynamic *bricolage* of religious practice. In my various experiences with music at Mt. Pisgah—from a new listener to becoming the worship leader who chose, rehearsed, and led worship music for

the church—I encountered first-hand the range of personal sensibilities, histories, and doctrinal beliefs about music that shaped both individual preferences and the carefully negotiated art of leading a diverse congregation into a unified state of worship. Here, too, believers and musical leaders must pay close attention to the agency of God, who “anoints” particular music or musicians with special power, and who “inhabits the praises” of worshippers. The power of God to “show up” in musical worship imbues this aspect of Christian life with particular significance for meaning-making and the formation of religious identities. Following Chapter 2 is a brief inter-chapter that further explores the relationship between musical worship and religious identity through a narrative of crisis in the life of Mt. Pisgah and in my own identities and relationships to Mt. Pisgah as a musician, a community member, and an ethnographer.

Chapter 3, “Destiny House: ‘A place where lives are changed,’” continues to examine the building of religious identities, this time through community efforts at evangelistic outreach through artistic creativity. The chapter delves into Mt. Pisgah’s Halloween alternative walk-through drama, *Destiny House*, which was produced for six years from 2001-2006. *Destiny House* was part of a still-growing genre of so-called “Hell House” ministries that incorporate elements of horror films and haunted houses into Christian narratives of salvation (Clark 2003; Ratliff 2001). Some churches even purchase commercially-produced packages that include a script, production tips, and publicity materials. Though inspired by similar ministries elsewhere, *Destiny House* was Mt. Pisgah’s own creation; as such, it reflected not only the cultural trends that have shaped the entire genre, but also the particular community that produced it. Participating in the cast and crew of multiple productions gave me the opportunity to look at *Destiny House* as its “insiders”

did—as a ministry through which God not only reached out to the unsaved, but also worked in the lives of the drama’s participants. Because bringing each year’s drama to fruition was a long process, Destiny House offered a chance to see the inevitable conflicts and tensions of a church community as they unfolded, and as members of the community struggled to resolve them in an arena where authority was particularly fluid. The contentiousness surrounding Destiny House attested to the intense identity production that took place through these practices.

In Chapter 4, “Genesis and revelations: Of comings and goings,” I look more closely at the ways relationships between individual and communal religious identities are built or dismantled, by focusing on entrances to and exits from a church community. Congregants at Mt. Pisgah during my time there came from diverse religious backgrounds, and in all of their stories we can trace the work people do to merge their own religious identities—never fully, always in process—with that of a community of believers. Narrative is a key lens through which to view this process, as both people and groups build identities as narrative constructions, creating coherent story arcs from histories that, to others, might seem random or disjointed. A church, in turn, works to integrate newcomers into its community, through formal mechanisms like classes as much as through informal means such as building friendships and encouraging group involvement. The “Genesis class,” a course for potential members, was one such mechanism instituted at Mt. Pisgah during my time there. People who entered this course ideally journeyed through challenge and conversation to a new religious identity, now understood in relation to their new religious community. But the course was also a site where Mt. Pisgah’s communal identity was challenged and re-imagined through negotiations (inside and outside the classroom) about class content.

Finally, some believers' identity narratives became stories of separation from Mt. Pisgah, as they changed or realized that this was not the right community for them. These stories illuminate the always incomplete nature of the unity and shared identity of a church community. Reflecting on the stories of those who leave and the stories of those who stay and watch them go offers an opportunity to glimpse that incompleteness and the constant evolution of identity, even in a community that is built on principles of unity and harmony.

At every stage of this journey, I add layers of experience onto the complex relationships between individuals and communities of faith. Beginning with deeply personal, individual experiences of music and worship, moving through interpersonal relationships and community presentations, and finally venturing into difficult decisions about integrations into and separations from a church community, I continually return to the ways that individuals and communities shape one another through everyday practices. The concluding chapter, "Potters and tightropes," sums up the journey. Reflecting on where Mt. Pisgah and I now stand—separately and in relation to one another—and drawing together the themes of the preceding chapters, I assess the ways these interconnected narratives shift and broaden our understanding of religious identity formation.

## CHAPTER 2

### “A POWERFUL INSTRUMENT”: MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

*Music brings me closer. Music touches me, way before preaching will, ever. And that's always been the case. Music ministers to me. I guess that's why I enjoy Southern Gospel music so much, is because, if you really listen to it, most of Southern Gospel music talks about heaven, and talks about the brighter day. It talks about the pain that Christ goes through. If you really listen to a lot of the Southern Gospel, that's what it's really geared to, at the payday. And it's very encouraging and very exciting to know—and they tend to really paint a big picture of what Heaven's going to be like. So, I mean, music's just a huge part of my life. I couldn't go to a church that had no music, or had poor music. . . .*

*Do I think our church is going the right direction [musically]? I think it's going the right direction; I think it's leading the music to the point that it's going to get the newer people in, but I think it's also—we have to touch the old stuff, too. . . . We can't just go one style. We have to be different styles. But we can make the older stuff sound like our new stuff. We can change it around, but yet have the same meaning behind it, that touched everybody. I think our music is pretty unique—I think in most churches, our music probably wouldn't fit, because we do a little bit of everything. . . . I think everything needs to be open for change, as long as we never lose the purpose of what this church was built on, and never lose the sight of what God's will is, whatever God's will is—we can change. —Glenn K., worship coordinator at Mt. Pisgah Chapel, 2004*

Glenn, like most believers at Mt. Pisgah, relies on music to bring him closer to God, both in public worship and in private life. Indeed, music—always a fundamental part of Christian worship—expresses and reflects the experience of Christian life, both individual and communal, for most believers in the U.S. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2003:251-252) has found a strong association among American churchgoers between an interest in music (and the arts generally) and a greater interest in spiritual growth and discipline; in addition,

he found that Americans are more likely to have relied on music in times of trial than on the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Music is so crucial to Christian worship services that, in the common parlance of many churches, “music” and “worship” (short for “praise and worship”) are used interchangeably to refer to the main musical section of the service.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, I use this space to explore the powerful role of music in the identities and lives of Christians, viewed through the lens of my fieldwork in one small community of Pentecostal believers—and, conversely, through musical experiences and narratives, to illuminate some important features of these Christ-centered lives. Second, in and through these observations and stories, I compare the ways social scientists understand music, identity, and religious life with the ways believers talk about these same topics. In so doing, I look both for points of agreement and for places where the “insider theories,” inclusive as they are of non-human actors and influences, take us a step further, necessarily exceeding what it is possible to say from a strictly social scientific perspective. With these dual purposes in mind, I begin with what a few members of Mt. Pisgah Chapel have to say about music as part of their Christian lives.

### **“It doesn’t matter where I’m at”: Music and Christian identity in everyday life**

*Darla*

Darla had come to Mt. Pisgah in 2003 with her boyfriend Chuck, a man who had only recently been “saved” with the help of some relatives who were long-time members of the church. Darla, too, had found a relationship with God at Mt. Pisgah. By the time I interviewed her in 2004, Darla and Chuck had become members of the church, and they had even joined the choir. Quick to laugh and to speak her mind, Darla told me that she had

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<sup>8</sup>Wuthnow drew his data from a body of 1530 in-home interviews with a representative sample of non-institutionalized Americans aged 18 and up, commissioned by Wuthnow and conducted by the Gallup organization (Wuthnow 2003).

always loved many different kinds of music—country, rock and roll, even classical—but that now she had become a fan of contemporary Christian music.

Contemporary, you know, the new—new age, whatever they call it. Like Mercy Me, that kind of music. I don't listen to too much Southern gospel or the old-timey gospel. I like the new age. I'm hip that way. [Laughs] . . . All the ones on K-LOVE! The K-LOVE music.<sup>9</sup>

[MM: Do you feel like music figures into your spiritual life?]

Yeah. . . .

It just ministers to me, more, music does. I just love it.

[MM: At church?]

Church, at home, it doesn't matter where I'm at. I've always loved music.

(Darla C., 2004)

Bringing her love of popular music with her into a new Christian lifestyle, Darla had found music that was stylistically similar to the rock and country music she enjoyed, but that also spoke to her Christian values. And, like many Christians, Darla felt that this music “minister[ed]” to her, not just in the church, but at home, in the car, and anywhere else she listened to it.

### *Deborah*

Deborah and her husband Jack came to Mt. Pisgah—along with their daughter Julie, Julie's husband Steve, and Julie and Steve's young daughter—in 2002. Raised Catholic, Deborah had been active in her parish, but believes she was not really “saved” until 2000, when she began attending a tiny, rural Pentecostal church where Steve's family was very active. Deborah, who loves country, folk, rock, jazz, and various kinds of world music, also attributed part of the impetus for her salvation to a Christian CD that Julie left at her house.

I mean, music changes people. To say it's not important is crazy. Because I think it's one of the most important things you can do in a service. I mean, part of my

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<sup>9</sup>Mercy Me, named Christian music's “Artist of the Year” and “Group of the Year” in 2004, is still best known for its 2002 hit “I Can Only Imagine,” which crossed over to the secular top 40 pop charts in 2003. As a group with several hit Christian songs, Mercy Me received significant airplay at that time on K-LOVE, a national network of radio stations and translators that broadcasts contemporary Christian music.

indoctrination to Christianity was—Julie had left a Martins CD here.<sup>10</sup> And I wasn't even saved at that point. And I just turned on my machine and thought, "That's pretty." And I sat down and listened to it, and listened to the words. The words made sense, and it just drew me closer to God at that point. And then that was just one of those discoveries, those things, part of my life, that draw me closer and closer to God. It was a really, really big one to me. . . .

Believers often speak of music as a ministry because, time and again, they have seen and felt music "draw [them] closer and closer to God." This belief in the power of music to bring people closer to God—coupled with the conviction that non-Christian music can do just the opposite—leads some Christians to shun secular music altogether. Yet for many others, including Deborah, a love of Christian music does not preclude listening to other genres.

I usually listen to K-LOVE. But every once in a while, I'll drag out an old country CD, or I'll drag out Billie Holliday, or I'll drag out—it just depends. It depends on my mood sometimes. If I want to be, if I know I need to be uplifted, I'll pull out some Christian music. It puts me in a good mood, because it has a good message. I like all kinds of music, and I think, unless it's something really offensive, I don't see anything wrong with listening to secular music. Some people can't believe that you listen to secular music. But God gave them [secular singers] a voice too, just like He gave Nichole Nordeman [a popular Christian artist]. He gave her a blessed voice; He gave a lot of people blessed voices. . . .

Deborah recognizes that her particular *bricolage* of preferred musical styles sets her apart from some strict Pentecostals who "can't believe that you listen to secular music." Yet she predicates even her choices of secular music on spiritual considerations. She does not, for instance, listen to music that is "offensive" to her Christian values; further, she recognizes that musical talent and beautiful voices, even in the secular realm, are gifts from God that should be honored. This broad sense of God's musical blessings extends to recognizing that even secular music can uplift through both its sound and its message.

Some things can be very uplifting to me. Music can move me to tears, and it doesn't matter what it is sometimes. It could be just the way it sounds. Did I tell you about this? I was so hyped up—I could not wait 'til "The Lion King," the movie. I couldn't wait 'til the movie. I knew the concept that the story was about, and I thought it was

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<sup>10</sup>The Martins are a singing family trio who describe their genre as "contemporary Southern Gospel."



great. When I got to the theater, that opening scene where they chant in African and the sun comes up? The “Circle of Life” song. I cried through that whole song. I just was so moved to tears. I think it’s a beautiful story, great music, I mean—that whole opening scene. I was in tears. I just thought it was the most beautiful thing. (Deborah S., 2003)

Deborah’s love of music led her to a closer relationship with God, through the vehicle of Christian music. Additionally, she found uplifting themes in various kinds of secular music, including the music of “The Lion King.” Her expansive definition of the kinds of music and musicians that are “blessed” by God meant she could incorporate nearly any kind of music, from Disney to Billie Holliday, seamlessly into her Christian life. Not every Pentecostal, of course, shares Deborah’s wide-ranging appreciation for many types of secular music, as she recognized, and some congregants at Mt. Pisgah shunned all secular music. But even within the strict moral values of Pentecostalism, there is room for individual believers to piece together musical listening repertoires that reflect both their past experiences with music and their present commitments to a Godly life.

Like Glenn and Darla, Deborah found spiritual comfort and ministry in music. All three saw a religious significance in music that placed this art form at the very heart of Christian life, both inside and outside the walls of the church. And all three had a self-consciously individual relationship with the music they enjoyed and that ministered to them—whether it be Southern Gospel, the contemporary Christian music on K-LOVE, or even secular music with an uplifting message. They recognized, as members of a church community that included diverse musical tastes, that their own preferred songs and styles did not appeal to everyone else, even within that small group. And while they honored the musical compromises that the church made in worship services, they were eager for the comfort of their own music when they returned to their own cars and homes.

## **“Something wonderful happens”: Music and worship**

Is it an accident that music and religious experience are so tightly interwoven in the Mt. Pisgah community and, indeed, throughout recorded history? Looking at music from the point of view of listeners and worshippers offers some insights into this question, while scientific research offers a different—but perhaps complementary—set of observations. Indeed, neurological and psychological research on musical perception, affect, and ability have fairly exploded in the last thirty years (see, e.g., Avanzini, et al. 2003; Avanzini, et al. 2005; Levitin and Tirovolas 2009). Case studies of patients with brain injuries, hearing loss, or brain lesions have revealed that hearing and understanding music is a complex phenomenon combining many discrete processes. The abilities to perceive pitch and timbre of individual notes, harmony, rhythm, and higher structures in music (including repetition and variation of themes) each utilize different specialized neural pathways (see Sacks [2007] for an excellent and entertaining summary of current research in this area). Most of these experimental studies on the effects of music focus on instrumental music (without lyrics), and examine either the physical processes and effects of music listening or the emotions evoked by music.

Experiments on musical perception and understanding have examined the areas of the brain that become active when listening to music and performing simple musical tasks, such as echoing a heard rhythm by tapping it out with a finger (Zatorre, et al. 2007), and have discovered that the brain relies on different neural cues when processing music than those used for processing speech (Zatorre, et al. 2002). Other studies have found—through measuring skin conductance, heart rate, and the appearance of “goosebumps”—increased physiological arousal in research subjects when listening to music; this is particularly true for

music that produced what subjects described as “chills” (Craig 2005; Guhn, et al. 2007; Khalfa, et al. 2002). Tempo, volume, and genre all seem to affect these physiological responses, although they interact; hence, increased tempo in classical music may have a different effect than increased tempo in rock music (Carpentier and Potter 2007; Nagel, et al. 2008).

“Chills” and other kinds of musically-induced physiological arousal are also strongly related to emotions (Krumhansl 1997), which, in turn, powerfully affect our thoughts, behaviors, and interactions. Neuropsychologists Jaak Panksepp and Günther Bernatzky note that “it has generally been recognized that music is the language of emotions and it is coming to be recognized that the basic emotions and motivations may constitute the very foundation of consciousness” (2002:152). A wave of recent research on music and emotion has examined the effects of melody, tempo, volume, and harmony on emotional responses (Grewe, et al. 2007; Meyer, et al. 1998; Ockelford 2005; Webster and Weir 2005), the potent relationship between music and memory (Bey and Zatorre 2003; Lowis 1998; Schulkind and Woldorf 2005; Woody and Burns 2001), and the physiological and psychological pathways through which music facilitates social bonding (Bicknell 2007; Panksepp and Bernatzky 2002).

Finally, some observers and theorists have examined the ways that physiological and emotional responses to music translate into social phenomena, whether of a temporary “collective effervescence” sort or a more lasting sense of social solidarity. Cognitive scientist and jazz musician William Benzon has argued that music stimulates the most ancient core of our brains and facilitates a “coupling” of individual brains into interactional synchrony (Benzon 2001). Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker, drawing on Benzon’s research and other

work on neurobiology, has concluded that dancing and other kinds of group musical experience are “phenotypic features of humankind,” and that such musical experiences are “intrinsically social” (2004:129). And religion scholar Stephen Warner (2007) connects group musical experience—specifically, the making of music through ensemble or congregational singing—both with these collectively corporeal phenomena and with the building of social cohesion. Indeed, he argues, precisely *because* music fundamentally connects these two, that it “has more than the cognitive and aesthetic function of informing and beautifying religious life. Music is one of the rituals that *constitute* religious life” (2007:185, emphasis in original).

The above studies largely focus on the rhythmic and melodic components of music. Pentecostals who talk about the power of certain Christian songs, however, nearly always point to the lyrics. It is important to them that those lyrics are in line with Scripture, and just as important that the lyrics express thoughts and feelings that are powerfully resonant and relevant to them. Believers may even doubt the legitimacy of emotional responses that are based only on musical rhythm and harmony (Hinson 2000; Nelson 1996). Nevertheless, believers usually gravitate to particular styles of music and recognize that stylistic preferences vary. For those who feel uplifted by the transcendent quality of classical compositions, the exuberance of gospel may seem superficial and merely emotional, while those who are drawn to the charismatic energy of contemporary praise and worship music often find the formality of hymns dead and lifeless (Aghahowa 1996). When believers listen on their own, they choose music that reflects their own musical history and style; when they are together, shared musical preferences can be as important to forming a coherent church

community as kinship and other social bonds, and can be as crucial to unified worship as a common theology (Butler 2000; Warner 2007; Wuthnow 2003).

At Mt. Pisgah Chapel, music appears throughout the service in various forms, being completely absent (usually) only during the sermon. All other elements of the service—prayer, taking up the monetary offering, taking communion, the invitation and altar service—are usually accompanied by music, whether instrumental or sung by a choir, small ensemble, or soloist. But “praise and worship” is different in that the congregation is expected to participate in the music during this time, usually set after introductory announcements and before the sermon. The worship leader and the small group of vocalists called the “praise and worship team” lead the congregation in a set of songs, accompanied by instrumentalists and sometimes the choir. During this time the congregation usually stands while singing along, clapping their hands to the more upbeat “praise” songs, and raising their hands or just standing still during the slower “worship” songs.

Worship, of course, carries a broader meaning of which believers are not unaware. Worship means to give honor to God. Even more intimately, it means to draw near to God, to seek His face. Thanksgiving, praise, supplication, and communion with Him—these are all part of worship, and these can take place at any time. For believers who walk in a close relationship with God, this kind of worship is a way of life, and the praise and worship service is an opportunity for “refilling” and for communing with other believers. For the “unsaved” or for believers who are less practiced in a lifestyle of continual worship, the praise and worship service is a rare opportunity for some to literally experience God’s divine presence. One popular worship chorus (sung in the service I describe below) implores, “He is here, listen closely/Hear Him calling out your name/He is here, you can touch Him/You will

never be the same.” Worship songs and worship leaders remind believers that God “inhabitest the praises” of His people (Psalm 22:3 [KJV]), and that worshiping God, especially through music, invites God to be present in a particularly powerful way. One particular Sunday morning service at Mt. Pisgah illustrates this connection between worship music and experiencing the presence of God.

*Field notes: March 2, 2003*

The Sunday morning service begins with a choir of about fifteen and, standing in front, five singers standing, holding microphones. These five, the “praise team,” lead an opening song, “Come, Now Is The Time To Worship,” backed by the choir and accompanied by a Hammond organist and a pianist, who also operates a small drum machine. After announcements and a prayer, the “praise and worship” service begins, with the praise team, instrumentalists, and choir singing two medium-tempo songs, “Shout To The Lord” and “My Life Is In Your Hands.” A slower song, “He Is Here,” follows, and the praise team moves seamlessly into “In The Presence Of Jehovah” as the choir members descend from the platform and sit in the congregation. The music finishes in a quiet and reverent mood.

Pastor Jim approaches the podium, at the center of the stage in front of the praise team. “When a king or a president comes in, there is a song they usually play, like ‘Hail To The Chief.’ But how many of us know that Someone greater than the president is here today?” he asks. Murmurs of assent and ‘amen’s rise from the congregation and from those on the platform behind him. “We go looking for Him, but He’s already here.” The pianist softly plays and, as the pastor continues to speak, the music swells under his voice. Lynn R., then Ed P., then Phyllis R., stand with

arms raised. The praise team sings another chorus of “In The Presence Of Jehovah.” Pastor Jim motions to the pianist to continue playing; there is a very worshipful, quiet presence in the room.

From the back of the sanctuary, Alice J. begins speaking in tongues, continuing for about five seconds. The pianist stops playing and the room is silent as Alice speaks. Then, from the front pew of the sanctuary, Irwin says, “Selah. For I am here today. I am your God. I meet all your needs.” The sanctuary remains silent for a couple of seconds, then someone shouts/cries, “Awesome! God is awesome!” Murmurs throughout the church, whispered prayers. At Pastor Jim’s signal, the pianist begins softly playing “I Worship You.” The pastor signals Ginny R., a praise team member, and she sings the chorus, so passionately—I’ve rarely heard her let loose what she can really do. Julie H. is weeping, unable to join the praise team when they join in. A woman I don’t know, standing between Brenda J. and Phyllis, is crying and shakes progressively more violently as the song goes on. Two people approach the altar and kneel, and other people attend them, kneeling and praying with them as Pastor Jim prays with his hands on their heads. Phyllis and Brenda lead the now convulsing woman out the back of the sanctuary.

As the people who had been kneeling go back to sit in the pews, Pastor Jim picks up a microphone and asks for (and receives) an “amen” from the congregation. “We shouldn’t be surprised when He shows up. Something wonderful happens.” The pastor thanks the praise team and they leave the platform to sit with the congregation. He says, “We’ll have some wonderful worship songs this evening. And there’s only

one person in the audience—His name is Jesus. You say, ‘I can’t sing’? Just praise Him.” With that, he launches into his sermon for the morning.

This service was structurally typical of Mt. Pisgah’s Sunday morning worship during this time period, although the Holy Spirit did not “show up” in such a visible way in every service. As they usually did, the choir and praise team opened the service with an opening song, often referred to as a “call to worship,” in which the congregation participated by standing, singing along, and clapping. A verbal welcome, announcements, and prayer followed, orienting visitors to the church and giving members an opportunity to pray for one another and hear about upcoming events. Then the “praise and worship” began—a component of the service that might be as short as 12-15 minutes, or that, if the Spirit moved, could stretch much longer. On very rare occasions, it might even supplant the planned sermon. Praise and worship usually began with up-tempo songs designed to infuse the congregation with enthusiasm for praising God. Gradually, however, it would usually ease into a slower, more reverent or meditative mood, with the goal of bringing the congregation into a worshipful frame of mind that was receptive to the message of the pastor’s sermon.

On this Sunday, Pastor Jim felt the Spirit moving as the praise team sang a song about going to God with difficult questions and wounds:

*In the presence of Jehovah  
God almighty, Prince of Peace  
Troubles vanish, hearts are mended  
In the presence of the King.*<sup>11</sup>

The pastor, feeling that the song was facilitating a move of the Holy Spirit, directed the congregation to feel the presence of God in the room, and asked the praise team to continue singing. The music and the feeling of God’s presence swelled in concert with one another,

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<sup>11</sup>“In the Presence of Jehovah” by Geron Davis and Becky Davis, ©1983, 1985 Meadowgreen Music Company, Songchannel Music.



signaled by upraised hands and some members standing to praise God—and, finally, by a prophecy in tongues, a direct message from God, confirmed by an interpretation in English. Such a prophecy is relatively rare during praise and worship; it abruptly stops all music, with the unusual silence highlighting the gravity of the moment.

Even though a room filled with voices raised in individual prayer can seem chaotic to an observer, there are well-defined protocols for worship, and going outside these can call for intervention. Hence, when one woman (who was not a regular attender at Mt. Pisgah) began shaking and convulsing in the pew, experienced members surrounded her and eventually led her out of the sanctuary to talk and pray with her privately, protecting both her own safety and the flow and order of the group service.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, it is the pastor's role to direct this flow: to decide when to “tarry” in expectation of a move of the Spirit, and to signal when it is time to move on.

The research on music's ability to affect people individually and bond them socially, focused as it is on neurological, physiological, and psychological processes, helps illuminate some reasons why music is such a powerful component of worship in this gathering at Mt. Pisgah—but it does not cover all of them. No doubt the swelling of music heightens emotions. A strong association between familiar songs and past experiences of emotional depth plays an important role. And the simple act of singing and clapping together breaks down barriers and facilitates a sense of oneness. Yet there is an agent missing from this equation, from the point of view of the believers who experienced this moment. They

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<sup>12</sup>Experienced Pentecostals are aware that the fervency of Spirit-filled worship can affect some people in unexpected or unpleasant ways. They watch for people who may be emotionally unstable and also for people possessed by a demonic spirit. Such a spirit may violently manifest itself on being threatened by God's presence (knowing God is the only power that can break its hold on a human being). I did not see the convulsing woman again, and do not know the particulars of her situation, but praying privately with someone who was overly emotional or inappropriately demonstrative was a well-accepted practice at Mt. Pisgah.

witnessed the power of a living and present God, and from their perspective, God's presence—in the person of the Holy Spirit—directly caused the weeping, speaking in tongues, and euphoria that they experienced that morning. Their understanding of the workings of God in this setting, based on interpretations of Biblical descriptions of worship and of the tabernacle of Moses, influenced both the structure of the service I have described and the ways the congregation responded to it.

### **Standing face to face: Musical worship and the tabernacle**

An often-described schema for musical worship models itself on the Old Testament tabernacle. (I have heard this model outlined by worship leaders at Mt. Pisgah and elsewhere, in sermons at Mt. Pisgah, and in a local workshop for worship leaders that I attended; for the summary that follows I use the discussion of this topic by Pentecostal evangelist Terry Law (1985) as a reference.) The tabernacle was a movable dwelling and place of worship and sacrifice for God during the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Six chapters of the Old Testament (Exodus 25-30) record exact specifications for its building and use, as given directly to Moses from God. The tabernacle was a tent made of wood, linen, and animal skins, surrounded by a fenced courtyard with only one entrance, a gate made of embroidered linen. Into this courtyard God commanded the Israelites to bring animal sacrifices which the priests slaughtered, burning certain specified parts and keeping other parts for their subsistence.

The outer court of the tabernacle, an area open to anyone bringing a sacrifice, contained an altar where these blood sacrifices were laid. Psalm 100:4, a passage often quoted in reference to worship says: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name." The first step in worship, then, is

metaphorically entering the gate of the tabernacle, coming into the outer court where one brings a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. Songs appropriate to this phase often speak in the first person about what God has done for “me,” and they are usually festive and celebratory in character. At Mt. Pisgah Chapel, praise and worship music often began with songs like “Celebrate Jesus” by Gary Oliver, or with “Friend of God” by Israel Houghton and Michael Gungor. The latter begins: “Who am I that You are mindful of me/ That You hear me when I call?/ Is it true that You are thinking of me?/ How You love me—it’s amazing!”

In the Old Testament tabernacle, only priests could go from the outer court into the Tent of Meeting, or Holy Place. Inside the Tent of Meeting, priests constantly burned incense pleasing to God, and symbols of God's majesty were everywhere. In worship, symbolically moving from the outer courtyard into the Tent of Meeting is signified by a transition from thanksgiving to praise, from appreciating God for what He has done to extolling God for who He is. Some of the most popular contemporary praise and worship songs exemplify this phase of worship, such as “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High” by Rick Founds.<sup>13</sup> Darlene Zschech’s “Shout To The Lord”<sup>14</sup> has lyrics that are in character for this second phase of worship: “Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing/ Power and majesty, praise to the King/ Mountains bow down, and the seas will roar/ At the sound of your Name.”

Finally, separated from the rest of the Tent of Meeting by a heavy curtain, was an inner room called the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place. There resided the Ark of the Covenant and the literal presence of God. Only the high priest entered this room, once a year,

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<sup>13</sup>Made popular by the Christian rock group Petra, this piece is one of the most popular of all contemporary worship songs. Although written over 20 years ago, it remains continuously on the list of the top licensed songs reported by churches worldwide that use contemporary Christian worship music (CCLI, Inc. 2010).

<sup>14</sup>The most widely-known praise song to emerge from the hugely successful Hillsong Music Australia, “Shout to the Lord” (written in 1993) also continues to rank among the most popular Christian worship songs worldwide (CCLI, Inc. 2010).

to sprinkle blood over the Ark as atonement for the people's sins. However, Christians believe that the blood of Jesus has forever taken the place of these yearly blood sacrifices, and that Jesus' death rent in two the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the people. According to the writer of Hebrews, "since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, . . . let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19-22). Christians, then, may enter the very presence of God because of the atonement of Jesus's blood. Carol Cymbala, director of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, has this to say about this process of "drawing near" to God through musical worship:

One of my favorite Bible verses reveals the nearness of God. It describes him not as a distant being but as a tender God who actually inhabits the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3). Since we know that God is everywhere at all times, this verse must be describing something much more intimate and personal. This has often been called the "manifest presence of God" in which God reveals some of some of his glory to the hearts of those who worship him. We experience his nearness, blessing, and help not when we are rehearsing again and again our doubts and complaints but when we are offering up our praises and thanksgiving. That is why this whole subject of worship and praise is so important to our churches and to our individual lives as well. Whenever our praises go up to heaven, the Holy Spirit gives us fresh revelations of who God is, showing us how great his glory is. (2001:93)

This third and final stage of worship happens after the believer has been prepared for true communion with God through thanksgiving and praise. Internationally touring worship leader Terry MacAlmon described it this way: "It is the Holy of Holies—a place where we can go in and sit with the Father. It is a place of intimacy where the Father shares things with His children that He refuses to tell them in the outer courts" (Terry MacAlmon Ministries n.d.). MacAlmon's own song "Holy Are You Lord" expresses the character of this place of worship and intimacy, as does Dave Billington's "Awesome In This Place": "As I come into

Your presence, past the gates of praise/ Into Your sanctuary, where we're standing face to face/ I look upon Your countenance; I see the fullness of Your grace.”

Interestingly, Terry Law's (1985) use of the tabernacle as a model for worship goes one step further. Law describes the outer court, Holy Place, and Holy of Holies as models for approaching God with thanksgiving, praise, and worship. Additionally, however, he connects the outer courts with the body, the Holy Place with the soul (defined as the mind, will, and emotions), and the Holy of Holies with the spirit (the part of humans that connects with God). Noting that the Hebrew root of “thanksgiving” in “Enter his gates with thanksgiving” is a word meaning to revere with extended hands, Law argues that this “sacrifice of thanksgiving” brings the body into submission to God through physical acts of worship such as raising hands, singing, clapping, dancing, and shouting (1985:246). In the next phase, entering the Holy Place, the believer moves from thanksgiving to praise. This transition entails a progression from bodily submission to a sacrifice of the will, a submitting of the mind, and, finally, a release of the emotions. Having given over human will to God and allowed the mind to be renewed through the Holy Spirit, the emotional expression of praise “brings us through the veil into the act of worship”—into the Holy of Holies, the very presence of God. Law emphasizes that this final stage may not always happen, that it takes place at “the divine invitation of God” (1985:251-252).

Law's model parallels recent research into human responses to music in interesting ways. Neuropsychologists Panksepp and Bernatzky assert that “music derives its affective charge directly from dynamic aspects of brain systems that normally control real emotions and which are distinct from, albeit highly interactive with, cognitive processes” (2002:135). Theirs and other studies have shown that music affects “primitive” areas of our brain that

control core physiological functions and basic emotions like fear and pleasure, possibly even before we process its structure cognitively (Blood and Zatorre 2001; Guhn, et al. 2007; Krumhansl 1997). Our neuro-physiological response to music begins immediately upon hearing, and deepens into more complex emotional and cognitive responses as we process its structure through culturally-conditioned understandings and memories of previous hearings (Jourdain 1998; Krumhansl 1997; Schulkind and Woldorf 2005). So a progression from physical reactions to music to cognition and emotional response echoes Law's sequence of worship, at least from the outer courts (body) into the Holy Place (soul). From there into the Holy of Holies, where God may invite the believer to submit her spirit and commune directly with the divine, neuroscience and musicology cannot follow. Trance studies have attempted to peek beyond that veil, but as Judith Becker (2004) notes, people who are in that state are not generally amenable to sitting still, attached to wires and sensors—so the physiology and psychology of trance and of divine experience remain largely a mystery.<sup>15</sup> The testimonies of believers, that they have been filled with the very presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit, stand unassisted (but also, necessarily, uncontested) by the physical and social sciences.

### **Contentious spaces and the devil's discord: Building identity in community**

Because worship music plays such a central role in guiding believers into an intimate encounter with God, it is a key component of Christian communal identity. This is certainly the case at Mt. Pisgah Chapel, where people with little prior church experience, mingling

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<sup>15</sup>A recent article by Uffe Schjoedt, a Danish religion researcher and psychologist who has worked with neuroscientists to study brain functions during religious practices such as praying, reviewed the brain imaging research that has been done on meditating, praying, and tongue-speaking subjects (2009). Schjoedt argued that significant methodological issues call into question some of the broad conclusions these researchers have drawn, including the unfamiliar and uncomfortable setting for subjects (restrained inside a noisy laboratory scanner and injected with a radioactive tracer during the activity), and the very small number of subjects (between 3 and 15). Only two researchers have claimed to have scanned subjects who were speaking in tongues; one of these examined five women, and the other only one woman.

with lifelong Pentecostals and people from Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, and other denominational backgrounds, worship together to music that is a blend of old-time Pentecostal, Southern Gospel, and contemporary Christian styles. As Glenn noted at the beginning of this chapter, Mt. Pisgah “can’t just go one style”; instead, they worship with a musical bricolage, one that both reflects and helps define a community that is, like its music, “a little bit of everything.”

I was unfamiliar with much of Mt. Pisgah’s music when I began attending services. I had been raised in a fundamentalist church, so I knew many of the traditional hymns and old-time gospel songs I heard. But I had barely set foot in a church for over ten years, and knew nothing about Southern Gospel or contemporary praise and worship music. However, as a trained pianist and singer, I soon found myself being pulled closer and closer to the musical epicenter of the church community. After some agonizing that seems comical in retrospect, I decided to join the choir. Ellen Haywood, Pastor Jim’s wife, was directing the choir, and soon talked me into accompanying them for a special song she had picked out, with a soloist yet to be determined. Little did I know—although it seems clear that Ellen knew all along—the soloist would turn out to be me. Later on, Glenn, who was leading the praise team at the time, recruited me to fill in for an absent member; eventually my participation on the team became an every-Sunday commitment. And finally, through a series of unlikely twists and turns (described later), I accepted what was once Glenn’s responsibility and became Mt. Pisgah’s worship leader for nearly two years.

In these various roles, I witnessed and participated in the negotiations that take place around worship music in the church. In adopting new worship music, in deciding how much “contemporary” music to use, and in struggling with stylistic issues, members of the praise

team must consider not only their various personal tastes and abilities, but also the art and ministry of leading a congregation with diverse preferences into a unified state of worship. Such preferences are rooted in social and historical factors such as generation, region, class, race, ethnicity, gender, family history, and religious upbringing—what Holland and Lave (Holland and Lave 2001) refer to as “history-in-person,” and Bourdieu (1990) calls “habitus.” This “history-in-person” so filters people’s perceptions that most of us cannot explain why one kind of music “feels” uplifting or worshipful and another doesn’t. After all, the surge of recent scientific research on music has shown that we perceive and respond to music physically, through our very muscles and skin, as well as through intellectual cognition and the deepest, most basic emotions of our psyche. This fundamental, embodied connection to music evokes memory through all these various channels; perhaps it is this bridging of intellect, emotion, and body that gives music its unique power to trigger “affective shocks of re/membered experience,” powerful memories associated with music that sometimes and suddenly overcome us (DeChaine 2002). With such strong and seemingly involuntary associations, a particular song or style of music in a worship service can draw people deeply into an atmosphere of worship—or jolt them out of one. Accommodating one another’s musical preferences, then, is as important to a religious community—and as challenging—as any other aspect of building community.

In their discussion of the production of “history-in-person,” Holland and Lave (2001) theorize that spaces where such identity production is particularly intense, what they call “spaces of authoring,” are always contentious spaces. Holland and Lave invoke the Bakhtinian concept of “dialogism” in which identities are formed through a continual process of being “addressed” by stimuli in the natural and social environments and “answering” those



stimuli by making meaning of them. In spaces of contentious local practice, they suggest, “participants are ‘addressed’ with great intensity and ‘answer’ intensely in their turn,” an especially potent situation for generating novel identity formations (2001:10).

Pentecostal believers offer a different perspective on “contentious spaces” in the church: that where God is working, the devil will sow discord. Music in the church, as I have suggested previously, is precisely the sort of space in which we should expect to see such “contentious spaces,” since music figures so heavily into potentially life-altering personal encounters with God. Tom, a long-time member of Mt. Pisgah, offered a compelling insight into the reasons for this contentiousness. Tom ran the sound board for many years at Mt. Pisgah, attending nearly every rehearsal, sound check, and Sunday morning service, and working closely with the choir, the praise team, guest singers and groups, various worship leaders, and the pastor. From his unique insider’s perspective on music in the church, he made this observation:

I think that’s the very place the devil fights the church a lot: in the music, because it *is* such a powerful instrument. It moves people into worship. It breaks them down. I’ve seen people just weep before God, when God moved mightily through music. And it softened the heart, and it softened their spirit, to where when the minister gets up to preach, the people are more receptive. You’ve got a lot of potential to move a lot of folks in a good direction, if you get yourself out of the way. It’s not easy, and a lot of good things are not easy. And some of the best things that you ever receive are the very things that you fought very hard for. And if you’re not careful, the devil knows that. Music moves people—always has. It’s just a dynamic that God has made that just really moves people to tears, to joy, to deep reflection. But if it’s not used in the right way, and the devil gets hold of it, and he takes what you mean for good and turns it around for something bad, you’re butting heads and clashing. (Tom S., 2004)

Tom’s insights about music and worship echo much of what neurobiologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have told us about the power of music, on the one hand, and about the production of identities, on the other; and he links these two together. In a communal space of worship, music “soften[s] the heart.” It “breaks [people] down.” And it

“move[s] a lot of people in a good direction,” to a state of mind that is “more receptive” to the Christian message that they are about to hear preached. Here Tom describes a space in which, as in many other contexts, music is a crucial component of identity production (see, e.g., DeChaine 2002; Holland and Skinner 2008). If Tom is right, then communal worship through music is precisely the kind of space that Holland and Lave call a “space of authoring,” a space where identity production (in this case, religious identity production) is especially intense (2001). And, as Holland and Lave do in other contexts, Tom identifies that space as a contentious one: contentious precisely because of its potential for that intense identity production. As Tom says, music “really moves people,” but “if you’re not careful . . . you’re butting heads and clashing.”

Mark, a former worship leader at Mt. Pisgah, has told me that no one comes to know God except by the work of the Holy Spirit. This view is a common one among Pentecostals, and one that I have heard Pastor Jim preach many times. Many Pentecostals say, for example, that reading the Bible with the Holy Spirit’s guidance opens it up to you, whereas without it the Word is hard to understand. The implication here is that, in any situation in which people are growing spiritually or are being converted, God (in the person of the Holy Spirit) is actively at work. To put this concept into anthropological terms, God is the real actor in situations of identity formation (where that identity formation means spiritual growth), or—more precisely—God is acting in concert with human beings who are the social actors in those situations. However, another important component of this belief in God’s agency is that where God is doing good work, the devil, the author of confusion and offense, will try to work against it.

Given the power of music and the devil's inclination to fight it, the roles of those who lead worship are crucial. While worship through music is—like faith, prayer, exhortation, and other gifts—an invitation extended to all believers, these gifts are, believers say, given to some in special measure. A particular singer, instrumentalist, or songwriter may be “anointed” by the Holy Spirit to bring intense spiritual power to listeners, just as a particular teacher or prayer intercessor may be “anointed” with special gifts in the areas of wisdom, teaching, or prayer. These gifts allow them to serve as mediators for other believers (and for unbelievers who may be drawn to them) in those areas, showing and enacting God's power in especially compelling ways. Because of their special gifts as mediators of spiritual power and the respect they receive from others, leaders and pastors in the church are especially vulnerable to satanic attack. They must therefore be especially attentive to their own spiritual life and how it affects those whom they influence. Believers want to feel that they can trust their worship leaders to lead the way, quite literally, as they enter the tabernacle of praise and approach God's presence in the Holy of Holies. Listening to secular artists on the radio is one thing and worshiping to music is quite another—particularly in the sacred space of a church meeting. Here where believers come for a refilling of the Holy Spirit and newcomers experience God's power for the first time, the impure heart of a leader can leave an opening for Satan's influence.

Many Christians identify musical praise as a key weapon in ongoing spiritual warfare against the devil. Using this weapon in spiritual battle steels believers against Satan's negative influences and, more importantly, brings lost souls who otherwise would be forever under Satan's power to a knowledge of God's saving grace. One evangelist and author has this to say about worship:

It is time to lead God's people in high praise, to declare that he is victorious in all the earth—and this Scripture [Isaiah 30:32] shows us that as we do, God tightens his fist and gives the enemy a left hook, and then a big right cross to the jaw! . . . Every time a soul is snatched from darkness and brought into God's kingdom, a death blow is administered to sin . . . . [S]top fighting and start praising! Praising and rejoicing and confessing God's sovereignty release God to fight, and what was not accomplished in years may happen in just a matter of months or weeks! (Sorge 1987:55)

When obstacles to a ministry effort appear, particularly when they crop up unexpectedly, believers often interpret the very existence of these obstacles as a sign that the effort is headed in the right direction. Why would the devil bother to oppose something that didn't further God's kingdom? On the other hand, when such an effort is especially beleaguered and succeeds nevertheless, believers often assert that God has intervened. In these cases it is especially important to credit God for the victory—the faithful argue—because “we know we couldn't have done this ourselves.” So the implication runs both ways. Where God is working—through communicating with and directing the actions of believers, gently influencing the thoughts and actions of unbelievers, or even miraculously altering circumstances—the devil is always working against God through some of those same means; but where the devil is working against God, God turns it to His glory. As an oft-quoted Bible verse says, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Even through the worst of situations, believers assure one another—circumstances caused by the evils of human sin and the devil's influence—God can bring about growth, healing, and success for His kingdom and His children.

For Pentecostals, religious choices (indeed, life choices) are ideally directed by divine will. In group worship, leaders are willing to abandon even the most tightly planned programs if God moves in another direction; in private lives, many members of Mt. Pisgah

say that God has used music to guide them, or to minister to them in times of need. Taking seriously believers' narratives of God's personal guidance means taking this non-human actor into account as a shaper of individual and communal religious practices. According to Tom and other believers, God spurs moments of identity formation, in addition to and in concert with human agents, through the anointing and presence of the Holy Spirit. And Satan is also an important agent, influencing and acting through humans to generate confusion and conflict. This alternative theoretical framework for religious identity formation parallels the anthropological one at nearly every point, except for the identification of supernatural agents who interact with human ones. While these agents are beyond the scope of anthropological theorization, they are an integral part of believers' own reflective interpretations about worship through music, interpretations that rightfully identify these corporate experiences as spaces where identity formation is particularly intense.

I am not suggesting that we revise practice theory in anthropology texts to include these non-human agents. As I noted above, such agents are beyond the scope of our discipline. But given the pervasiveness of belief in these supernatural agents; given the thoughtfulness, even rigor, with which this framework is theorized among communities of religious believers; and given the strong parallels between this theorization and ones produced by anthropological theorists, it might behoove ethnographers of religious practice and experience to take these interpretations seriously—to consider this as an alternative to secular practice theory, an alternative that carries tremendous analytical value and explanatory power.

### **“My four and no more”: Music and community**

The power of music to create spaces where identities are shaped and, sometimes, radically altered also creates and binds together communities. Sharing a repertoire and listening to music together (DeChaine 2002), singing together (Warner 2007), and, perhaps most intensely, having peak-experiences together like being filled with the Holy Spirit (Becker 2004)—all of these generate senses of *communitas* that are themselves free-flowing, but nonetheless “depend upon structural rules in order for the flowing to take place” (DeChaine 2002:94-95). Indeed, in setting forth his notion of *communitas*, Victor Turner described *communitas* as “nature in dialogue with structure, married to it” (1995 [1969]:140). Robert DeChaine notes that, whenever the feeling of *communitas* arises for him in a musical space like a rock concert, he recognizes a sense of bonding with others in that space, co-existing with “a jealous impulse to police this space, to guard it from the ‘undeserving’” (2002:95). This desire to “police”—to impose his own will on a communal happening—may be, DeChaine suggests, a reminder of Turner’s dictum that *communitas* is always in process, but never fully realized “precisely because individuals and collectivities try to impose their cognitive schemata on one another” (Turner 1988:84). In a Christian context, in which welcoming outsiders is not merely lauded but demanded by the Biblical injunction to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), the impulse to “police this space” may not manifest itself in the same way, but it remains a powerful urge. It may show up in conversations about the proper way to behave or dress in church, and about who does or does not conform to these standards; in discussions about whether and where to send out buses or vans to bring children and youth to the church from other neighborhoods; or in urgings to stick with “the way we’ve always done things.”

Greg, who arrived at Mt. Pisgah about two years before I did, called the urge to stick with the status quo the “my four and no more” mentality. Raised in a small, family-centered, very strict Pentecostal church, nothing frustrated Greg more than this attitude, which he described as a desire to keep things comfortable for a few core members of a church rather than looking for ways to attract people who need to hear the message of Jesus. At Mt. Pisgah, he still saw pockets of the “my four and no more” mindset, especially when it came to music.

We have to quit thinking that it’s supposed to be, “this person stands right here, this person plays this dinosaur right here [gesturing to the organ], and this person does this right here,” and, you know, that’s it. I mean, I love the Oak Ridge Boys, but, you know, they’re 100 years old now. . . . I feel like we have to modernize our view on things—our music being the number one thing, and we are trying that. . . .

When I interviewed Greg in 2008, he had already been volunteering for several years in the sound and multimedia booth of the sanctuary. He had come from a venerable Southern Gospel family of singers (although he joked, “I didn’t get the gene”), and understood the appeal of that style, particularly for older and more traditional Pentecostals. Now in his mid-40s, however, Greg said he felt strongly that Mt. Pisgah needed to draw younger people to the church, and that newer musical styles were key to doing that.

The biggest draw in church is the music. Churches spend, you know, millions of dollars a year over music. And little by little, we’re trying to get more modern music. We’re still singing 1890 hymns sometimes. And I have no problem with hymns. You can’t beat hymns for altar calls. There’s that power there, you just can’t beat it. For praise and worship? No. It’s not, you need more modern—and especially if you’re trying to bring young people in, because they want that upbeat, moving music. And so do I. . . . We have to quit thinking, “Well, this is what I like, and this is what I grew up with.” You’re saved! It ain’t a matter of what you grew up with. It’s what the person you’re trying to reach grew up with. And that’s where I feel like we have to go, and we struggle. And I struggle with it too, because, you know, I’m—my mom played the organ. But I try to put myself in somebody else’s shoes. You know, what do *these* people listen to? What did *they* grow up on? How am I going to reach them on their level? Not expect them to come back to mine. (Greg P., 2008)

Like so many churches, Mt. Pisgah has few members in their twenties or thirties. Greg, whose girlfriend attended a youth-oriented church with a strong young adult membership, wanted to bring some of the “modern” elements of that church to Mt. Pisgah—especially upbeat, contemporary music. More established members, especially older members raised in Pentecostal churches, have sometimes found this push from Greg and others difficult. The desire for “what you grew up with,” especially music with its deep connections to emotion and memory, is undeniable—music’s power to comfort, uplift, and move us is strongly tied to its familiarity. Indeed, Pastor Jim (part of that older generation of Pentecostals) often brought some of that affinity for traditional gospel and hymns to the pulpit, despite his enthusiasm for contemporary worship music. The praise team often jokingly accused Pastor Jim of making up songs to confuse us, since often he would request gospel songs so old that no one on the team had ever heard of them.

Like Pastor Jim, Greg saw the “power” in the older songs, power stemming partly from the shared memory and history they evoke for lifelong Pentecostals; and he wanted to find a place for them in a worship service that could, in some sense, reach everyone “on their level.” And yet, he argued, the comfort of lifelong Christians should not be the primary factor in designing a worship service. Mature Christians should be willing to sacrifice their own narrow preferences in the interest of bringing others to Christ. The job of those who are already saved, said Greg, was to focus on the unsaved and consider, “What do *these* people listen to? What did *they* grow up on?”

Greg was hardly the only person at Mt. Pisgah to hold this opinion—musicians and leaders at the church, including Pastor Jim, often said similar things to me. However, caveats and uncertainties abounded, chiefly falling into two categories: the need to compromise



between attracting new people and nurturing the existing congregation, and the question of what kind of worship actually brings in the unsaved. Glenn, who led the praise team at Mt. Pisgah for several years, felt the former especially keenly. He spoke admiringly of his father, also a Mt. Pisgah member, who—regardless of his own musical tastes—supported any genre of worship music that would bring more people into the church. I had heard others say similar things about Glenn’s father and a few other “elders” of the church, implying that a truly mature Christian could worship God anywhere under any circumstance, whereas an unsaved person or immature Christian needed God’s message packaged in such a way that it would grab their attention. Nevertheless, not every Christian in a church is so mature, and even those who are need the nurture and comfort of the familiar from time to time. Talking with me about worship music, Glenn—in remarks quoted at the beginning of this chapter—said it was important to use contemporary music that would “get the newer people in,” but immediately followed, “we have to touch the old stuff, too.” As a worship leader, Glenn had struggled with blending old and new in ways that would comfort and “lift” not only a church from diverse backgrounds, but also the “unchurched.” The answer, he believed, was to “make the older stuff sound like our new stuff”—to continue using some songs that would strike familiar chords with longtime members, but to update them stylistically to a more contemporary sound. This strategy is a widely used one: from Hillsong Music Australia to Lakewood Church in Dallas, hymns and traditional gospel songs have found new life in some of the largest and fastest-growing churches in the world. Nevertheless, that balance between old and new at Mt. Pisgah was a precarious one.

The second caveat to the desire to use music to reach out to the unsaved is a bit thornier. In a church filled with the “saved,” who decides what will appeal to the “unsaved”?

Opinions on this subject varied—chiefly, it seemed, by what kind of music appealed to the person speaking. As Spirit-filled Christians, everyone at Mt. Pisgah wanted “good” worship that was exciting and emotionally charged, and it seemed commonsensical that exciting worship would attract more people to hear God’s message. The problem, however, is an obvious one: music that strikes an emotional chord with one person may be boring to another, and what some call “exciting” others may call “noise.” Imagining the musical preferences of potential converts and future members of the church community necessarily entails some image of that future community swelled by the ranks of those future converts. Just as no music can appeal to everyone, no church community can be compatible with everyone. Thus, superimposing my own deeply felt musical likes and dislikes on those imagined preferences of potential members—a nearly irresistible temptation—implies a future vision of a church community populated with people who are much like me, my kids, and my friends. “The unsaved” can easily become a proxy for “my four,” and disagreements about what will attract the unsaved a version of existing diversity in the church writ large.

The perspective of Julie, the youngest member of Mt. Pisgah’s praise team, further illustrated the church’s complex negotiations around music and worship. Julie and Steve were among that poorly-represented but much-desired demographic at Mt. Pisgah, young couples with children. Julie and Steve had come to the church in their late twenties in 2002, along with Julie’s parents Deborah and Jack. Julie had quickly become a member of the praise team and a frequent soloist, and she and Steve spent some time as youth leaders for the church’s teenagers. From those vantage points, Julie echoed many of Greg’s statements about music’s importance in church, and about the relationship mature Christians should have to their own musical preferences.

I just think that music has a big pull in determining whether people stay or leave. . . . But I'm starting to realize more and more that it's not the be-all and end-all, you know, for what church you go to. I think it, like I said, can be definitely something that can pull somebody in to a church, or to Christianity, but, you know, at some point you have to kind of say, "Well, it doesn't really matter what kind of music I like. It matters what kind of music they like." You know, how are we going to get people into the church, and get them saved? So I mean, I think it's a big deal. I think it shouldn't be as big a deal to people that already have a relationship with the Lord. . . .

In a statement nearly identical to Greg's, Julie notes that "at some point," as a person grows in their own faith, they must sacrifice their own preferences in the interest of music "that can pull somebody in . . . to Christianity." Because she herself enjoyed "rock-style" worship music, it was probably easier for her to identify with the musical tastes of the teenagers with whom she worked, who she said complained about the style of music in worship services. As both a worship singer and a youth leader, however, Julie also recognized the dilemma that Glenn voiced, between reaching out to younger people who could bring new energy into the church and nurturing the older Christians who currently filled the pews. Julie actively ministered through her singing and her choice of solo songs; she told me that she prayed while choosing and rehearsing music that the Spirit would move through it. "You want people to be blessed by it," she said, "and as many people as possible." Ultimately, however, Julie disagreed with the kind of compromises made to accommodate different musical tastes at the church.

I think Mt. Pisgah is kind of stuck right now because they're trying to please everybody. And you can't—being on both ends, I realize now you can't do that. . . . I think you just have to make a decision on what you're going to do and which direction you're going to go in. I don't think we can keep going like we've been going and say, "Well, we're going to do all of it." Because I think it's just not working. (Julie H., 2007)

Perhaps because she did not have the same fond family associations with hymns and gospel songs, Julie was less inclined to endorse a blend of musical styles. Her vision of a future Mt.

Pisgah was one populated with more people her age and younger who could carry the church into the next generation, and both she and the teenagers in her youth ministry responded to upbeat, contemporary music, not to the Southern Gospel or hymns that touched many of the lifelong Christians in the Mt. Pisgah community.

## **Conclusions**

Music is central to Christian life, inside and outside the church. It comforts, uplifts, and facilitates a sense of closeness to God. But musical preferences, even in a small and close-knit Pentecostal congregation like Mt. Pisgah, are remarkably diverse—like the congregation itself. Music is so important for believers that they have developed highly nuanced understandings of its place in worship, understandings that bear some resemblance to scientists' still-developing conclusions about music and the brain, but go beyond them in identifying God's role in the worship experience. Interpreting scriptural examples of worship, believers see music as ordained by God for the purpose of guiding worshippers into His presence and inviting Him to palpably dwell in the midst of them—inhabiting their praises. In their likening of music to the Old Testament tabernacle, believers have found a highly ordered, God-designed structure in worship that leads through the body, the emotions, and the intellect, to the realm of the spirit in which they can experience God directly. This uniquely powerful experience of musical worship is what leads believers like Darla to say, as she did at the beginning of this chapter, that “music ministers to me,” and others like Deborah and Greg to say that music can lead the unsaved to Christ.

Similarly, we can draw remarkable parallels between social scientific theories of identity and agency and the ways that believers like Tom portrayed God's power and the devil's discord. Musical worship is a contentious space precisely because it fosters intense

identity production, a space in which both the ways in which worshippers are “addressed” and the ways they must “answer” can be especially passionate and forceful. But who is doing the “addressing”? For believers, it is God, knocking at the door of their hearts, minds, and identities; through the visceral power of music, He presses for an “answer” that may leave a person radically changed. Not only does a clash between individual and communal identities lead to contentiousness, say the faithful; the devil is also ever-present, attempting to derail God’s work by sowing discord. Because of this danger, worship leaders must be especially vigilant to keep a pure heart and a clear vision of God’s purpose for music in the church: to lead people into His presence.

Leading people into God’s presence requires difficult decisions, however. Shared, intense musical experience pulls a congregation into the fellow-feeling of *communitas*; at the same time, however, individuals also feel the strong urge to impose their will on the flow of shared experience and the kind of community it creates. In negotiating the structure of worship music at Mt. Pisgah, leaders tried to find a middle ground between competing preferences of the existing congregation, but also struggled to define that unknown population—the future converts to the church—through the kinds of music they chose in order to appeal to them. Balancing competing desires and responding to the needs of a rapidly changing culture outside the church requires a community to be “open for change,” as Glenn said in this chapter’s opening. The key, he believed, was that the willingness to change be guided by a determination to “never lose the purpose of what this church was built on, and never lose the sight of what God’s will is, whatever God’s will is.” Discerning God’s will, however, brings its own set of uncertainties, as I was to learn in a moment of personal and community crisis at Mt. Pisgah.

**INTER-CHAPTER**  
**HOLDING HANDS THROUGH HELL,**  
**OR HOW I BECAME A PENTECOSTAL WORSHIP LEADER**

Mark was a good worship leader—a really good one. With a powerful voice, skilled hands on a keyboard, and a keen sensitivity to the spiritual mood of a congregation, he brought a freshness into the praise and worship music at Mt. Pisgah Chapel. He was a curious character in many ways, though. He could be morally rigid to the point of brittleness; yet he had an infectious, easy laugh that drew people to him. He spoke of God as a gentle, loving “Daddy,” but he himself, when challenged, had a short fuse and anger that sometimes seemed out of proportion with the situation at hand.

I got to know Mark quickly and well, as I’d already been recruited into Mt. Pisgah’s “praise team.” As an ethnographer, I had been uneasy about being yanked across the successive “lines in the sand” I’d drawn. (Does an ethnographer join the choir? Surely an ethnographer doesn’t serve as the accompanist? An ethnographer who sings solos?) But I had also realized that music was at the heart of Mt. Pisgah (as is true in many churches, especially Pentecostal ones), and being a musician there gave me access to inner workings of church leadership that otherwise I’d only be able to glimpse from the outside.

So when Mark came to Mt. Pisgah in 2004, I became fast friends with him, and with his wife Pam. They were close to my own age in a church that was dominated by people

whose children were my age. They were fun to hang out with, and I even liked their kids. And then there was the *music*. It was sheer joy to sing with Mark; all of us on the praise team agreed to that. He was the skilled leader we'd been needing all this time, and we could just relax, and *sing*—and then watch in awe as the Spirit moved in and through the music, touching the whole congregation.

But after about six months, Mark was getting more erratic, and it was getting harder to keep a protective shield between him and the pastor. Both of them were strong-willed, and both were convinced they knew what was best for the music. Mark would invite me to spend time with him, Pam, and the kids, but more and more often, he'd end the evening sullen or angry. Finally, after a particularly off-kilter music rehearsal, I cornered him and asked what was going on. He was edgy and defensive, but he agreed to have lunch in a couple of days to talk. And that's when he told me, before I'd had a chance to grill him or even have a sip of my margarita: "I'm gay," he said. "I fought it for a lot of years, but I've finally decided that it's like Ragu—it's in there. I've already lined up a room to rent, and in a couple of weeks when the Christmas choir cantata is over, I'm leaving." And I cried. I cried for Mark, Pam, for the kids, for myself, for the church, and for the music—maybe, selfishly, especially for the music.

The weeks that followed seem, in retrospect, like both a rushing whirlwind and a slow-motion sequence. Pam suspected something was up, but she couldn't have prepared herself for the revelation that would come just days after Mark had confided in me. I spent a lot of time with Mark, alternately helping him with last-minute details for the church's Christmas cantata, and buying and moving cheap furnishings into the room he'd rented. I also spent time with Pam, alternately working with her on her solo for the choir production

and listening to her pain and crying with her. By the Sunday of the Christmas musical, Mark had indulged in a diamond stud earring that raised quite a few eyebrows, and Pam had confided her grief in another church member who then violated that confidence in the name of “prayer requests” to other church members. That evening, Mark and I sang our last duet in front of the congregation at Mt. Pisgah. After the service, the pastor called an emergency meeting of the board, who, without ever speaking to Mark to ask what was going on or if the rumors were true, summarily dismissed him.

As fascinating as Mark’s and Pam’s stories are, though, this particular story is mostly about me, and about the turbulent times that followed Mark’s departure from this church that was, for me, a fieldwork site, a social network, and a spiritual home. My relationships with the Mt. Pisgah community were, and still are, multilayered. Since I was a member of the church, a close friend of many there, a dedicated volunteer, and a heartfelt worshipper (not to mention an ethnographer), Mt. Pisgah was a complex and conflicted “space of authoring” for me at the time. I already struggled with the multiple, overlapping identities generated by my interactions with the church in these various roles. But when this crisis happened, the incongruities between those identities that had merely nagged at me from the background were suddenly glaring at me from center stage. As tempting as it was to withdraw back to the academy and a more sure-footed identity, though, the resolution—such as it was—came through continuing deep engagement with the church community in which I had embedded myself.

Did I mention I was also going through my own separation and eventual divorce? Mt. Pisgah had enfolded me with support after my husband left, and I’d immersed myself in the church, staying constantly busy there. But although for two years I’d skillfully cultivated a



numbness and burial of my grief over a failed marriage, in the face of Mark and Pam's potent reminder of my own situation, the full range of emotions—from sadness, to anger, to deep loneliness, and back to intense sadness—all came flooding over me with unimaginable force. When people ask how Mark and I got to be so close, I often say that we “held hands through hell.” And I realize that talking about my own marriage and divorce may sound self-indulgent, but the point of this brief (and probably all too familiar) description of the emotional turmoil of the end of a marriage is simply this: that ethnography is an interaction of a person with other people. Ruth Behar (1996) powerfully described the irony and deep sadness of talking with elderly Spanish villagers about death and grief when she could have been at her dying grandfather's side, experiencing her own grief directly. And Renato Rosaldo (1984) convinces us that he understood the rage of Ilongot headhunters only after seeing them through the lens of his own anger and grief for his deceased wife. Ethnographers aren't digital voice recorders; part of the power of the stories we tell is that we experience them as a human in place and time, and part of the lie we often tell is that we can somehow transcend the particularity of that experience in the name of ‘transferability of results.’

And so, surrounded by turmoil within and without, I struggled to find a way to remain at Mt. Pisgah and finish the work I'd started there. Everybody knew that Mark and I were close. A few of the older ladies there, unable to accept that Mark could really be gay, even believed for a while that he and I were having an affair. Pam vacillated between turning to me for comfort and blaming me for making it easier for Mark to abandon his family and his faith. The praise team reeled from our loss and struggled to make music in our sadness. Many at the church felt understandably hurt, betrayed, and angry; the adult Sunday school teacher admitted to his class he felt like punching Mark in the face. And suspicions and accusations

flew—who knew what, and when? I kept silent on that topic, and no one ever approached me to ask, but I knew that it would be difficult for many to reconcile my continued friendship with Mark and my continued presence at the church—especially on the platform, leading worship through song. And, indeed, being friends with Mark didn't make it any easier for me to make things work at church. We'd become joined at the hip, and he'd just discovered gay bars—so there were Sunday mornings I found myself at church without ever having gone to bed Saturday night. We drank in the afternoon, and made fools of ourselves at Walmart, and cried on each other's shoulders.

But one thing in particular kept nagging at me. I didn't feel bad about sticking by Mark. I shored him up when he was sad; I told him when I thought he was being an ass; and I took care of him when he had no one else to do it. And I didn't feel bad about going out dancing, or about drinking—although I knew I needed to practice a bit more moderation in the latter. But in my mind I kept returning to one complaint I heard about Mark from church members: that when he knew he was out of line with what the church believed, he shouldn't have continued to lead worship. Knowing how important worship through music is, especially for Pentecostals, I could understand the betrayal Mt. Pisgah felt at having a worship leader who was living a secret, sinful life.

I heard musicians and singers at Mt. Pisgah on many occasions pray, “Lord, help us to get out of the way.” What does that mean? When the Psalmist says that God “inhabits the praises of His people,” Pentecostals take that scripture quite literally. Praising and worshiping God through music builds a tabernacle—a habitation where God chooses to reside and draw near to His people (see, e.g., Cymbala and Spangler 2001; Law 1985). And although all worshippers participate in building that tabernacle, the worship leaders—the

people who choose, lead, and direct the flow of musical praise—are, in a powerful sense, its architects. Like a glass of clean water, a worship leader who is pure of heart opens a clear conduit for believers who are seeking God’s face. He or she becomes a signpost, pointing the way into the holy inner sanctum of God’s presence. One who is not right with God, or who is making music just for his own glory, gets in the way of that direct connection with the divine that unencumbered worship can facilitate. I’ll be honest, though: those last few weeks, when Mark had made his decision (even before I knew about it), the worship at Mt. Pisgah was phenomenal. No longer feeling imprisoned, Mark pulled out all the stops, and the worship music was powerful, uninhibited. But if Mark was out of God’s will, what were we all feeling? If his sin clouded his clear vision toward God, where was he leading us? To a congregation of trusting worshippers, this was perhaps the ultimate betrayal. If we weren’t seeing God’s face through him, to whom were we revealing our hearts, and connecting with at the most intimate level?

But I’ll set aside those questions where Mark was concerned. What was really bothering me was that, in my own way, I was similarly out of line with unwritten, even largely unspoken, moral and spiritual expectations for a worship leader at Mt. Pisgah. Alcohol was not out-and-out condemned from the pulpit (incidentally, a more liberal position than many Pentecostal pastors would take), but it was certainly portrayed as a dangerous flirtation with a sinful world. The usual invocation was to be careful because being seen drinking could “damage your witness” as a Christian. Dancing, to a lesser extent, was probably viewed similarly, especially by older and stricter members. Dancing all night to technopop in a gay bar—well, no doubt that would push a few buttons for some. And beyond those obvious outer behaviors, there were my deep theological disagreements with almost

everyone else in the church about hot topics like homosexuality, war, and abortion. And there I was on stage every Sunday with a microphone in my hand, helping to choose and guide and lead worship music for God to inhabit and commune with His people. Should I step down? Go back to sitting on a pew with a notebook and pen? And I knew that, if the answer was “yes,” then it had been “yes” all along—that maybe I should never have allowed myself to take on the identity of a worship leader, even in a small way. Maybe I never should have held a microphone, played a keyboard, helped pick out songs, helped teach music to the choir, or set foot on that stage in any capacity except as an ethnographer.

My dilemma was both a professional, ethical one and a personal, spiritual one. Looking back, I can see that at a time when my identity development, multiple and conflicting, was particularly strong, it’s not surprising that the “space of authoring”—those interactions in and through which that development was happening—was a particularly contentious space (Holland, et al. 1998). I needed to talk it out, but it was too easy for my colleagues and friends outside the church to say, “Sheesh, just get out of there. I don’t know how you can stand being around those bigoted people, anyway.” I knew they didn’t “get” it, and I needed someone who did. So I finally confided in one of my closest friends at Mt. Pisgah: Dot. I knew Dot would give me a sympathetic ear, but the insight she offered me was more than I could have imagined. In response to my outpoured concerns, Dot offered me advice in the form of a story from her own life, a story of a difficult decision she had faced which, she felt, was analogous to mine.

Dot had come to Mt. Pisgah from the Church of God, a denomination that has historically forbidden makeup and jewelry for women, along with “ungodly amusements” like dancing and most television and movies. At that time, Dot and her husband owned a

company with regional offices spread across two states, and she spent a lot of time meeting with corporate clients and the like. She told me that she didn't feel she could be effective in that role if she went around looking dowdy in high-necked dresses with no jewelry or makeup—and, more importantly, she couldn't find any Biblical justification for these rules, even though, as a longtime Bible study teacher, she'd looked pretty hard. So, Dot told me, she started dressing like a businesswoman during the week, but still took off the makeup and jewelry when she went to church. It was an identity conflict she was describing, drawing an explicit and apt parallel to my own situation. She felt like a hypocrite, she said, and so she went to her pastor, to whom she was very close. She told him she felt she was okay with God, but she didn't feel right living differently outside church than inside it. He told her that if she had read the Bible and prayed about the situation, that she should do what she thought was right. And so she started wearing her 'worldly' dress to church—and she was never voted into another leadership position at that church again. But she stayed, because she felt God hadn't yet released her. She stayed another two difficult years before she felt God calling her to a different place—Mt. Pisgah Chapel.

And, indeed, that's almost precisely what I did. Like Dot, I prayed about my own relationship to God and tried to hear and follow His voice in my conscience. I hoped that God would let me know whether He wanted me to stay at Mt. Pisgah and under what conditions, and that He would release me when it was time to go. And several months after Mark's departure from Mt. Pisgah, through a series of twists and turns, I took his place. For over a year and a half, I was a Pentecostal worship leader. It was one of the most fulfilling, and educational, and difficult things I've ever done. The identity crisis I've described here made that possible, and gave me a deeper perspective on what it means to do engaged,

collaborative ethnography. Dot may not talk about ‘contentious spaces of authoring,’ but she knows precisely what they’re about, and in the middle of that swirling conflict, she saw it much more clearly than I could have. Conversely, although I’d actually heard Dot talk about leaving the Church of God before, the situation in which I found myself gave me access both to a fuller and richer telling of that story and to a more profound understanding of it. Just over two years after that conversation with Dot, I finally left Mt. Pisgah, an equally difficult decision (see chapter 4)—but I still count my experiences at Mt. Pisgah and the dear friends I made there among the most valuable of my life.

I often return to Dot and to other church friends, including Pam and Mark, to ask them to help me interpret events from my fieldwork, and I’m never disappointed. As much through circumstance as through decision, I found myself fully engaged in a community of faith—personally, spiritually, socially. But in that space, I also found a host of ethnographic collaborators who’ve stepped with me into the interpretive endeavor, and, with remarkable insight and clarity, they have guided me through it.

## CHAPTER 3

### DESTINY HOUSE: “A PLACE WHERE LIVES ARE CHANGED”

#### Introduction

*You enter a brightly lit church lobby. A heavy-set woman sitting behind a table adorned with artificial pumpkins and fall leaves breaks into a smile. “Hey there! Do you have a reservation?” She lets you know that the next tour group will begin in just a few minutes, and sells you a ticket. Other people are milling around, talking quietly. A clump of teenagers giggles in a corner—a church youth group? The sanctuary doors are hung with a stern “DO NOT ENTER” sign, their windows covered in black paper, but from behind them you hear faint voices and strains of music. Finally a middle-aged man in Birkenstock sandals and a baseball cap appears through another set of doors, glass ones covered in black plastic. He gathers the waiting crowd and introduces himself:*

**TOUR GUIDE:** Hi folks! My name is Bill and I’ll be your tour guide tonight. I’d like to take this opportunity to welcome you to Mt. Pisgah Chapel and to Destiny House, a place where choices are made—some good and some bad—a place where lives are changed. Let’s begin.

## **Reaching out, reaching in**

This is the way you'd begin a tour of Destiny House, the "Halloween alternative walk-thru drama" that Mt. Pisgah Chapel produced for six years, from 2001-2006. Destiny House has much in common with other so-called "hell houses" produced by churches around the U.S., a genre which has become increasingly popular since the marketing of hell house production "kits" in the 1990s. Destiny House's creators were inspired by this genre and influenced by "hell houses" at other churches. However, unlike many of these productions, Destiny House was completely original in its plot, characters, and production design. The script, written (and re-written for every year's production) by the church's drama team, reveals a body of core beliefs and practices that the Mt. Pisgah community shares with most other conservative Christians in the U.S. These include a focus on a personal relationship with God, an emphasis on faith and grace over works, and a personalization not only of God but also of angels, Satan, and demonic forces. For its cast and crew, Destiny House was both an evangelistic outreach and a chance to renew their own commitment to God's work in their lives. During the years of its production, Destiny House was Mt. Pisgah's most public statement of its collective identity; the people who made it happen every year, in turn, found that it refigured their identities as Christians and as members of their faith community.

This chapter explores the creation and re-creation of identities through community creativity, performance, and ministry in the Destiny House production. To do so, it employs a variety of voices: voices from history; voices from American evangelical Christians; voices from Destiny House's creators, cast, and crew; dissenting voices from within and without the production; my own voice as ethnographer, actor, writer, crew member, and co-director; and, through Destiny House's participants, the voice of God heard, questioned, disputed, and/or



obeyed. Framing this chorus of dissonant and harmonious voices are descriptions of and excerpts from *Destiny House*, which itself begins with voices in the dark.<sup>16</sup>

### **Destiny House scene 1: Waiting Room**

*Your tour guide Bill leads you into a hallway, completely dark except for his small flashlight. The teenagers giggle nervously as the group bumps against one another in the blackness. Bill then leads the group into a long, narrow room, and directs everyone to the seats that line the walls, leaving the entrance area open. A recorded montage of voices begins in the dark room.*

#### **RECORDING:**

**ALISHA:** My baby—my baby—Hold on Sarah—It's gonna be all right—just hold on!

**NEWSCASTER:** Our top story: A night out ends in tragedy as a young child fights for her life.

**RESCUE WORKER:** This is EMS unit 27—we have a 10-45 code 2 in route to your site. Mom is on board with the injured child—ETA is 10 minutes.

*(Dial tone, then phone ringing. ALISHA sobbing into the telephone.)*

**JOE:** *(Answering the telephone.)* Baby, what's the matter—what's wrong?

**NEWSCASTER:** According to police reports, a car spun out of control and struck a young child walking on the sidewalk along Central Road. The victim has only been identified as a 12-year-old girl. The child was rushed to University Medical Center, where she is said to be in critical condition.

*(Sounds of siren and emergency radios in the background.)*

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<sup>16</sup>*Destiny House's* script changed every year, with major revisions in the third, fourth, and fifth years. The script excerpts quoted in this chapter (in an alternate font) are from a combination of years five and six. My summaries of context and other portions of the script appear in italics. Any local place names featured in the script have been removed or changed for anonymity, in keeping with my use of pseudonyms for people and places throughout this work.

**RESCUE WORKER:** Breathe for me, Sarah. Come on Sarah! She's going into shock!

**ALISHA:** Sarah's been hurt—the rescue unit—I'm in the rescue unit with Sarah—they're taking her to the emergency room!

**JOE:** Oh my God, no! What happened—tell me what happened?!

**ALISHA:** You gotta meet us. Oh honey, you gotta get there now. Please, come quick—come now!

**NEWSCASTER:** The driver of the vehicle has been identified as Mia Flynn of Wattstown. Ms. Flynn had just left a local area restaurant when the accident occurred. No word yet on whether alcohol or drugs were involved.

*As the voices fade and the lights come up, a woman enters, sobbing; and soon another woman, wearing a doctor's coat, enters and finds her.*

**NICOLE:** *(Sits beside ALISHA.)* Alisha, I'm Dr. Flynn. *(Looks into ALISHA's eyes and shakes her head as if to say no.)*

**ALISHA:** *(Begins sobbing uncontrollably)* Noooooo ... nooooo ... NOOOOOO!  
*(Gradually becoming louder and louder)*

**NICOLE:** I'm sorry—we did everything we could, but there was just too much damage. Sarah didn't suffer. She never regained consciousness from the time the accident occurred—she just slipped away.

**ALISHA:** *(Screams)* Noooooooooo! Not my baby—not my Sarah! Oh God, help me—please!

### **Voices from history: Church dramas past and present**

“Drama ministry” has gained tremendous popularity in contemporary American churches, paralleling the pervasiveness of drama in the medieval European church. While no direct genealogy connects the church dramas of these two very different periods, they do share similar purposes (Michie 2009). Those early mystery and morality plays—short dramatizations of Biblical topics—served as educational tools for Christians, who were at that time largely non-literate (Leonard 1996). Over time, dramas moved from inside churches to the steps or the courtyard, as they gradually became longer and more elaborate; eventually, they began incorporating more secular themes and ribald humor. By the time of the Reformation, the church had withdrawn its support for these productions and drama had moved entirely into the secular realm (Leonard 1996). In the early 20th century U.S., drama ministry burst back onto the public scene when emerging nondenominational churches such as Paul Rader’s Chicago Gospel Tabernacle and Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple in Los Angeles produced spectacular Biblical dramas to entertain and educate the crowds that flooded through their doors (Hamilton 2000).

In the American South, African American churches often capitalized upon a rich history of spiritual songs to create music-filled dramatic presentations, mesmerizing black and white audiences alike. With plots often based directly on spirituals, these early black church dramas (with titles like “Old Ship of Zion,” “The Devil Play,” and “Heaven Bound”) wove together vocal music and dramatic action, relying on a common pool of religious symbolism to create stylized depictions of Biblical themes (Abrahams 1972; Richards 1982; Wiggins 1991). Probably the most famous and well-documented example of this genre is “Heaven Bound,” a musical drama produced by Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal

Church in Atlanta every year from 1930 to the present. Unlike other African American dramas that gained fame by spreading from church to church, or even by making the leap to Broadway, *Heaven Bound* remained solely at Big Bethel, where congregation members kept the script, music, and direction strictly within the church. Conceived originally as a fundraiser to help the church rebuild after a fire, *Heaven Bound* became a tradition not only for Big Bethelites, who have passed roles solemnly from one generation to the next, but also for black and white Atlantans, who have flocked to the production year after year (Coleman 1994; Fletcher 1991).

Church dramas or “spiritual-dramas” such as *Heaven Bound* serve many functions. They can certainly bring financial benefits to the hosting church (as evidenced by the economic inspiration for Big Bethel’s production). They also provide church-sanctioned entertainment. (Historian Randolph Edmonds emphasizes this function so much that he dismisses their educational aspects as mere “byproducts” [Edmonds 1949, cited in Wiggins 1991].) Some scholars see these plays as forms of “collective spiritual expression,” while others highlight their instructive role, noting that they often present unacceptable social behaviors as examples for the congregation (sometimes even taking aim at particular people in the community) (Wiggins 1991). For their actors and audience members, however, these plays are, first and foremost, acts of worship aimed at bringing salvation to the lost.

Historically white churches have also incorporated dramatic presentations into musical productions, particularly in Christmas pageants depicting the Nativity. The widespread use of drama as a common part of regular Sunday worship, however, can probably be attributed to Willow Creek Community Church, an evangelical “megachurch” founded in 1975 in the Chicago suburbs (Hamilton 2000). One of the pioneers of

“contemporary” worship services, WCCC incorporated a number of unconventional elements—including rock music and dramatic sketches—into its services from its inception, hoping to reach “seekers” alienated by more traditional churches (Gillmor 2000; Todd 1999). These methods have taken hold in many nondenominational (and some denominational) churches across the United States, and are now prevalent in (but hardly exclusive to) the American South.

The most publicized recent development in church drama, particularly among historically white churches, has been the “hell house.” These elaborate dramatic productions (which take a variety of names, but are most commonly titled “Hell House” or “Judgement House”) are usually presented near Halloween. An outgrowth of longstanding concerns among conservative Christians about Halloween celebrations, particularly among youth, hell houses offer an evangelistic alternative to the community-sponsored “haunted houses” that have become popular in recent decades. Hell house productions typically depict people making choices about sin (often influenced by demons and angels), and the eternal consequences (heaven or hell) of these choices. Hell houses also often portray hell itself, and frequently show some characters entering heaven.

In 1953, the Sunshine Party, an evangelistic group led by Native American evangelist Bruce Thum and his wife Ruth, created a precursor to today’s hell houses entitled “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames” (Pentecostal Evangel 1993). This stage drama shows characters making a decision to accept or reject Christ just before their untimely demise. Some are then immediately dragged away to “hell’s flames,” while others are welcomed into “heaven’s gates.” Today, “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames” is still in production across North America, in a tightly controlled licensing process. Representatives from the Sunshine Evangelistic

Association bring sets, lighting, sound, props, and script and then direct the production, using actors and crew from a local church which has paid a substantial fee to produce the drama at their site (Sunshine Evangelistic Association n.d.). While most productions of “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames” take place at Halloween, they may happen at any time of year.

Another forerunner to today’s hell houses, often cited as inspiration by “hell house” creators, is Liberty University’s “Scaremare,” which is also still in production. The elaborate website for “Scaremare” estimates that over 300,000 people have toured their evangelistic version of a haunted house since its inception in 1972 (Liberty University 2008).

“Scaremare” has taken place at several locations around Liberty’s Lynchburg, Virginia, home, and volunteers from over 300 local churches now assist Liberty students in producing the event each October. This production more closely resembles a conventional haunted house than later hell houses do, in that it simply ushers audiences from room to room showing them frightening scenes of death. After the tour, however, presenters give a brief sermon to the audience about what happens after death and offer them an opportunity to accept salvation through Jesus Christ.

Tom Hudgins, a youth minister in rural Alabama in 1983, created what might be considered the first real hell house, named “Judgement House.” A scripted production with a unified plot, “Judgement House” presents an evangelistic message from beginning to end, showing the ultimate fate of characters who have followed or rejected the Christian message. A native of Dunn, North Carolina—arguably the birthplace of Pentecostalism in the American South (Wacker 2005)—Hudgins wanted to give the youth in his church an exciting activity to counter Halloween celebrations, one that would also serve as an evangelistic outreach to the local community (Jaffe 1996). “Judgement House” was a huge success and

now forms the major portion of Hudgins’s incorporated venture, New Creation Evangelism, in Clearwater, Florida. Churches may pay to become “covenant partners” and receive their choice of several variants of the “Judgement House” script to use for one year. The “Judgement House” website explicitly contrasts the production both with “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames” and with licensed “Hell House” productions (described below). “Judgement House,” unlike the on-stage production “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames,” is a walk-through drama more similar to the format of a conventional haunted house. While churches purchase a script and receive advice on producing “Judgement House,” the responsibility for sets, costumes, direction, and all other aspects of the drama, along with ownership of all physical items used in production, lie with the church itself (New Creation Evangelism Inc. 2006).

The first production actually named “Hell House” was created in 1990 by Pastor Gary Turner of Garland, Texas. Although it was short-lived due to Turner’s death in 1991, this production served as a model for others that would gain nationwide recognition (Wisdom and Gillman 1994). One of these, the “Hell House” at Trinity Assembly of God in nearby Cedar Hill,



**Figure 1.** Trinity Assembly of God’s “Hell House” poster for 2009.

Texas, has been produced every year since 1991 (Trinity Church HD Student Ministries 2009). Documented in an independent 2001 film of the same name, Trinity's "Hell House" ushers through 3000 visitors per day during its yearly run (Ratliff 2001).

Other creative variations on the "hell house" have sprung up in local churches across the country. Perhaps due to the resources and volunteers a church must muster in order to put on these elaborate productions, most only last a few seasons. Still, these dramas may make quite a stir and even have effects far beyond their local communities. Such was the case, for example, with the "Hell House" created by Bradenton, Florida's Christian Family Retreat Center in 1992, using two vacant storefronts in a run-down neighborhood (Stevenson 1992). Numerous residents complained to the city council about the word "Hell" in the large sign the church erected, and local psychologists and ministers spoke out against the shocking and gory scenes, which doubtless only increased attendance (Derstine 1992; Stevenson 1992). Though the production has long since ceased, it did inspire at least one other "hell house" in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. Youth pastor Scott McKeen of Grace Chapel in Elizabethtown had played Satan in the Bradenton "Hell House" in 1994 and brought the concept to his own church the following year (Cassidy 1995).

No production in this genre has had more influence than the "Hell House" created in 1993 by youth pastor Keenan Roberts in Roswell, New Mexico. In 1995 Roberts brought the production to Abundant Life Christian Center in Arvada, Colorado, where he was associate pastor. He then took it with him in 2002 when he started a new church, Destiny Church in nearby Northglenn, with support from Abundant Life (Butler 2004). "Hell House" was so popular in its first year at Abundant Life that Roberts began selling "Hell House kits" in 1996 to churches across the country, reporting that over five hundred churches in fourteen



countries had purchased these kits (selling for \$150-\$200) by 2002 (Torkelson 2002). Like the earlier productions in Texas, Roberts' "Hell House" combines gory elements of a haunted house with controversial topics such as homosexuality, abortion, and Satanism.

The emergence of parodies of the "hell house" concept gives some indication of its permeation into American popular culture and of the controversies that these productions have often spurred. In 2004, a group of actors and comedians used Roberts' "Hell House" manual to produce "Hollywood Hell House," a spoof starring Bill Maher as Satan, Andy Richter as Jesus, and a host of other well-known names (Gorski 2004). The "Hell House" concept has also been spoofed by the satirical "Landover Baptist Church" website; for several years the website has parodied real church productions with online announcements of their own fictional "Hell House," which they report is so horrifying that prospective visitors must sign a medical waiver (LandoverBaptist.org 2001).

Churches that produce "hell houses," like other churches that create dramatic productions, commonly cite evangelistic outreach as their key purpose. Keenan Roberts, for example, claimed that Abundant Life Church grew 25 percent after 1995's five-night run of "Hell House" (Christianity Today 1996). A longtime participant in that production noted, "Sometimes you have to use extreme measures to save (God's) people," while a visitor to a different hell house in Chicago said it was "a glimpse of what you're going to do forever if you don't confess your sins and give your life to Christ" (Donckels 2007; Falsani 2006). These perspectives echo that of "Heaven Bound" producer Gregory Coleman, who emphasized that even the show's most gifted comedians know that the "true purpose" of their roles is "salvation, not humor" (1994:124). The hell houses at both Trinity and Abundant Life have been widely criticized for their graphic, frightening, and controversial content,

leading some other churches to avoid gory or politically divisive topics in their productions in hopes of reaching broader audiences.

My fieldwork at Mt. Pisgah has indicated that church dramas produce powerful effects not only on their intended audiences, but also on the people producing them—a point made more fully later in this chapter. The volunteer actors, directors, and crew members who produce these often-elaborate presentations frequently leave them feeling a stronger sense of community with their fellow participants and a strengthened commitment to Christian life. Seeing the impact that their efforts have on audiences often profoundly affects these volunteers. Through their participation in these evangelistic productions, teachers, mechanics, nurses, and people from many other walks of life frequently discover and cultivate new identities as servants and ministers of the Gospel.

### **Destiny House scene 2: Pre-murder**

*Bill leads you through a series of dark rooms and curtains of shredded black plastic, this time with only the sound of your fellow travelers murmuring and whispering to one another.*

*You sit on a long bench as lights come up in a small room in front of you. A man sits at a desk reading a newspaper. A woman enters and you recognize her as the grieving mother from the previous scene. She and the man, who seems to be her husband, are arguing.*

*Unseen by either of them, a demon shrouded in black cloth watches from a corner, leaning on a gnarled walking stick.*

**ALISHA:** We have to let it go. If you keep holding on to this hatred, it will consume you, Joe. Think of our future . . .

**JOE:** You mean *your* future.

**ALISHA:** What is that supposed to mean?

**JOE:** *(rising from his chair, defiant)* You know what I mean. Ever since we had to bury Sarah, you've immersed yourself in your career. Leaving me to pick up the pieces . . .

### **Voices of the ethnographer: Angel and demon**

#### *Angel*

My knuckles were white as they gripped the steering wheel. Some part of my brain committed that image to memory, there at the corner of Cypress and Eden with my turn signal blinking, while the rest of me seethed with frustration, and hurt, and anger. *So this is it. No matter what I say or do, your mind is made up to leave—and it's been that way for a long time.* Joe's calm voice made it clear he'd long prepared for this conversation, too. *Every detail in place, every eventuality thought through before you ever said a word. As usual.* I knew he was frustrated with living with the ghost of a wife who spent her days on campus, her nights studying, and her weekends at a church where they yelled and clapped and fell to the ground. Maybe that was why he'd agreed, to my surprise, to participate in Destiny House with me. At any rate, tears and talk and therapy had not changed his decision, only delayed it. We talked around and over and through it, and it grew and filled the space between us, so that we felt strangely closer in our shared grief than we had for a long time.

Meanwhile, we were still going to rehearsals for Destiny House, where Joseph's towering 6'4" frame had led Shaun and Dot to talk him into taking the role of the Angel at the Book of Life. No one had ever asked him if he was even a Christian, as no one had ever asked me, even though I'd been there nearly every Sunday for well over a year, and Joe had

only come with me once. We'd even found a white robe that fit him, sort of. Since he was standing behind the cotton-covered podium with the giant gilt-edged Bible we used for the "Book of Life," no one would ever see his khakis peeking out from the robe that didn't quite reach his ankles. In the twenty minute breaks between tour groups, he joked around with the other, nameless angels, including me, charming the little old winged ladies with special care and attention. No one had a clue that, when the last group had prayed with the pastor after seeing the gates of Heaven open, when the feathered wings were removed and carefully placed in the pews for the next night's show, Joe and I would return home to half-packed boxes, an apartment slowly being divided in half like the marriage that once lived there.

### *Demon*

Two years later, in 2004, I was living alone in a small but cozy place much closer to Mt. Pisgah. The upheaval of separation had mellowed into a comfortable loneliness that I assuaged by diving even more deeply into the life of the church. Between praise team rehearsals, teaching Sunday school to preschoolers, heading up the crafts for Vacation Bible School, and editing the church newsletter, there was little time to feel lonely—except in the evenings after everyone else had gone home to their families.

Destiny House—and my roles in it—had changed considerably. No longer an outsider with tenuous connections at Mt. Pisgah, I had become a central player in the Destiny House project. The running joke was that, as people in the church had gotten to know me better, they had realized that I was better suited to play a role in "Hell" than one in "Heaven." Behind the scenes, though, in planning and script meetings, the drama team (which now included me) was struggling with a difficult circumstance: we were a "hell house" without a Satan. The role of Satan in Destiny House, its largest and most demanding, had been filled by

two different actors in its three-year run, and both men had left the church. Some people had even mused that perhaps Destiny House's early naysayers had had a point—perhaps giving life to the character of Satan did invite evil influences in, at least for the person who threw their energies into that role. For my part, I didn't worry about evil spirits much, but suspected that the larger-than-life role, as it had been written by the man who originally played it in Destiny House, was a handicap to the script as a whole. Others might have disagreed on that point, but practical concerns took precedence: from our limited casting pool, we had no one who could convincingly take on the unfilled role this year.

The drama team brainstormed instead about a completely different concept of Hell for the production. Rather than a fiery, loud room with bloodied, screaming actors jumping out at audience members, we envisioned a cold and dark space filled with eerie whispers. Gone was the swaggering Satan in a tuxedo who joked with his wild-eyed henchmen. In his place would be the suggestion of an evil figure too terrible to portray directly, and angry, violent demons who did his bidding out of fear. For a production with an ample supply of women actors but few men, it was an ideal solution. And I was filled with both delight and trepidation when Dot and I agreed that I should play the very worst of those demons: a fearsome hag who leaned heavily on a gnarled walking stick, veiled in black rags until she revealed her horrid face at the climax of the "Hell" scene.

It had been years since I had done any acting to speak of, but I threw myself enthusiastically into the role—so much so that I dyed my long strawberry-blonde hair black to blend with the cold, grey hues of my makeup. But writing and acting out the role of Desdemona the demon opened a small crack in the armor I had built up for two years. Suddenly finding myself a brunette (when the black dye did not wash out as promised)

opened it even wider, as I realized my earth-toned wardrobe looked washed-out and dull next to my deep black tresses, and my pale features seemed out of place without makeup. At the same time, I was discovering new passion in the music that Mark, Mt. Pisgah's new worship leader, brought to the church, and finding my voice as a soloist. Newness assaulted me from all directions, and like a faltering dam, I found that without constant vigilance my



**Figure 2.** The author as “Desdemona” the hag-demon in Destiny House.

emotions would burst forth in unexpected ways. For the moment, though, I channeled the power of those emotions into fervent song and the malevolent monologue of an ancient hag-demon.

### **Destiny House scene 3: Murder**

*Again in darkness relieved only by his small flashlight, Bill leads you through a black plastic curtain into a similar space with a bench facing a darkened room. A few audience members sit on the bench and this time you stand behind them. As the lights come up, a young woman sits on a bed and begins to pray. It becomes clear that this is the driver of the car that killed young Sarah. In tears, she asks God's forgiveness for her careless actions and thanks God for setting her free. When she turns out the light and settles down to sleep, a dark figure comes through her window. When he flips on the light, you see it is Joe, Sarah's father,*

*holding a gun. He talks wildly to the young woman Mia, making it clear he is seeking revenge.*

**JOE:** *(Now very intense he moves closer)* You murdered my precious little girl!

*(Bearing down on her)* I WANT TO HEAR YOU BEG FOR MERCY!

**MIA:** No, please . . .

*(Frightened, MIA makes a break for the door. JOE stops her and pushes her back onto the bed. But as he approaches, she springs up and makes a play for the gun. They struggle and after a moment a shot rings out. They break apart and JOE stumbles back with the gun still in his hand.)*

**JOE:** *(Motionless for a moment, then sinking to his knees holding his side in pain)*

I've got to make you see, why can't you see?

**MIA:** *(Astonished by what has happened, she approaches JOE)* Oh my God, I didn't mean to . . . No, please don't die Mr. Link, I'm so sorry . . .

**JOE:** Sorry? You don't know the meaning of the word. *(He suddenly raises the gun and fires it point blank at MIA.)*

*(MIA screams and sinks to her knees just as JOE falls over onto the floor. Then MIA topples on top of him. The sound of a police siren is heard in the distance)*

**TOUR GUIDE:** Joe Link didn't die that night, but Mia did, and Joe was convicted of first-degree murder, on the evidence of his own confession. Follow me . . .

### **Voices from Mt. Pisgah Chapel: Embracing and resisting**

Destiny House didn't win everyone's approval, and even those who eventually embraced the project took some time to warm up to it. Many in the church worried that it was



**Figure 3.** Under construction: the set for the Murder scene in Destiny House.

impracticable, or perhaps just not worth turning the church upside-down for several weeks. Destiny House utilized every part of the church building, from the nursery to the sanctuary. Staple guns, duct tape, and rolls of black landscaping plastic, the building blocks of many a haunted house, caused many a headache for Pastor Jim and other stewards of Mt. Pisgah's hard-won and still relatively new church facility. And it had been many years since any project at the church had required so many hours of labor; in order to pull it off, the drama team needed participation from the majority of Mt. Pisgah's small congregation.

Other objections to Destiny House were more theological. Portrayals of hell, and Satan strutting around the church sanctuary, caused a good deal of discomfort for some. A few more literal-minded members of the congregation objected to the use of the nursery



room for the production's murder scene. Remember that, for Pentecostals, demonic spirits are a very real entity. These spirits often influence people to do evil things like murder, lie, or steal; watching movies or plays that depict acts like these, therefore, can leave an opening for demonic influence. How much more dangerous, then, might it be to *play* demons and demonically-influenced characters—and especially to allow such portrayals, night after night, in spaces designated for worship and for innocent children?

A few members were unhappy with the title, concerned that it implied an impersonal “destiny” was the cause of life's events. The drama team disagreed, saying that the play presented human choices and the grace of a very personal God. As with any spiritual issue in the church, it was up to Pastor Jim to judge—and, after reading the full script, he decided that it was theologically sound. One family, long-time pillars of the congregation, left the church after that decision, a move that grieved Pastor Jim terribly and strained or ended several old friendships. Small churches are made of complicated webs of relationships, and pulling out one strand often sends reverberations through every part of the delicately woven whole.

While everyone on the drama team contributed to the concept of Destiny House and worked to bring it to fruition, Shaun quickly emerged as its face and voice to the rest of the church. Young, single, and absolutely oozing charisma, Shaun charmed many of us (including me) into participating those first couple of years. He was Destiny House's visionary—and, in the role of Satan, its star player. Shaun focused on making Destiny House fun and entertaining, with elements of a secular haunted house, while Dot and others on the drama team worked to give the drama a continuous storyline and clear scriptural messages. “And hell was entertaining. I mean, people really loved it,” Dot recalled of Shaun's original script. “It was funny. And we didn't want hell to be fun, to where people couldn't wait to get

in there,” she laughed. “There were people sitting, waiting to get in there. It was so funny, people had a good time in there.” (Dot K., 2006)

Shaun’s enthusiasm and charm helped overcome many initial objections. But for many who were at first skeptical, it was the news of dozens of audience members every night of the show saying that they had been saved or had rededicated their lives to Christ, that convinced them this was worth their support. Like “Heaven Bound” in Atlanta and countless “hell houses” across the country, the purpose of Destiny House was salvation for the lost; its entertainment value was important only insofar as it served this ultimate goal. Churches, like any community, coalesce around shared identity and purpose, and Mt. Pisgah’s was focused squarely on its commitment to salvation through Christ.

Waymon (Pastor Jim’s brother) and his wife Marie were among those who raised early objections. Marie, especially, because she ran the nursery, was disturbed by the murder scene that took place in that room. However, Pastor Jim’s stamp of approval was enough to convince Waymon to give Destiny House a chance, and soon he became a counselor in the “Salvation Room” that followed each Destiny House tour, at his brother’s request. Waymon’s gentle manner made him an ideal prayer partner for audience members young and old who responded to the pastor’s mini-sermon after seeing heaven and hell portrayed; he, in turn, was inspired and animated after watching so many tearfully commit themselves to a Christian life. Marie, for her part, eventually began offering her experienced child-care services to Destiny House, both during rehearsals for cast members with small children, and during the production, when church groups often brought with them children too young to make it through the spooky or loud scenes.

Once Destiny House became a part of Mt. Pisgah's yearly schedule, the congregation got used to its hustle and bustle, and many began looking forward to the last two Sundays in October, when we got to have church in "heaven." The sanctuary was transformed with huge rolls of cotton batting and sprinkles of iridescent glitter, until the entire stage was a brilliant white cloudscape. A gold lamé runner led up the steps between two tall pearly gates. The church accompanist clambered behind a white panel to sit hidden at the grand piano, the praise team strung long microphone cords across the fluffy stage, and the pastor preached from a small pulpit brought out onto the floor. Sometimes members of the Destiny House cast presented a short vignette from the production, to encourage members to attend and bring friends. Those Sundays came to be days of vivid imagination, when Pastor Jim would often speak about the beauty of heaven, a beauty even our most spectacular efforts could not match. On those Sundays I often heard someone in the congregation exclaim, "I wish we could have church in heaven every Sunday!"

Seeing the emphasis that Destiny House placed on the promise of heaven made a difference to many at Mt. Pisgah who had been suspicious of a Halloween-focused event that resembled a haunted house. As with any new idea, it took a while for many people to get past those early suspicions, but after the first few years nearly everyone at Mt. Pisgah had helped out Destiny House in some way. Brenda, a friend of Marie's who had at first voiced opposition to Destiny House, eventually took on a small role in Hell. Later, dismayed by the thick artificial fog and the chilly room (Hell took place in a carport encased in sheets of black plastic), she asked to be moved to Heaven instead. Trudy, an older member from a traditional Pentecostal background, was unsure about the production initially, but eventually allowed herself to be recruited for the ticket lobby, and even helped sew black hoods for the "lost

souls” in Hell. The drama team saw these changes of heart as evidence that Destiny House was proving itself as a powerful ministry, and this was certainly true to some extent. However, these later decisions to join the cast and crew may have been as much a testimony to Mt. Pisgah’s strongly interrelated congregation as to any qualities of Destiny House itself. Because the production required participation from most of Mt. Pisgah’s active members, those who chose not to participate found themselves left out of an activity that consumed their relatives and friends for at least a month out of the year. Given those options, many core members of the church may have chosen to be part of a major event in a congregation that comprised their main social group, even if they did not have a special attachment to the mission of the event itself. The unity of the church under Christ was a crucial component of Mt. Pisgah’s collective identity as a congregation (see chapter 4). Maintaining a sense of this unity often overrode personal preferences (as in compromises over music, see chapter 2), especially if a course of action enjoyed the pastor’s enthusiastic support.

#### **Destiny House Scene 4: Suicide**

*Still startled from the loud gunshot, your group shuffles to the next darkened room, through another hallway covered in black plastic. When the lights come up, you see Alisha, Sarah’s mother, enter with car keys and bags in her hand. Through answering machine messages and phone calls, you learn that Joe, who did not die from his gunshot wounds, is now in prison for Mia’s murder. As Alisha tearfully says goodbye to her mother on the telephone, she dumps the contents of three pill bottles onto a table and counts them out. Accidentally knocking a large envelope off the table, she opens it to find a devotional book her mother has sent her. She reads a couple of Scriptural passages but then puts the book aside,*

*pronouncing it “sappy.” Nearby, unseen by Alisha, a black-robed and hooded demon hovers, waiting.*

*(ALISHA barely hangs up the phone before collapsing in sobs. After a few moments she catches her breath and turns her attention back to the pills on the table, regaining control by counting them and lining them up precisely. DEMON inches closer.)*

**ALISHA:** *(Muttering, then gradually speaking more clearly) 86 . . . 88 . . . 90. (Deep breath) 90. That should do it . . . (Stifling a sob, then forcing herself back into control) Get it together, Alisha. . . . This is it. Get it together. . . . It just goes on and on—it’s meaningless. There’s just no point. . . . Not one more day. Not one more moment like this.*

### **Voices from evangelical Christians: Theology and evangelism in Destiny House**

The popular website “ReligiousTolerance.org” describes “hell houses” as promoting the following conservative Christian beliefs: the need for salvation through repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior; that anyone who is not saved will be damned to hell for eternity; that abortions kill human babies; that homosexual behavior is sinful and sexual orientation can be changed; and that underground Satanic cults sacrifice human beings (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance 2009). The well-known and well-documented Hell House at Trinity Assembly of God near Dallas has depicted a fatal drunk driving crash, a school shooting reminiscent of Columbine, the bloody results of a botched late-term abortion, and a gay man dying of AIDS (Ratliff 2001). After scenes like these, most hell

houses portray hell as a place of everlasting torment. And finally, the audience members see a depiction of heaven, and are offered the chance for personal salvation.

Destiny House followed the structure of other hell houses in its walk-through format, and in its portrayal of hell, of heaven, and of people making choices that lead them to one or the other. Like Trinity's Hell House, Destiny House showed demons as invisible influences, nudging people to choose sin over God, and angels protecting those who had given their life to Jesus. The 2001 "Hell House" documentary, for example, shows a scene in which a girl dying from a botched abortion calls out to Jesus with her dying breath; at that moment an angel enters the room and wards off the demon that has been waiting to snatch her away to hell. The angel pronounces, "She's not yours any more" (Ratliff 2001) This scene combines multiple messages: that abortion is a sin and is more dangerous than women are led to believe; that demons are real, personified forces acting to influence the unsaved toward sin; and that repentance and a profession of faith in Jesus is the only prerequisite to salvation, no matter how horrible that person's previous actions. Destiny House offered some similar theological lessons: the young woman Mia who drove drunk and killed young Sarah later repented; asked Jesus into her heart; and was, in the end, welcomed into heaven. In another scene, Destiny House depicted an angel and a demon battling over a woman who struggled to believe in God.

It may be, however, that Destiny House more closely reflects the attitude of most American evangelicals than some of the more publicized, and more shocking, hell houses. For his 2000 work *Christian America?*, sociologist Christian Smith interviewed a broad range of evangelicals across the U.S. and found that, despite their controversial reputation, nearly all believed that Christians should "avoid disruptive protests and hostile

confrontations,” and that they should “rely on voluntary persuasion through positive dialogue and communication” in order to influence others (Smith 2002:37). Smith reported that the evangelicals with whom he talked were “particularly repulsed” by violence against abortion clinics, and that they “expressed more faith in the power of religious conversion than in organized protests” (44). Unlike Trinity’s Hell House, Destiny House shied away from more controversial topics like school shootings, abortion doctors, homosexuality, or AIDS. In script meetings for Destiny House, an often-raised concern was that the drama should draw people in rather than alienate them. So, for instance, in the 2004 version of Destiny House, a young woman confessed to her mother that she still felt guilty for having had an abortion years before; she accepted salvation through Jesus Christ, and, in the final scene when she entered heaven, met the daughter she never birthed. The very next scene after her confession, however, portrayed another woman who, under Satanic influence, bombed an abortion clinic in a mistaken attempt to enact God’s justice—and who, when she died, was dragged away to hell. The consistent focus of Destiny House was away from condemning particular types of sin. Rather, Destiny House focused on more natural, earthly consequences of the choices its characters made (drunk driving leads to car accidents; abortion leads to regret; enacting one’s own vengeance leads to imprisonment or even death)—even if the choices themselves were noticed and sometimes influenced by supernatural forces. And, most importantly, every scene drove home the same point over and over—that eternal peace and salvation is only available through a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

This focus on the moment and fact of salvation through repentance and relationship came through particularly strongly in script meetings for Destiny House. A suggestion one year to include a scene condemning homosexuality (tellingly, from a member of another

church who was helping with the production) found little support from Destiny House's other scriptwriters and was eventually dropped, much to my relief. While I resisted the urge to argue openly against such a message, the suggestion brought a palpable discomfort into the room, and my very presence in the meeting was a reminder that "hot topics" like homosexuality were as likely to drive audience members away as to bring them in. The "suicide" scene, quoted above, also raised anxiety levels among those working on the script, including me. Lurking in and through our conversations was an unanswered theological question: is a person who commits suicide necessarily condemned to hell? The fundamentalist church in which I was raised would likely say yes, but at Mt. Pisgah that conclusion was not so clear. "What if the person is mentally ill, or on a drug that makes them think about suicide?" someone mused. Some of us had been close to people who had threatened or attempted suicide—I was one of those—and we had a particular investment in not condemning such people out of hand. And none of us wanted to alienate people in the audience who had similar experiences. In the end we settled on the firm point we could all agree on, as the message of Destiny House and of Mt. Pisgah: the necessity of accepting Jesus Christ as Savior. We gave Alisha a clear opportunity to do just that in the scene, and had her refuse it just as clearly—placing the culpability for her eventual trip to hell squarely on that refusal, rather than on her suicide in a moment of hopelessness and misery.

One reason Destiny House took a route away from shocking, gory, and controversial images was simply due to its genealogy. The inspiration for Destiny House came in 2000, when Glenn and his wife Leigh saw a Halloween production at another church entitled "Judgement House." Whether this production was based on one of Tom Hudgins's "Judgement House" scripts, or whether it merely shared the name, it was clear from hearing



Glenn's and Leigh's descriptions that they found this production dramatic and exciting, but not horrifying or controversial. From the structure of that production and the desire of Shaun and others on the drama team to create a youth-oriented haunted house alternative, Destiny House was born. It employed conventional tropes like dark passageways, fog, sudden noises and visual surprises, a knife-wielding murderer, and bloody not-quite-dead corpses to capture the fun atmosphere of a haunted house, while weaving Christian themes through each scene, a formula well-tested in other "hell houses." However, the unique *bricolage* Mt. Pisgah created out of these common elements of haunted houses and "hell houses" also reflected the theological outlook of the Mt. Pisgah community—filtered through the personal views and identities of individual writers on the drama team. Pastor Jim is not a "hellfire and brimstone" preacher. While he certainly speaks in his sermons about the consequences of sinful behavior, he spends more time emphasizing God's grace and the joy of relationship with Jesus Christ. And while nearly all members of the Mt. Pisgah community believe that abortions, homosexual behavior, and any extramarital sex are sinful, the overwhelming sense of the church is that actions are the fruit of faith and an experience of salvation, so these inner matters receive much more attention than particular sins or good works that result from a Spirit-filled heart. A Keenan Roberts-style "Hell House" likely could not have taken root at Mt. Pisgah, because its shock-value approach does not mesh with the rhetorical and evangelistic style of the church. Yet the script of Destiny House, while it reflected the theological and cultural characteristics of the church as a whole, was still very much a product of the individuals who created it. The original Destiny House reflected Shaun's gift for comedy and his fascination with spooky haunted houses, while later scripts reflected

other individuals' unique life experiences and religious identities. As we will see below, Dot rewrote the "Graveyard" scene to reflect her own experiences of grief and questions of faith.

### **Destiny House scene 5: Graveyard**

*As the lights go down on Alisha, you hear faint sounds of crickets and birds. Ushered into the next room, you see a dimly-lit graveyard covered in dead leaves. By a large tombstone sits Nicole, whose daughter Mia was murdered by Joe. She cries as she talks first to herself, then to God, and finally to her*

*deceased mother. Nicole is bitter that God has taken away both her mother and her daughter.*

*Crouching near her is a black-robed demon, but standing behind her, with arms upraised, is an angel in satiny white robes and feathered wings.*



**Figure 4.** Charlotte as the Angel and Dot as Nicole in the Graveyard scene of Destiny House.

**NICOLE:** Mama? If there's a heaven, I know you're there. If God's real, I know you're with Him. But I needed you here with me. *(She pauses and cries.)* I really need someone to love me. I miss Mia so much. I want to be with you, both of you. Mama, through all your hurt and pain, your faith never wavered. You never stopped believing that God loved you. So what's wrong with me? What's so hard about believing? *(NICOLE starts crying again and the*

*DEMON approaches, but the ANGEL waves him back and drops a red rose in front of her. When she sees it she looks around, then picks it up, confused, and looks toward heaven. Lights go out.)*

### **The voice of God: Listening for God in Destiny House**

The Mt. Pisgah church community viewed Destiny House as very successful, in the way they measure such things—in other words, in terms of souls touched, saved, and rededicated as a result of seeing the production. Every year the numbers seemed to increase, and reports filtered back to the church after every production from people who felt their lives had changed, or who said their teenager had been saved, or who hoped we would do it again next Halloween. But even after five successful years, when 2006 rolled around, nobody seemed to have the energy for Destiny House. Our morale was down, and got worse as October neared; several key roles were yet to be filled, and other important technical issues had not been resolved. Just weeks before the production, our last prospect for a lead role fell through. Dot called to tell me this as I was pulling up to the church, discouragement in her voice. And I had no reassurance to offer her—I was running on empty. Later she told me that was a low point for her, and I apologized for not being more helpful at that moment. She answered, “We were all that way, though, Marsha. But it was just that I had to live with disobedience if I didn’t do it.” (Dot K., 2006)

Every year Dot questioned whether Destiny House should happen. She prayed, and every year she heard a confirmation from God.<sup>17</sup> Destiny House had, from its beginnings,

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<sup>17</sup>Like most Pentecostals, Dot both seeks and expects very personal communications from God; and when she believes she has “heard” from God, she takes the message very seriously. Communications from God may take the form of a spoken message from another person, a written passage in the Bible or another book that seems to jump off the page, an idea that seems to arrive unbidden in one’s mind, a vague feeling of being “led” toward

been a group project, but two people emerged from the beginning as its leaders: Shaun, the dynamic, charismatic public spokesperson; and Dot, the organizer and spiritual bedrock. When, after two years of Destiny House, Shaun left Mt. Pisgah, no one could really replace his unique talents, but Dot remained as the quiet force that kept Destiny House going—although she always emphasized that she could not do it alone. As a Bible study teacher and leader in many areas of the church, Dot held the respect and confidence of the congregation and the pastor, and when she reported a message from God about Destiny House, it was rare to hear anyone at Mt. Pisgah doubt its validity. But in 2006, it took three such messages to convince her. Often, when she is looking for help with a decision or confirmation that she is going in the right direction, Dot will pull out one of her many scriptural devotional books, pray, and then let it fall open. The first time she asked God to tell her whether she should go ahead with Destiny House, the devotional book fell open to a page entitled, “Don’t ask, just do.” The second time, she told God she wanted to be absolutely sure, and asked for confirmation of His will: the devotional page read, “The ending result will be confirmed.” Later, torn by doubt because of the tremendous challenge that lay ahead, Dot asked a third and final time. The book fell open and the page read: “Walk by faith, not by sight.” Another member of the congregation, not knowing what question Dot was wrestling with, came to Dot privately with a message that she said God had told her to give to Dot—it was another confirmation to move forward. Even then, Dot couldn’t imagine how it would happen. The contradiction between what God was telling her to do and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to it led her to a crisis of faith. She told me:

I even thought, you know, “God, if this is not You telling me, then I’m even beginning to question all the other years. Because I know how You speak to me. And

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something or someone, or even an unexpected event or strange coincidence. More examples of believers who listen for this kind of communication appear in chapter 4.

I know how I feel when You speak to me. And You're telling me to do it, but everybody else is saying that I'm crazy, that I shouldn't." But He's come through. So I know that it was something that God really wanted us to do. And I'm upset that I even questioned it so much this year. But it's made my faith stronger. It really has. (Dot K., 2006)

Despite the many obstacles in our way, somehow Destiny House happened. It was to be the last year we produced it, although we couldn't have known that then. By the next spring, Glenn and Leigh had moved out of state for Glenn's new job, and Dot and Bill had left Mt. Pisgah for another church, after a conflict unrelated to Destiny House (see chapter 4). Those later developments, though, did not affect Dot's sense that we were meant to produce Destiny House that year, as in previous years, and that God continually "c[a]me through" to overcome what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles.

In fact, two years before, in 2004, a different set of difficult circumstances had led the Destiny House planning committee to a similar decision-making crisis. When I think of Destiny House '04, I always think of the "holy nine," as Bill began jokingly calling us by the end: Dot and Bill, Leigh and Glenn, Deborah and Jack, and three "singles," Kirk, Claire, and me. So when I remember that remarkable August evening that we decided to go ahead and make Destiny House happen again despite everything, my first impulse is to think of all nine of us sitting around that table. But in reality there were only four of us in the room—Bill, Dot, Glenn, and me—although the rest were very present in our thoughts and concerns about Destiny House's future. Leigh came in and out (with a toddler to watch, she couldn't sit still long), Claire was out of town, and the other three hadn't yet been brought into the conversation, so it was a very small group that Sunday evening with a big decision on our hands.

There the four of us sat, one on each side of the large square that Arthur had created in his age 9-11 Sunday school classroom by putting two six-foot folding tables side by side. There were so many reasons to just give up on Destiny House this year, so many struggles in each represented family that no one would blame us if we just took a sabbatical, used this time—as Bill had suggested—to see what other groups were doing and to get an early start in 2005. Selfish as I am, I sat there wondering what this would mean for my dissertation, then berating myself silently for that selfishness and resolving not to push my preferences because of it.

I thought of Dot's mother Ellie, ten hours away by car, stricken by a fast-moving brain cancer that could claim her at any time. By Christmas, Dot would stand with her father at Ellie's graveside. I thought of Leigh's father Howard, hardly able to eat because of the abdominal cancer that had stretched its greedy tentacles into every adjoining organ, rendering it inoperable. In January I would sing at Howard's funeral. And I thought of Jack, who came to church looking more haggard each Sunday because of the chemotherapy they pumped into the port in his chest every other week. We had already said as a group that we would cancel Destiny House before we would let Jack, our head set builder, make himself sick working on the production. Each of us sat that evening with our own wounds, our own lives to consider, trying to decide whether a ministry that could save precious souls was worth the time it would steal from us, our spouses, our parents, our children.

The week before, we'd sat in that same room, the four of us plus Claire, and had struggled with this same issue. Claire and I were optimistic, saying we thought we could pull this thing off. Bill, remembering our exhaustion the year before that had left us unable or unwilling to put in much effort earlier this year, was in favor of a sabbatical. Glenn clearly

didn't want to do it, either—he was fiercely protecting his wife Leigh's need to be with her father in these last months, and he himself was starting a new job that would take him out of town for much of our rehearsal period. Dot was simply torn between her desire to keep going and her anguish over her mother's illness. So the five of us were at an impasse. Dot had suggested that we all pray for guidance during the following week—during which she'd be visiting her mother—so that we could make a final decision at our next meeting.

Just before this week's meeting started, I had spoken to Dot. "Claire just called," she'd said, closing her cell phone. "She's still on the road and can't make it back in time." Claire had recently separated from her husband Drew, and despite some concerns over how well he was (or wasn't) taking care of their nine-year-old son on the alternate weekends when Drew had him, Claire often took those opportunities to go to the beach with friends. Raising her son mostly alone; struggling to rebuild her life financially; and coping with a husband who phoned her late at night, almost every night, to curse, threaten, and play upon her deepest fears was taking its toll on Claire—but I knew she wanted Destiny House to continue this year. She'd been part of Destiny House from the beginning and felt strongly about this ministry. And she needed something to immerse herself in, this year more than ever.

"I'll be honest with you, Dot," I confided. "I don't hear so good. So I just prayed this week that God would tell you what to do." Her mouth fell open. "That's exactly what Claire said she prayed for. And I did get an answer. Oh, Marsha, it was really something!" she beamed.

“Well, good, then, it worked,” I replied, my smile barely hiding the tightness in my stomach. Did this mean God had given Dot the go-ahead? And would that be enough for the others? What had God told them?

We walked together into the same Sunday school classroom, and Dot could hardly contain herself as the meeting convened. “Guys, I’m sorry, I know everybody thinks that we shouldn’t do Destiny House this year. But I’ve got to go with what God is telling me,” she effused, without a trace of self-importance. And she read the devotional that God had given her in response to her prayer for guidance. Dot had taken the “Graveyard” scene from Destiny House with her to Tennessee—a scene she had just rewritten, pouring all her anguish over her mother’s illness into her character Nicole’s tearful monologue at her daughter’s grave. “I felt such a presence of God when I wrote that.” Dot’s mother Ellie had never seen Destiny House, had never really understood what it was all about. But when Dot explained the concept of Destiny House to her and read her the scene, Ellie, a lifelong Sunday school teacher herself, responded, “Oh, Dot. That is *something*.”

“Mama,” Dot reminded her, “you’ve got to understand that if we do this this year, I’m going to be so tied up for the month of October. But I don’t have to do it.”

“No,” Ellie replied. “You *have* to do this.”

When Dot finished her story, all of us were brushing back tears and any objections had evaporated. “Whew,” Bill exhaled. And, in a summary that would often be repeated in later weeks, he pronounced with a grin, “Dot has a direct line to God. The rest of us are just on cell phones.”

Seeking that “direct line to God” is, for Dot as for most Pentecostals, a crucial part of her walk of faith and her identity as Christian. For her, the continuing experience of directing



Destiny House has altered that Christian identity in several ways. Not only has it strengthened her faith by confirming her belief that God answers her prayers in very clear and personal ways; but it has also given her a new sense of her purpose and role in Christian ministry through drama. In 2006, after her crisis of faith, Dot came to a significant insight about that role. She said:

I read a devotion to where—in the devotion it talked about Moses. How Moses said, “I can’t do this,” but God still sent Aaron, and the people that helped Moses to make that happen. And I’m just like Moses. Not to compare myself with someone so famous. But I don’t feel like I can do it. But God, every year, has sent the people that can come in and make it happen. And I can just be there saying I know it’s supposed to be done. You know, “God said, ‘Let’s do it,’ and I trust Him.” And I go forward. And so I just feel privileged that He’ll use me to at least do that part of it. (Dot K., 2006)

### **Destiny House scene 6: Hell**

*As you leave the darkened graveyard, you hear rumbling, then loud, crashing thunder. Flashes of lightning reveal large, rough gates fastened with a heavy chain and padlock. Bill the tour guide warns you that you are now entering the afterlife, and unlocks the gates to bring you into a chilly, barren, smoky room, mostly dark except for a dimly lit figure seated in a black chair. The guide leads your group into a circle around this ragged figure, who is crying. She begins wailing, calling out to God, and all at once you notice that there is an eerie whispering sound coming from the dark corners behind you. The seated figure notices your group and fearfully urges you to leave before it’s too late. Suddenly a demon enters and strikes the pitiful soul, nearly knocking her from her small chair. Another demon enters soon after, limping like an ancient hag and leaning on a stick. The two demons talk about the characters who have died and now face judgment. The tortured figure, still huddled in her chair, cringes as the demons circle around her threateningly. The younger demon reports*

*that he nearly had Nicole in his grasp, but that “He” (pointing upward) sent her a rose as a sign, and so her destiny still hangs in the balance. The hag Desdemona, still leaning on her stick, sends him away before pulling back her black veil to reveal a hideous, ghostly face.*

*The whispering souls get louder, and closer.*

**DESDEMONA:** *(Slowly uncovers her face and peers heavenward. Angrily:)* We are coming for her! Do You hear me? *(Pointing at audience)* We are coming for all of them! You cannot protect them all!

They will know fear. They will know doubt. They will know pain and sorrow and anger. And in that place we will find them. They will be alone, and we will find them there! *(Looking directly at individual audience members for the first time.)* I will find you. In your despair, in your uncertainty, in your lonely, lonely room. He won't be there, but I will. In the whispers, and in the SILENCE!

*(SOULS fall suddenly silent.)* It'll be my voice you'll hear. And I will drag . . . you . . . down.

### **The voice of God? Conflict and discernment in Destiny House**

In the summer of 2003, after Shaun left Mt. Pisgah, the drama team was left with some big decisions. Many who saw Shaun as the heart of Destiny House simply assumed it was over. But Bill and Dot, Claire and Drew, Leigh and Glenn, and a few others who had come into the production later (including me) were not so sure. Those who had been part of Destiny House from the beginning knew that it had always been a team effort. So when around a dozen of us met at Claire and Drew's house to brainstorm, many were hopeful that the production could continue, despite the big shoes Shaun had now left unfilled. That

informal meeting produced no firm decisions, but we all enjoined each other to pray and think about Destiny House's future. A few days later, Claire came to Dot and Bill with news: the night before, Drew had woken during the night speaking in tongues. Then he had told Claire, "God told me that he wants me to take over and direct Destiny House." When Dot reported Claire's story to the rest of us, the group was skeptical. Dot, nearly always open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, commented wryly, "God didn't tell *me* that."

Theologian Gordon T. Smith defines discernment as "mak[ing] a distinction between the voice of Jesus and those competing voices that invariably speak in our hearts and minds" (2003:12). Christians often speak of discernment as one of the spiritual gifts, like faith and wisdom, given to all believers—but given in special measure to some more than others. The letter from Paul to the Corinthians speaks of "different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit," noting that these are "given for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:4-7). While discernment can mean properly interpreting and applying the words of the Bible, for Pentecostals this gift often refers to the ability to recognize authentic messages from God, as these may appear through tongues, dreams, visions, a sense of "just knowing," an audible voice, or even modern-day prophets. Christian groups commonly speak of undergoing a "discernment process" when they have big decisions to make; when one member claims to have received God's will for the group in a direct message, discernment takes on a special meaning and importance.

Drew's claim to have heard God tell him that he should take over Destiny House was never really taken seriously by the drama team as a whole. In the same indirect manner in which the Mt. Pisgah community so often addressed conflict, the claim was quietly moved aside with little group discussion. Dot became the production's sole director in Shaun's

absence, although her main role continued to be organizing people and delegating tasks. Drew, a good actor with a strong voice, took on the larger-than-life role of Satan, and his previous smaller role—Mr. Link the murderer—was written out of the script. (Mr. Link returned as a larger character, Joe, in later years.)

*Grounded in God*, a popular work on group discernment, lists several signals that a group is truly hearing God's messages. Foremost among them is "God's peace . . . serenity and a sense of well-being," in addition to "joy" and perhaps "a great surge of energy" (Farnham, et al. 1999:28). Another prominent signal, they note, is "[p]ersistence . . . . When the same message keeps coming to a group from different places and in various ways . . . take notice!" (1999:28). But these signals, and others, may all be interpreted differently by different people, and are clearly "subject to human limitations" (1999:29). In the end, it is impossible for an individual or a group to know for certain whether they have properly discerned God's will in a situation, unless they experience a "knowing beyond knowing" that they feel comes directly from God. Some believers may have experienced this "knowing" before and recognize it—like Dot who said, "I know how I feel when You [God] speak to me" —while others may doubt every potential message. And, particularly for groups, discernment is never a completely impersonal process, since relationships and interpersonal histories are necessary lenses through which we view one another.

Was the rejection of Drew's "message from God" merely an indication that he lost a popularity contest with Dot? In a small church community like Mt. Pisgah, members are more than just a name and face. Drew was Claire's husband, Irwin's son, a man whom Dot, Bill, and several others in the church had known since he was a rebellious teenager. He was the Drew who had faithfully acted in *Destiny House* the previous two years, and he was also

the Drew who had struggled from time to time with drug addiction. Drew's message was, without a doubt, evaluated not just in terms of the message itself, but also in terms of the messenger. The fact that his message was communicated to the drama team through Claire, who was closer to many in the group than her husband, was one indication that Drew was not an obvious choice for group leadership. Neither was Dot simply a co-creator of Destiny House—she was also Bill's wife, Heather's mother, Charlotte's lifelong best friend, a Bible study teacher, and the leader of the drama team. Put simply, Dot had built up more trust and social capital at Mt. Pisgah than Drew, and so her "hearing" carried more weight than Drew's.

Nonetheless, some of the less personal principles of group discernment easily applied to this situation. Drew's message was not a "persistent" one, and was never confirmed through other people or sources. When Dot sought God's guidance, as she did in 2006, she asked for and often felt she received multiple "confirmations" of God's will. Drew's message did not inspire "joy" and "energy" in the group; nor did members say it brought them a sense of "God's peace" (Farnham, et al. 1999:28). Rather, it caused confusion and discomfort as group members struggled with the question of whether Drew was deceiving them in order to take on a position of authority. While Pentecostals freely acknowledge that some people can falsely pretend to speak in tongues or prophesy, accusing a specific person of that sort of deception is a tricky affair, as these gifts are ultimately between that person and God. Personal revelation is a phenomenon both holy and obscure, and few Pentecostal believers feel qualified to judge such matters, choosing instead to ask for divine "confirmations" and quietly marginalizing claims that seem out of line. In Drew's case, while personal opinions of

Drew guided group judgment on the merits of his claim, the team nonetheless sought a way to move forward without directly contradicting his assertions of supernatural communication.

In this situation, as in the case of the messages Dot received from God about Destiny House in later years, personal revelations shaped both individual and collective religious identities, as groups must discern God's will for the entire body based on multiple (and often competing) individual claims to know the correct path for themselves and for the group as a whole. For believers, identities—both individual and collective—take shape and re-shape continually in this space formed between individuals, their shared community, and God.

### **Destiny House scene 7: Heaven**

*As you leave Hell, Desdemona laughs wickedly and the tortured soul begs you to take her with you, but soon you are outdoors and breathing fresh evening air as you follow a sidewalk to an unmarked metal door. As your tour guide Bill opens it, soft light and soothing music pour out and you are welcomed into a large room in which it seems everything is sparkling white. Your eyes adjust and you see that this is a church sanctuary which, except for the pews, has been nearly encased in glittering white cotton. You are guided to a pew and watch as, one by one, the characters from previous scenes approach huge gleaming white gates, guarded by two tall angels in white tuxedos with unsheathed swords crossed, blocking the entrance. One by one, characters from previous scenes enter and approach the angel who stands behind a gold podium with a heavy book: the Book of Life. They may be welcomed in or turned away—dragged offstage to hell by Satan and his demons. The last character to enter is Nicole, whose fate hung in the balance in the graveyard. From among the many*

*white-robed figures in Heaven emerges a smiling woman whom Nicole recognizes as her mother. They embrace and Nicole tells her mother about that night.*

**NICOLE:** The night when I visited Sarah’s grave, I felt so hopeless, like there was darkness all around me. I was so confused, and then—a rose just dropped out of nowhere. Mom, that’s when I realized my only escape from the darkness was to enter into the light. Over and over I could hear you say . . .

**MOM & NICOLE:** “If you Receive God’s Offering for Salvation, you’ll receive Eternal life.”

**NICOLE:** I chose to receive that offering. I finally realized that it was a free gift, and all I had to do was take it. It was just that easy. And now here I am, at the gates of Heaven. *(NICOLE and MOM turn and approach ANGEL at the Book of Life.)* Angel, is my name in that book? I know it is.

*(ANGEL lifts arms. JESUS enters and welcomes NICOLE with outstretched arms. ANGELS all lift their arms in celebration.)*

### **Voices from inside and out: The Salvation Room**

At the end of each tour, Pastor Jim or another speaker always talked briefly with the group about the drama and its message, and led the group in saying a “sinner’s prayer.” In 2006 every tour group member received a small handout that included the text of a “sinner’s prayer” they could say at that time, or later. The text read:

Lord, I come to you today sorry of my sins. I ask You to forgive me and to cleanse me. I accept that Your Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross for me and that He rose from the dead. Help me to live for You the rest of my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

The speaker asked anyone who had just said that prayer for the first time, or who had rededicated his or her life to Christ, to raise their hands. Then volunteers offered counseling and literature (a small pamphlet entitled “What Every New Convert Should Know”) to anyone who might want it. In 2006 they estimated that over a quarter of the just under 400 people who saw the production were “saved” or “rededicated.” Anecdotes and reports often came back after the fact, sometimes from people who happened to recognize Dot or Bill in a store and stopped to tell them how much Destiny House meant to them or, often, to their son or daughter. Pastor Jim also reported hearing similar stories, such as the email he received from a teenager who told him she’d been in church all her life, but hadn’t really understood the reality of what being a Christian was all about until she saw Destiny House. Seeing and hearing about these large numbers of people who said they were changed by the production bolstered the conviction of the cast and crew that Destiny House was a ministry that was ordained and anointed by God.

Seeing themselves as part of a ministry that actually saves souls is a moving experience for many people, and often changes or strengthens their sense of their own identity as a Christian. Such has certainly been the case for Dot, who said that her faith is now stronger, and that she has learned more fully how to listen to God. Gail, who acted in Destiny House for several years, told me, “I just thought it was so awesome. All these people got saved. I just liked being a part of that” (Gail M., 2004). While the explicit goals of Destiny House always focused on reaching out to the lost, rather than strengthening Mt. Pisgah’s own members, Pastor Jim did use the “Salvation Room” as an opportunity to train and encourage people who want to evangelize and preach. Brad, who taught Sunday school



at Mt. Pisgah and spoke in front of groups regularly at work, nonetheless had never personally “led a person to Christ.” He recalled:

I wanted to learn how to do that. [Pastor] Jim taught me how to do that, he really did. The first year, Jim did it, modeled it for me, and then I’d do one. And I learned from Jim. And I wouldn’t have led a person to Christ prior to that. I’d have been afraid to death to do that. Now I wouldn’t think twice about it. And so it’s made me more of a soul-winner, so I’ve personally grown from it. (Brad R., 2005)

For Dot and Brad, participation in Destiny House altered their very sense of what it meant to be a Christian. From seeing herself mainly as a behind-the-scenes organizer and writer, Dot’s identity transformed into that of a “Moses” who pointed boldly in the direction God told her to lead. From an educated Christian who was reluctant to press his faith on others, Brad’s identity became that of a fearless “soul-winner” for Christ.



**Figure 5.** The sanctuary of Mt. Pisgah Chapel decorated for the Heaven scene in Destiny House.

And they were hardly alone, as Destiny House cast and crew frequently discovered abilities, roles, and connections they had never considered before. Destiny House demanded more of Mt. Pisgah's congregants than most were used to giving to their church. Its requirements in terms of time, personnel, and range of skills were nearly untenable for a church of Mt. Pisgah's size—but, for six consecutive years, community members rose to the challenge. The participants in Destiny House's ambitious vision—whether they took on large or small roles—often began to see themselves as actors, writers, and set designers; even more importantly, as Gail said above, they began to see themselves as part of a larger effort to bring people to Christ. In this way, transitioning into a role in this community effort also signified a transition in religious life and identity: from neophyte to disciple, from follower to leader, and from uncertain outsider to someone who feels confident she or he belongs to a tightly-woven religious community.

Destiny House also created new and unexpected wrinkles in a collective identity forged over many years of gradual maturation as a community. The concept of and plans for Destiny House arose outside the usual leadership of the church (although, like every aspect of Mt. Pisgah, it was subject to the pastor's approval); in so doing, it disrupted existing assumptions about spiritual and organizational authority in the church community. It interrupted the normal activities of the church and the conventional ways that members connected with one another, reorganizing community expectations and relationships. It prompted self examination and difficult conversations about what the church really believed about God, God's saving grace, and God's will for Mt. Pisgah—and, implicitly, what the individuals having those conversations really believed.

There were also other subtle—and sometimes unexpected—ways in which Destiny House altered the church’s collective identity. Mt. Pisgah has had the same pastor since 1969, and he is the son-in-law of the man who had started the church eleven years earlier. So leadership tends to run along familial lines; like many small churches, Mt. Pisgah can be an insular place. Destiny House provided both an avenue into the church for people with no personal ties to the Mt. Pisgah community, and an anchor for people who had previously floated around the margins of the church with no strong connections to other members. For some people who had felt shut out of other ministries, that opportunity to create connections was a strong pull to be involved in Destiny House. One member who told me that she felt a “core group” ran too many things at the church said, “Seeing the church as a group just really pull together to accomplish this—you know, I just thought that was great. People that you didn’t usually see involved in church stuff were involved” (Deanna M., 2004).

Dennis and Shelley’s family certainly fit that description. Dennis’s sister had asked him to come help with set construction on Destiny House in 2004. Dennis is a carpenter and a painter, so his skills were invaluable. Touched by the production, he started coming to church for a month or two with his girlfriend Shelley. But after that, they came less and less and finally stopped going to church entirely. Dennis’s sister left Mt. Pisgah for another church, so he no longer had any family connection there. But when Dennis decided that he wanted to make a change in his life, it was Mt. Pisgah and his experience in Destiny House that he remembered. He started coming back, with Shelley and her two children, just in time to help out with set construction in 2006. Destiny House gave Dennis a creative outlet, too—he was so excited about making the production even better that he started making plans for the next year’s production, for which he planned to create a “hell pit” with smoke and flames.

Someone like Dennis, without family or deep friendships in the congregation, would have had little to tie him into the Mt. Pisgah community were it not for Destiny House, which welcomed his special talents in construction. As an unmarried couple, their lifestyle conflicted with teachings of the church; although Mt. Pisgah would never turn them away, many couples in their position would feel uncomfortable in a church that unequivocally called their living situation sinful. But Dennis and Shelley charmed many at Mt. Pisgah with their sincerity and eagerness to help out. And when they struggled—when, for instance, their family van broke down and they were unable to come to church or to Destiny House rehearsals—the church took on this unmarried couple’s needs as their own, broadening their collective identity as a congregation to fully embrace them as part of the church “family.”

In 2006 Pastor Jim decided to celebrate the success of Destiny House by inviting several audience members who had said they were “saved” or “rededicated” through the production back to Mt. Pisgah to participate in the church’s Thanksgiving potluck dinner (an event for which nearly the entire congregation annually crowded the fellowship hall). One by one, they took the microphone that Pastor Jim handed them and testified to the difference that Destiny House had made in their lives, and to what the past few weeks since the production had been like for them. For Destiny House’s creators, this event confirmed that Pastor Jim and the Mt. Pisgah congregation had finally fully embraced this production as their own. For Destiny House’s cast and crew, seeing the faces and hearing the words of people who had actually undergone spiritual transformation was a galvanizing experience, one that made the idea of “soul-winning” a personal reality. And for the entire Mt. Pisgah community, knowing that God was saving souls through their church confirmed their commitment to Mt. Pisgah’s

official statement of collective purpose, found on church banners, programs, and stationery:  
“Transforming lives through Christ.”

Participating in Destiny House reconfigured the individual and collective identities of members of the Mt. Pisgah community, and it accomplished this because of, and through, its consistency with the sense of Christian purpose that these believers shared with most American evangelicals: to reach out in a positive, inviting way to non-Christians in order to persuade them to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This sense of purpose animated the cast and crew of Destiny House, and transformed their identifications as carpenters, directors, and actors into ministers of the Gospel—God’s people hearing, understanding, and carrying out His purpose and mission in the world.

## CHAPTER 4

### GENESIS AND REVELATIONS: OF COMINGS AND GOINGS

Dan and Suzanne had been married for nearly ten years—a second marriage for each of them—when they decided to come to Mt. Pisgah Chapel. As for many people choosing a church, an important draw for them was family connections: Dan’s mother had been a member of Mt. Pisgah for several decades. Dan himself had been heavily involved in ministries at the church in the 1980s, but when his first marriage ended, he felt uncomfortable staying at Mt. Pisgah and fell away for several years. After he met Suzanne, they asked Pastor Jim Haywood to marry them at the church, but still didn’t attend services there.

I quit, when my first wife and I separated. We were going there in ‘86, and I quit going. And then, I wanted to go back. I really believe in God. I mean, I didn’t go to church, but I still believed in God. You know, I just—and then she [Suzanne] didn’t want to, she felt funny about going to the church that my wife had gone to. So I finally was able to talk her into going. I just felt the Spirit in the church. And I just wanted to go back to where I felt the Spirit, even though I knew I was going to have to face all the people that knew I—me and my wife had separated. And then when I did go back, ninety percent of them people wasn’t there anyway. (Dan N., 2005)

For her part, Suzanne quickly overcame her initial uneasiness about attending a church that had known Dan’s ex-wife:

The reason I really liked the church when Dan and I first went is because the people were very friendly. They made you feel welcome there, you know. And then, it’s something about the church that just really moves me. I mean, it just really—the praise and worship team just really moves me. And plus, I really—I really get a lot out of Pastor Jim’s messages. And, I don’t know. I

just feel comfortable there. I felt like this was my home, this was where I wanted to be. Because Dan had told me, “If you’ll just try it, if you’ll just go, if you’re not comfortable there, if you don’t like it, we’ll try another church.” And it seemed like that when I went, it just seemed like that was the place for me to be. (Suzanne N., 2005)

Exploring and joining a new church community is a tricky process. Will I find like-minded friends there? Will I feel comfortable? Will I like the music? And what about the preaching? What do they believe? For that matter, what do *I* believe? Both coming into a new church and leaving an old one bring identity questions to the forefront in a way that staying put often does not. The uncertainty and sometimes contentiousness surrounding entrances and exits from a church community signal spaces of identity authoring—times when the stories we tell about who we are may be challenged, or altered, or appended with brand new chapters. These beginnings and endings, then, offer us windows onto religious identities in transition, and onto collective religious identities that evolve as community members integrate—or stop trying to integrate—their stories with the ones a group tells.

The previous two chapters have looked at religious identity formation with an eye toward individual actors—recognizing, in the process, that identities never belong solely to an individual, but are a ‘middle term’ between the personal and the social. Identities are constantly shaping and being shaped by the relationships individuals form with and within social fields such as places of employment, neighborhood groups, and churches. This chapter looks more closely at relationships between individual and collective religious identities. Collective identities also form in the “space of authoring” between the individual and the social; but they encompass (in whatever incomplete and multifaceted forms) a shared vision for the group, a belief in some distinction between insiders and outsiders, an understanding of power relations among group members and between the group and larger societal groups or

forces, and a sense of solidarity with others who share this identity (Holland, et al. 1998; Melucci 1988; Somers 1994). Scholars and journalists, along with the rest of us, often talk or write about religious groups unproblematically, as unified social actors. But, from the perspective of religion as lived in the everyday world, we cannot assume that these collective identities are single, fixed entities. In this sense collective religious identities have much in common with collective identity as described in social movement studies: “continually emerging, forming and reforming between people and groups in multiple sites and places of contentious practice” (Holland, et al. 2008:99).

To keep a grasp on this always-incomplete, dynamically-shifting quality of both collective and individual religious identities, we look more closely in this chapter at the narrative quality of identity. As we have seen in earlier chapters, no single identifier could capture the complexity of even one believer, much less a body of believers that have chosen to be a community together. Religious identities, like all identities, are less categories of being than they are stories of becoming. We approach identities in this chapter as not merely revealed through the stories people and groups tell, but as constructed by and constructive of those narratives in a dialogic way (Ammerman 2003; Somers 1994). In other words, we *are* the stories we tell about ourselves—stories that necessarily place us in relationship to other people and social worlds. And we create and re-create our own stories based on the stories those other people and larger collectivities tell, as our relationships to them come into existence, change, and grow over time. These multiple stories, in turn, guide our actions and may lead us to alter those very relationships. “People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives—however fragmented, contradictory, or partial” (Somers 1994:618). Groups, in turn, are continually creating and re-



creating their narratives as members come and go, as conflicts arise, and as the group's relationship to larger social forces changes over time. Never completely rigid and always in formation, collective identities "must be conceived as a process" constantly negotiated through relationships (Melucci 1988:342).

Scholars of religion have suggested that the relationship between religious collectivities and individuals seems to have changed in the past century (Bellah 1985; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Marty 1993; Roof 1999). Daniele Hervieu-Léger argues cogently that two seemingly contradictory phenomena observed in recent decades—the decline of traditional religious institutions and the persistence, or in some cases the resurgence, of personal religiosity or spirituality—can be traced to the same phenomenon: "a shift in the repository of the truth of belief from the institution to the believer" (Hervieu-Léger 2000:168). Said in another way, the character of the religious has transformed in the postmodern era: no longer do believers look to institutions for totalizing systems of belief and practice. Rather, they see religious traditions as "a fund of memory and a reservoir of signs at the disposal of individuals," to be interpreted, modified, and applied in an individual, subjective way (Hervieu-Léger 2000:168).

While Hervieu-Léger's description of relationships between believers and religious institutions in late modernity seems apt, I question the novelty of this phenomenon. To point out only one example of what used to be called "syncretism," the kinds of creative blendings of elements of African traditions and Catholicism that generated the many varieties of Vodoun, Santeria, and Candomblé have surely shown us that humans have long drawn on religious traditions as "reservoir[s] of signs" to be reinterpreted and recombined, particularly in times of intercultural contact and social upheaval (Brown 1991; Merrell 2005; Murphy

1993). The term “syncretism” now gets little use, precisely because it carried the implication that there were, indeed, “pure” forms of religions that became somehow “contaminated” in these blendings (Roof 1999). It may be more accurate to think of this shift as a recent one in western Europe and among European Americans—and particularly among the intellectual elites who have generated both the Western religious orthodoxies and the scientific and humanistic disciplines that study the religious sphere.

Nevertheless, if, as Hervieu-Léger posits, such a shift actually began with the Protestant emphasis on personal faith, then the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have surely fueled its acceleration in the 20th century, by placing unmediated communication with God (through the person of the Holy Spirit) at the center of their identity and practice. Within a theology that renders divine revelation an expected part of a believer’s everyday life (such that believers “feel led” to do or avoid a particular action, “hear from God” about a troubling question, or trust “letting go and letting God” as a lifestyle of submission to the subjective experience of God’s will), a very individual and subjective experience of belief necessarily takes precedence over tradition. Pentecostal believers, for instance, tend to judge the authority of the pulpit not by the weight of Church structure beneath it, but by a perception of a particular minister’s “anointing” by God; even so, this authority cannot long hold if an individual believer’s personal communications with God conflict significantly with the dictums issued by a human pastor. Religious identities that incorporate divine revelation as an expected part of everyday life—routinely guiding decisions and giving a spiritual valence to even seemingly mundane matters—may therefore be more compatible with a freedom to migrate between congregations and to hybridize religious traditions, and less compatible with denominational loyalties.

### **Beginnings: “I don’t want to say ‘accidental’”**

Some of the most easily recalled chapters in a religious personal history tell the story of becoming part of a congregation.<sup>18</sup> These stories are often as much an ending as a beginning; it all depends on the vantage point of the teller and the hearer, and the purposes the story serves. Below are narratives from three people with very different life histories, all of whom found a “church home” in the Mt. Pisgah Chapel community. In nearly all the interviews I conducted with people at Mt. Pisgah, I began by asking how they ended up at that church. I found that, precisely because joining a new church is a landmark of sorts on people’s religious journeys, asking churchgoers to tell this particular story was a way to put people at ease and open up potential avenues for later questions. For a few, that first question opened veritable floodgates of memories and intertwined narratives. Trudy was one of these churchgoers; in the end, we had to do our interview in two sections, as we spent nearly four hours together without making it to question number two.

#### *Trudy*

Trudy ran several popular restaurants in town for many years. Even at 75, she was still a dynamo and the proud matriarch of a large family network of her now middle-aged children (five in all), and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Although Trudy had only recently joined Mt. Pisgah, she had known Pastor Jim and Ellen for many years through her restaurants; she also knew them because Mt. Pisgah and her former church—to which she had belonged for four decades—were part of the same organized fellowship network of

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<sup>18</sup>People with whom I spoke at Mt. Pisgah never had any trouble recalling in detail how they came to be at that church, once asked. Conversion narratives, however, tend to outshine church-migration stories in terms of how often they are shared, especially publicly—perhaps because they are a “mountaintop” experience, or perhaps because they highlight God’s love and the teller’s submission to God’s call rather than uncomfortable topics, like conflicts within a church, or simply mundane ones, like the safety of the church nursery.

Spirit-filled churches. Trudy recounted to me how she left her longtime membership in her old church and came to Mt. Pisgah.

I had known and been in the same fellowship as Mt. Pisgah, and I knew of them, but I was associated with another church. But I was always fascinated with Mt. Pisgah, and Ellen and Jim. I knew them real well. And you notice that I call them, I've learned to call him Pastor Jim, but to me he was just Jim; they were Jim and Ellen. Of course, I'm older than they are, you know, and would meet them at—like, we went to Dallas to conventions, and things like that. We would meet there at the convention, even though I would go with someone else. And I just loved them, you know. I loved their move in the spirit of the more contemporary, above the old-time Pentecostal worship. So eventually my other pastor died. And I had gone up to take care of my mother and father, who were elderly. After five years of staying up in the country with my mother and father, taking care of them, I came back to [my church]. And it just didn't seem like home any more. Because they had a different pastor and wife, and a lot of the members had changed. And the door opened, and I says, "Well, I'll just go to Mt. Pisgah." So that's how I wound up going over there. (2005)

Among apostolic churches (churches started and led by a charismatic pastor), particularly smaller churches, the pastor and his or her family are usually the bedrock of the church community. Trudy's decades-old association with her former church, based in large part upon her relationship with the pastor and his wife, lost its salience once she returned after five years to find a new pastor's family occupying that central position. It no longer seemed "like home." Likewise, her love for Jim and Ellen Haywood drew her to Mt. Pisgah—a place where she could make herself at home, at least in part, because she already enjoyed a close relationship with its central figures.

### *Lori*

When I interviewed Lori in 2004, she had been coming to Mt. Pisgah for nearly a year and had begun a weekly prayer group at the church. Her husband Mitch and their adult daughters came with her occasionally, but never involved themselves in the life of the church the way Lori did. A survivor of childhood abuse, Lori had found in adulthood the promise of a very personal God who would never abandon her. She relied heavily on that close

relationship with God, but found herself resisting what she knew in her heart was God's calling to come to Mt. Pisgah, even though she had no personal connections with the pastor or the congregation.

We moved here, and I kind of searched around, and I was going to a different church. And it was really a great church, but I just didn't think that's where God wanted me to be. And I remember, one Sunday night, I just rode past [Mt. Pisgah] just to see if I would get some kind of—I don't know. Slap in the face? [Laughs] Or whatever. And I didn't. But I came here one time, and I knew this is where God wanted me to be, but I guess I was kind of afraid that God was going to start making me do like I'm doing now, leading a prayer group—because I know that's my calling. And I just wanted to sit back for a while and not do anything. But you can't just sit back in the kingdom of God and not do anything.

And so I went to this other church, and [the preacher said], "I was going to preach something else, but God wants me to preach that—He wants me to ask you, 'Why are you here? Why are you here at this church when you know you should be someplace else?'" And I thought, "Wow." You know, it was for the whole congregation, but I said, "OK, God, I got it. I got it." And so I started coming here that next Sunday.

MM: How remarkable that a preacher would preach a sermon like that. I mean, most preachers don't want to tell you you need to be somewhere else.

Right! Well, it all focused on David hiding out in a cave. You know, "Why are you hiding in this cave, when I told you to go out and do this?" And so I took it very personally. When there's a sermon like that, it hits you on wherever you're at at that time. And I knew that God was telling me at that time, why am I hiding here in this church when I know where God—where I'm supposed to be? (2004)

Believing strongly that God speaks to each person individually through many means, Lori searched for an unmistakable message that would direct her to the right church. Even though she didn't get the "slap in the face" she looked for as she drove by the church, her vague impression that God was calling her to Mt. Pisgah was confirmed when her pastor abruptly changed his sermon topic to one that touched Lori deeply. The impact of the message was even greater because of that abrupt change, signaling a special inspiration from God. Even though the message was "for the whole congregation," Lori couldn't help feeling that God had used an anointed messenger to make sure she personally "got it"—and once that happened, she was ready to obey that directive without question.

*Charles*

Some people appear to belong to a church through a particular set of circumstances rather than a deliberate decision. However, a believer may also weave those circumstances into a narrative that recasts them as more than mere coincidence in his personal history.

Charles and Georgina came to Mt. Pisgah in 1998 when it merged with their tiny congregation and their pastor became Mt. Pisgah's associate pastor and worship leader for a short while. Looking back on that event, Charles refuses to describe his membership at Mt. Pisgah as "accidental."

I don't want to say "accidental." I'm not going to say that, because I don't think you're supposed to say "accident."

MM: You don't think there are accidents?

No, probably not, but I'll have learn more about that. But as far as the moment and so on—I was going to River of Life up here, [with] Greg Morton. Were you there when Greg was there, playing the piano?

MM: No, I was there after.

Well, that's what impressed me, was the piano. [Here Charles described a particular instance of intense worship at River of Life Church in which he felt "terribly impressed" to pick up his young son and offer him as a "living sacrifice" belonging wholly to God.] So I was at Greg's, and then we stayed there, and then all of a sudden he met Jim, Brother Jim, you know, who offered him the position there at the piano. So he just gave up the ministry there downtown. Well, we either went with, stayed with Brother Greg, or go somewhere else, you know. (2004)

While going to Mt. Pisgah might have seemed a simple default decision for Charles, he framed that choice within a larger narrative in which he continually emphasized that many events in his life were the result of "just waiting for an assignment" from God—both for himself and his children—in a way he described as "almost childish." As a lifelong teacher, Charles declared, "We can learn so much from children. . . . I just think, 'What does He want?' Thinking and deciding is hard work, so I want someone to tell me" (2004).

For these three believers, coming to a new church home was part of a long journey in their lives as Christians and as churchgoers. Shaping this episode in their lifelong narratives of religious belief and practice meant making sense of this event from the perspective of religious identities that continually evolve. Sometimes mundane factors like moving to a new place necessitate joining a new community, and other times spiritual longings lead believers to seek out a new church. As Spirit-filled believers, Trudy, Lori, and Charles all fully expect to hear God's voice, and that voice continually leads them in matters that may seem, even to other Protestants, to be issues of personal preference or practical concern. As longtime Christians, these three believers have constructed well-defined identities, but are still open to change when—through the voice of a preacher, personal revelation, or unexpected circumstance—they feel God guiding them in a new direction. However, even if a particular church community feels “right,” a believer must always work to integrate the collective identity of that community into their own—and vice versa. Churches, too, must find ways to incorporate new voices and practices in their midst, in order to stay vibrant and healthy. This challenge is one that must be met both spiritually and practically.

### **Genesis and purpose: Shaping church entrance and identity**

Pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002), has the distinction of writing a book that not only topped the bestsellers list in both 2004 and 2005, but that became, in a few short years, one of the bestselling books of all time, exceeding 30 million copies (Nelson 2009). Before *The Purpose Driven Life*, though, came *The Purpose Driven Church* (Warren 1995), a book that was aimed at Warren's peers—pastors and other church leaders who could benefit from the insights of a man who has grown his Saddleback Church

in Orange County, California, into a megachurch with a reported weekly attendance of 22,000. Warren argues in *The Purpose Driven Church* that most church leaders—and most churchgoers—do not have a clear sense of their church’s identity and purpose. But, he says, “growing, healthy churches have a clear-cut identity. They understand their reason for being; they are precise in their purpose” (1995:82). For this reason, Warren urges churches to clearly envision their identity and purpose, and to reinforce these continually.

The premise of *The Purpose Driven Church* is that focusing a church’s efforts on five basic New Testament principles (worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism) creates a healthy church, and a healthy church is naturally a growing church. Warren uses a model he calls the “Circles of Commitment,” a series of concentric circles that show five different levels of involvement with the church—from the “core” (the center circle), to the “committed,” the “congregation,” and the “crowd,” all the way out to the “community” (the outermost circle). His plan for church growth simply entails mapping the five New Testament principles onto the five levels of involvement, moving people from the outer circles steadily into the inner ones:

Use the Circles of Commitment as your strategy for assimilating people into the life of your church. Begin by moving the unchurched from the community to your crowd (for worship). Then move them from the crowd into the congregation (for fellowship). Next, move them from your congregation into the committed (for discipleship), and from the committed into the core (for ministry). Finally, move the core back out into the community (for evangelism). This process fulfills all five purposes of the church. (1995:138)

Warren’s approach has exerted tremendous influence on pastors’ thinking about church leadership and growth. In a 2005 survey of pastors, *The Purpose Driven Church* appeared more than seven times as often as any other book (except for its successor, *The Purpose Driven Life*) as one of the three books that had influenced them most in the past



three years (Barna Group 2005). Mt. Pisgah's pastor was no exception to this trend. Bill Kaufman, the church administrator, had read Warren's book and, believing it was an approach that could produce big results at Mt. Pisgah, brought it to Pastor Jim's attention. The two were so excited about the principles in the book that they eventually organized a private study series with a handful of leaders in the church to work through the text and think about what it might mean for Mt. Pisgah.

The first product of Bill's enthusiasm for *The Purpose Driven Church*, however, was its influence on a project he had already begun, an idea for what he called the "Genesis class." Originally conceived as a single-session pre-membership class, Bill saw the class as a way to address two perceived problems: the laxity or virtual non-existence of requirements for church membership (beyond an expressed desire to join), and the fact that much basic information about the church's history and beliefs was not readily available—so newcomers and even many long-time members were unaware of differences between the church's core beliefs and practices and their own. Raised as a Methodist, Bill was bewildered by the lack of a pre-membership class at Mt. Pisgah, even though he had tried to adapt to the loose organization and apostolic structure of the church. He began gathering materials that could form a curriculum for this class: the church's ten-point statement of belief; a short church history that had previously collected dust in a file cabinet; and information about the various programs and ministries available at Mt. Pisgah.

Pastor Jim loved the idea of the Genesis class, and the first group went through the course in early 2003. In fairly short order, however, a gap began to grow between what Bill (who wrote most of the original class material) saw as the true purpose of the course, and how Pastor Jim (who taught the class) recruited students for and implemented the seminar.

Pastor Jim increasingly used the course as a catch-all for new converts and newcomers to the church, neither of which, Bill believed, were intended audiences for coursework designed to help potential members make informed choices about their church home. For his part, Pastor Jim clearly saw a need to quickly involve new converts (whose identities were particularly fragile and vulnerable to satanic attack) in an intimate group where they could be guided in interpreting their new experiences. Newcomers to the church were also sometimes new converts, but even if they were longtime Christians, Pastor Jim was eager to involve them in a personal relationship with others in the church, something he knew from experience increased the chances that they would stay.

Bill, on the other hand, believed this stretching of the Genesis class's target audience took away from its strength as an introduction to church membership. New converts simply have different kinds of questions than more mature Christians, he argued, and they need detailed explanation of basic Christian concepts, which bogs down a class intended to outline the particularities of doctrinal belief and practice at this church. Bill also worried that pushing newcomers into the Genesis class before they had attended services for a while was counterproductive. Among other problems, it could push people into direct conflict with the pastor, when they might otherwise have quickly discovered on their own that Mt. Pisgah was not the church for them. Indeed, this was precisely what happened in one of the early iterations of the Genesis class, in an incident that bears further description below.

The differences between Pastor Jim's ideas about the Genesis class and Bill's concept of the course also grew as Bill's thinking about church membership and recruitment evolved. As Bill read and digested *The Purpose-Driven Church* over several months, he began to develop his own vision for Mt. Pisgah based on Warren's model of a successful church.

Through this lens, he began to view Mt. Pisgah as a church without a “clear-cut identity,” in Warren’s terms, and began to see the Genesis class as a small part of an eventual overall strategy for clarifying that identity and growing the church. Rick Warren’s philosophy of gradually guiding people to move from a more casual to a more committed relationship with the church spoke to Bill, and he saw this model as a way to give membership at Mt. Pisgah more structure without compromising the close-knit community that it already enjoyed.

In addition, while Mt. Pisgah’s new members tended to arrive from other churches (notwithstanding the few who were new converts), Warren’s approach—like those of most “seeker-oriented” churches—specifically targets the “unchurched,” people who have never been regular churchgoers as adults. This kind of church growth can be fast, even explosive, but requires specifically reaching out to people who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with church jargon and traditions. The more excited that Bill got about Rick Warren’s book, the less satisfied he was with many aspects of Mt. Pisgah’s more traditional attitudes. Explaining Warren’s “Circles of Commitment” to me one day, he leapt up from his chair with a Sharpie in hand and made a drawing of the concentric circles with their labels on a large easel pad in his office, a drawing he then kept sitting on the easel in a corner of his office for months. From this newly forming perspective, Bill saw the Genesis class more clearly as a carefully constructed space for encouraging a new level of commitment for those people who were at a particular stage of identity development—in Warren’s terms, moving from the “crowd” to the “congregation.” Pastor Jim’s use of the course to pull in newcomers who had just found the church conflicted directly with the particular identity-authoring space Bill had begun to envision.

The eventual resolution of these divergent visions, to the extent they could be reconciled, was an expansion of the Genesis class to a Genesis series. The original Genesis class, which had expanded to two, or even three, sessions because of the additional materials that Pastor Jim had added, shrank to a version more like Bill's original, and became "Genesis II: Commitment To The Church." Preceding it in the series was "Genesis I: Commitment To Christ," a class designed for people who had just been "saved." It addressed basic Christian beliefs and answered common questions of new converts, and encouraged them to commit to being baptized at a church service that took place soon afterward. Here was an opportunity Pastor Jim had wanted, to guide brand-new Christians in developing an identity appropriate to Mt. Pisgah's conservative Pentecostal theology and its community ideals. The last class in the Genesis series became "Genesis III: Commitment To Ministry." Designed to accommodate people who had just completed the previous two classes, as well as longtime Christians and church members, "Genesis III" described the various opportunities for ministry service at Mt. Pisgah, and included a "gifts test" to establish what kinds of ministry best suited each individual. This class was a first step toward "discipling" members and developing their identity as Christians into one that incorporated a ministry relationship with the church and potential converts. The Genesis series accommodated Pastor Jim's desire to offer avenues to greater involvement to people at varying levels of acquaintance with Mt. Pisgah, while more closely paralleling Bill's vision for a *Purpose Driven*-type tiered structure of church commitment.

### **Inside the Genesis class: Identities and cross-purposes**

Before the Genesis concept was expanded to a series of three courses, however, Bill, Pastor Jim, and other leaders and members of Mt. Pisgah had a taste of just how contentious a space that was meant to produce new church members could be. In November of 2003, Pastor Jim encouraged Peter and Joyce, a couple who had attended only one or two services, to see what Mt. Pisgah was all about by coming to the Genesis class. They were a friendly, middle-aged African American couple who seemed both knowledgeable and serious about their Christian faith, people who appeared right away to fit in with the church. But in the Genesis class, Peter began to voice some disagreements about details of theology. In particular, he diverged with Pastor Jim and the church's stated beliefs about the second coming of Christ and the "rapture," the belief that Christians will be suddenly removed from the earth at some point during the "tribulation" of the last days. Pastor Jim is "pre-trib," in millennialist shorthand—he believes that Christians will be raptured before the prophesied seven years of tribulation. Peter, however, was "mid-trib," arguing that Christians will have to go through some part of the tribulation before they are raptured. The pastor quickly moved on to another topic, but Peter was troubled by the mistake he believed was being taught. After the session had ended, he pulled aside two older teenagers who had come to the Genesis class after attending church and youth group functions at Mt. Pisgah for several months, and began expounding upon his understanding of the tribulation and end times. Once Pastor Jim realized what was happening, he stopped Peter's impromptu lecture and told him it was inappropriate. Tensions rose, and Peter left abruptly with Joyce in tow—never to return.

Lori, who was in the same class, recalled several months later that she thought it was “informative,” but admitted, “To be honest with you, I don’t remember a whole lot about it.”

Her main recollection of the Genesis class was of the way Pastor Jim handled the disagreement with Peter:

I really liked the pastor, how he kept his composure, you know. Because the one who did not believe as what the pastor said had afterwards went out and tried to share his beliefs with the teenagers, apart from the pastor. So the pastor—I was very impressed by the way he handled himself and told them, you know, it doesn’t matter whether we go before, during, or after. The fact is, we are going to go. (2004)

Another Mt. Pisgah member, Darla, remembered the incident similarly, saying that when Peter and Joyce left that night, she knew they weren’t coming back. When I asked her if that incident was a “turn off” for her about the church, she replied:

No, it didn’t turn me off of the church. Actually, those people turned me off, because they were, you know, arguing with the pastor! That they want to be a part of the church of, you know? And it’s like—you know, this is how this pastor believes and how he teaches. If you’re going to argue with him—I mean, I can understand, you have a conflict of interest, but, you know, if it’s not for you, just get up and leave. (2004)

Both Lori and Darla understood some fundamental values of the Mt. Pisgah community that could not be printed in a class handout, but which were nevertheless reflected and reinforced particularly strongly in that incident. In a community of people from diverse backgrounds with a charismatic leader, subtle theological differences like “pre-trib” and “mid-trib” pale in importance next to loyalty and respect for the pastor and maintaining a sense of harmony and unity in the church. Peter and Joyce showed their incompatibility with the church by disregarding these unwritten principles, and particularly by subverting the pastor’s authority and explicitly contradicting his teaching to youth—who might be easier to influence than adults. Their behavior rattled others who had already adopted these priorities as community members, strengthening these members’ sense of belonging by threatening

these cherished values. Few Mt. Pisgah members with whom I spoke remembered much about the informational content of the Genesis class, but lessons in what it meant to be a member of Mt. Pisgah Chapel nonetheless came through loud and clear. Incorporating this new chapter into their narratives of the church's collective identity, Lori, Darla, Pastor Jim, and others played a part in the ongoing co-creation of that identity. This story of challenge was memorable precisely because it articulated clearly a sense of appropriate relationships between the congregation and the pastor, reinforcing feelings of belonging to a group that values unity under the authority of an anointed leader.

**Endings: “I can’t say that I won’t be Baptist again”**

As easy and seemingly natural as it was to elicit stories of how people arrived at Mt. Pisgah, it was much rarer to hear a story of how and why people left. These are the kinds of stories that are awkward, even sometimes painful to tell, and few churchgoers would share such a story with someone in the church they were leaving behind unless they were a trusted friend. Inquiring into the places where the church's values of harmony and unity in Christ break down is difficult and dangerous. As a result, I seldom asked about this topic unless I knew a fellow member well enough to have already heard some of their plans personally, and almost never sought someone out who had already left to discuss their departure. These stories had not yet become the kinds of narratives at the beginning of this chapter, tales of happily ending up in a place that was just right. Instead, what I most often heard were narratives very much in process, in conversations with friends who were, in constructing those narratives, working through their own reasons for considering leaving. They are important, however, precisely for the glimpse they offer into this process, one in which

churchgoers struggle to distinguish their own religious identity from a collective one to which they once subscribed to some degree.

### *Brad and Ginny*

Early in 2005, I interviewed Brad, who had been coming to Mt. Pisgah with his wife Ginny for about three years. An experienced public speaker who also wrote an online devotional column, Brad taught adult Sunday school at Mt. Pisgah; Ginny, in turn, was a praise team member and frequent soloist. Since both were so involved at the church and Brad was especially close to Pastor Jim, he surprised me when he said he was thinking of stepping down from his teaching position and leaving the church.

I might leave. I'm praying about that. Ginny isn't. Ginny doesn't even know.

MM: Is there a particular church you're thinking about?

Not at all. The problem is, there isn't a church around that I want to go to. Nothing like that. We are going to visit a little on Sunday nights, going to start taking advantage of that time and do that some, but we're not looking for a church. Ginny doesn't have any intention of leaving, but . . .

MM: Do you think you would leave even if Ginny didn't?

No. Absolutely not. Wouldn't do it at all. And wouldn't do it unless both of us, in praying about it, really felt liberty to do that. . . . I'm very frustrated by the fact that it's not growing. I just—you get tired of that, and people not doing their part. There are a lot of people in there just not pulling their weight, they don't care about winning souls, it doesn't seem like. [Pastor] Jim does. I think Jim really cares about winning souls. There are people who just don't care about it. And I just—I want to go somewhere where they care about that, where salvation is the reason they're there, is to see lives changed. And I want to see that, and that bothers me, a lot. So how much longer I'll be able to—you either try to change it, right? You try to change that, or help that change, or you—I just don't know what else to do. (2005)

About two months later, I interviewed Brad's wife Ginny. By that time she, too had begun to think about leaving Mt. Pisgah, and the two had started visiting some other churches. Both she and Brad told me that they missed their old church in Georgia, a Spirit-filled church which they had left only because Brad took a job in North Carolina. Ginny's disappointment with Mt. Pisgah, not surprisingly in light of her musical focus, was with the



music and what she saw as a lack of fervor and excitement in worship there. When I asked her if she thought Mt. Pisgah Chapel was a Pentecostal church, she answered:

Yeah, but—[pause] it's Pentecostal. Only. Only because Miss Alice will get a message in tongues every now and then, and the preacher will say—that's the only thing that makes it Pentecostal. My Baptist—I've gone to Baptist churches that had more worship. I mean, you can go to Daystar [a large Baptist church with contemporary music services] and they have a lot more worship type thing . . . I can't say that I won't be Baptist again.

MM: At some place like Daystar, that has really good worship?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, and not that everybody's going to know this, Brad and I are visiting on Sunday nights. We're going to other churches. And that's where we're going on Sunday night. We've been there once or twice before. (2005)

At the time, Ginny and Brad were still undecided about leaving Mt. Pisgah, or where they would end up if they left. Ginny was leading the worship team at the time, and her adult son was playing drums with the team. Her dissatisfaction grew, though, and a few months later, after a conflict that led Ginny's son to quit playing drums for the worship service, they finally decided as a family that it was time to go. They eventually joined Daystar Baptist, although Brad and Ginny increasingly visit other churches for speaking and singing engagements, and they are considering moving back to Georgia. Both Brad and Ginny, when I asked them separately, said they did not consider themselves Pentecostal, despite their long tenure at Spirit-filled churches. This tension between Ginny's desire for fervent Pentecostal-style worship and their mutual belief in the gifts of the Spirit, on the one hand, and their own explicit distancing of themselves from any personal identity as Pentecostals, on the other, has found—for the time being—resolution in both an independent ministry and membership in a Baptist church with dynamic worship.

*Pam*

Pam's position at Mt. Pisgah was unique. She had been at the church only about six months when her husband Mark came out as a gay man and left both his marriage and his

position as worship leader there (see chapter 2). The church community enfolded Pam in her time of grief and transition, but, privately, she knew even then that she probably would not stay there. When she remarried about two years later, she and her new husband began attending his home church, some 45 minutes away by car, although they later joined a different congregation closer to their home.

Everything that I ever wanted at a church was not at Mt. Pisgah. Because I didn't want to be there in the first place, it was like I never really attached. There were some people, obviously—but the church as a whole, no. I've always wanted a church where the kids could get plugged in, good music, family, friendships, you know, things that they didn't have to offer. So I was basically biding my time, because I didn't want to make a change. After everything with Mark, I was just kind of like, "Eh, I do not want to go someplace strange. At least these people kind of know." They loved on me a little bit, you know. But it was just kind of—you know. So I already knew—well. Remarrying was sort of my ticket out. I could throw it on him, that, "Well, he wants to go to his church." Which he did. He was okay with Mt. Pisgah, but he really didn't want to go to Mt. Pisgah. So it's easy to say, "Sure, we'll go wherever you want to go." [Laughs]

MM: And when you decided to leave, did you talk to Pastor Jim or anybody else about it?

No. I just left. Never came back after I got married, except a couple of times to visit. I mean, for what it was, I loved the people, you know. But it just—you know. It's old. [Laughs] I don't know how else to put it. You know. It's old and it's not vibrant and, you know. I don't necessarily see myself with that age group; I still see myself with this age group more, and it's hard. You know. When you're one of the youngest people that go there at forty-something, that's a problem. (2009)

Pam, like Brad and Ginny, was a lifelong Christian with considerable Bible study and ministry work under her belt. Unlike their story, however, this one was told well after the fact, over a year after she had left Mt. Pisgah, and Pam had had a good deal of time to think about what she wanted in a church and why Mt. Pisgah did not offer those things to her. Although she cared deeply for many people at Mt. Pisgah and had appreciated being "loved on" at a low point in her life, she realized that she had never really felt "attached" to a church community her ex-husband had chosen for her. She saw the church as "old," both literally and figuratively, "not vibrant" like

a church with more young people might be. A new husband was a chance to start a new life in a new community, one that meshed more seamlessly with her vision of herself.

*Marsha*

I've often thought about what a mess I'd be in if I'd chosen a less supportive group to study for my dissertation. I'd been at Mt. Pisgah a little over a year when Joseph told me he wanted to leave in 2002. Every part of my life was affected by my separation and eventual divorce. I found it difficult to work, and I was devastated both emotionally and financially. Whole months were a blur, and for long stretches of time crying—no, sobbing—became a nightly ritual. I didn't have the energy, much less the brainpower, for intellectual labor, and staying alone at home was unthinkable. So I invested my free time in the church; and in return, I had social contact and a sense of doing something that was useful and appreciated. Jim and Ellen were like surrogate parents to me for a while—looking after me, listening to me cry and talk, inviting me out to lunches and dinners. Once or twice, I even found a \$20 bill on the seat of my car, when they knew things were particularly bad.

I'm not sure when my relationship with them changed. Somewhere along the way, of course, I had started to get stronger; and as I got more and more experience in the church's various ministries, I began to get more opinionated. And I began making other close friends in the church, especially Bill and Dot, and later Mark and Pam. I was drawn to strong personalities and people who had interesting ideas about how to change the church—the very people who would end up dissatisfied with Mt. Pisgah, although I didn't foresee that then. I just knew that these were smart, vibrant, fun people with whom I could have conversations with depth. They asked questions about why the church should do what it does, and how it

could do it better; and they confided in me when they disagreed with what Jim or others taught, or with how the church was run.

Many of those people—like me, I realized—had come from church, business, and educational backgrounds in which a diversity of strong opinions was expected, even valued. The independent church in which I was raised was led by a board of elders, and the minister—though we respected his spiritual leadership from the pulpit—was essentially an employee. Mainline Protestant churches are governed by a combination of denominational authority and local committees, in which the pastor’s authority carries some weight but must bow to local, regional, and national rules and pressures. Then there are the classrooms of higher education, in which speaking out and effectively arguing a point are learned and rewarded. In boardrooms and public councils and committees, consensus comes out of a variety of strong personalities who fight to have their perspectives recognized and learn to broker compromises. However, in a small apostolic church with family roots, this kind of behavior clashes with a fundamental understanding of how authority works. There, the pastor’s leadership is paramount—even ordained by God. Submitting to God’s will for one’s life—arguably the ultimate goal for a Christian—means, in this context, also submitting to God’s anointed representative in the church. Treating that person as just another voice at the table simply doesn’t work—and, at worst, is a sign that you are a selfish person who listens to your own voice rather than God’s.

At the time, though, I was blind to how much this model of a group of strong, opinionated leaders negotiating through conflict, a model that appealed to me very much, clashed with Jim’s identity as pastor and, by extension, the collective identity of the church he had led for over 35 years. I came to Mt. Pisgah not too long after another group of people

dissatisfied with the church had made a mass exit, people whom the remaining congregants spoke about—when they did at all—in hushed tones reserved for traitors and heretics. Jim was at his strongest then; when the level of dissent and number of dissenters reached a critical mass, they made their exit and left behind only those who held a different view of authority, either believing in Jim without question, or feeling that they should trust him, as Mt. Pisgah's anointed pastor, to lead a church whose strengths outweighed its weaknesses. For his part, Pastor Jim welcomed the opportunity to start fresh and build up new church leaders who would support him the way a congregation should.

In 2007, it happened again. This time it was Julie and Steve, Gail, Bill and Dot, Charlotte and Irwin, Jerry and Kathleen—and me. In retrospect, the details aren't important. The problem was really a fundamental disconnect in our understandings of authority. Two forms of collective identity at Mt. Pisgah had begun to diverge years before, and two models of leadership for the church finally collided. Various views (for I'm sure they were all slightly different) of a community of diverse, strong leaders working toward a common goal clashed mightily with another type of vision: that of a pastor as a strong, paternal figure who held the respect and submission of his church family. Everyone felt hurt and betrayed and defensive. Everyone wanted to see the church thrive. But conflicts that had been bubbling under the surface—held in check by the church's collective valuing of unity, harmony, and civility—finally burst into the open, and one by one, families that had been at the very center of Mt. Pisgah's life and ministry disappeared from the pews. I hung around longer than the others, but finally it just seemed that it was time to go. I already knew that I was too embedded at Mt. Pisgah to reflect or write about the church with full clarity, and I felt mostly paralyzed in my academic progress because of that fact. But I hadn't felt free to leave with

the whole praise team depending on me. As many times as I reminded them, and myself, that no one was indispensable, we all knew how hard it was to replace a worship leader.

Nevertheless, I also knew that until I left, no one would try. And the pull to leave finally outweighed the pull to stay. No longer a haven and place of healing, the church had begun to feel unhealthy and confining, both spiritually and professionally, despite my deep love for every friend I had made there. I knew it was time to move on, to write my dissertation, and to explore the many other churches in the area that I had heard about, but had never had time to visit because I spent every Sunday morning behind a keyboard and a microphone.

The first church I gravitated toward was New Life Church, where Julie and Steve, Gail, and Bill and Dot were all attending. I had missed seeing my dear friends at Mt. Pisgah since they'd left, and it was great to spend time worshipping with them again. I enjoyed the upbeat, contemporary worship music there, and the laid-back style of the pastor. Still, I forced myself to spend at least two Sundays a month visiting a church I'd never been to before. I hated the discomfort of being in a strange church with unfamiliar people and rituals, but every new experience opened my eyes, by way of contrast, to some aspect of life at Mt. Pisgah I had taken for granted. I needed the perspective. And I still went back to Mt. Pisgah every couple of months, to see how things were going and to keep in touch with my friends there. Meanwhile, I had been encouraging Pam's ex-husband Mark and his new partner to look into a nearby United Methodist church that welcomed gay and lesbian members. I visited with them a few times, and they settled in and joined that church. The music didn't move me the way it had at Mt. Pisgah or at New Life, but the people were welcoming and the values of the church matched my own theological and political sensibilities more closely than the conservative churches I'd been attending. Over three years later, I have found a church

home there, even though Mark and his partner have moved on to another Methodist church. No longer a worship leader, I still help out with church activities; and I sing and play occasionally, when they ask me to. I argue with Pastor Laurie, Pastor Gayle, and other members about the direction various ministries should take, and I have so far decided I don't want to officially join. Nonetheless, I am among their most faithful attenders.

My own story shares some common features with those of Brad, Ginny, and Pam. As an exit narrative, it is a space where I have struggled to distinguish my own religious identity from the collective one at Mt. Pisgah Chapel. Although I always knew that I differed from others at the church in my politics and many of my religious beliefs, it was still a place that felt very much like "home" for me for several years. Likewise, Pam, Brad, and Ginny all found comfort and community at Mt. Pisgah and minimized their differences for a time. In the process of leaving, though, all of us began to highlight our disagreements rather than our harmony, and to seek out those aspects of our own identities that we felt we had neglected at Mt. Pisgah. Different events triggered each of our exits, but these events were final precipitators rather than sole causes. The long process of disentangling individual and collective identities had begun months, even years, before.

As I suggested at the beginning of this section, these narratives are not ones that people tend to share widely. I have considerable trepidation in sharing my own story so fully, simply because I run the risk of hurting people like Jim and Ellen Haywood, people whom I love very much and to whom I owe a considerable debt of Christian friendship. At the time he confided in me, Brad had not even shared with his own wife his developing story about the possibility of leaving. Pam, like most churchgoers, told me she "just left" rather than telling her story to Pastor Jim or others in the church that might be hurt or offended. These

are narratives believers may tell only to themselves, but they are significant narratives nonetheless. Whether they are publicly broadcast, confided in a few friends, or merely rehearsed in private thoughts, such narratives order experience and memory and make sense of choices and relationships. By selecting important details of plot and character and arranging them into narrative episodes, we are selecting and arranging our own identities; deciding what aspects are most salient at particular places, in particular times; and negotiating the various collective identities with which we choose to merge—and to what degree we do so.

### **Church-hopping and church-shopping**

Dissatisfaction with some aspect of a church pushes believers to consider leaving, but it must either be strong enough to outweigh other factors that keep them in the church, or combine with a pull toward something else in order for them actually to uproot themselves and make a move. In Pam's case, personal connections with people who knew her situation, along with a desire for some stability in the midst of upheaval for herself and her children, kept her in a holding pattern of sorts until her new marriage spurred a change. For Brad and Ginny, the push of their various disappointments with Mt. Pisgah was countered both by their respective commitments to teaching and music ministry and by their feeling that, as Brad lamented, "there isn't a church around that I want to go to."

Pastor Jim often notes, "There is no perfect church, folks," a quip directed at those who are tempted to "church-hop" in search of greener pastures. Indeed, "church-hopping" has a pejorative connotation among many regular churchgoers, suggesting a certain spiritual immaturity, perhaps, or a difficulty in getting along with others or in submitting to a pastor's



leadership. On the other hand, believers may speak about “church-shopping” as a very fruitful process, if an often challenging one. In this transition period believers have an opportunity to reconsider their own narratives and to confront new communities whose collective identities and practices mesh or clash with their own in new ways. By doing so, they may recognize changes in themselves that have happened gradually over time, or even come to new epiphanies in their spiritual life. Lori’s experience of church-shopping after moving to a new area led her to a realization that God would not allow her to “sit back in the kingdom of God and not do anything.” Ginny’s, on the other hand, gave her a chance to reflect on her path from a staid Baptist upbringing to Spirit-filled worship, and to ponder whether she would ever really “be Baptist again.”

Where do people go when they leave Mt. Pisgah, and why? This question brings us right back to the beginning, since the factors that believers take into account when they look for another church are much the same as those that lead newcomers to arrive on Mt. Pisgah’s doorstep. Family and friends often play a role, as they did for me, and as we’ll see they did for Julie’s family, below. Practical considerations like good nurseries and children’s programs figure in, as do issues of personal taste in music or preaching style. But, like Brad and Ginny (and Lori earlier in this chapter), church-shoppers often seek God’s guidance—and look for clues as to where they are “supposed to be.”

### *Julie*

When I spoke with Julie in April 2007, I knew we would talk about her plans to leave Mt. Pisgah. She had made no secret of the fact that she and her husband Steve were looking for another church, and she was even taking alternate weeks off from singing on the praise team to do some visiting around. Julie was leaning toward New Life Church, a large non-

denominational church with a very contemporary format to its services, a full rock band for worship, and elaborate programs for children and teenagers. But she and her young family had visited other local churches, too, and she was still deciding which would be a good fit for her, spiritually and stylistically.

We went to World Outreach [a very large non-denominational church with an emphasis on world missions and college student ministry], which was pretty good. But the week we went, they had a Campus Crusade guy speak. And he was really good, but I never did hear the pastor. And then, you know, a couple years back, we went and visited a couple places. We visited Zion [Baptist Church]. We visited Daystar. Somewhere else, I don't know where. But—and I mean, and I liked—Daystar was okay. Zion was kind of too low-key for me. And Daystar was kind of the same way. Kind of, I don't know. It just didn't move me, I guess. I don't know.

MM: Well, I heard the music up there was good, but I've never been, so I don't know.

At Daystar? Yeah. I mean, they had—I think what they do is they have the same kind of thing—with each service they have a different praise team. And they had an actual, praise team you know, standing up like we do, five or six people standing up there singing. And World Outreach was like that, too. (2007)

None of those churches, however, excited Julie as much as a Spirit-filled church that her cousin attended in another city, unfortunately too far away to be practical for her family. She described their music to me in detail, music of a contemporary style that she knew we both liked. She also felt comfortable with the pastor's style:

They were Spirit-filled; the pastor was really good. And the thing was, that church and New Life too, the pastors aren't like, "in your face," loud. It's just, they kind of sit down and relax, and they just talk, and preach, you know—read Scripture and start preaching about it. I used to be in a place where I thought I wouldn't go to a church like that, because I liked the Rod Parsley-type preachers—especially after I first got saved. But more and more—I mean, I still like those kind of preachers, but more and more I've started to like, kind of, the soft-spoken type pastors. (2007)

Not too long after our conversation, Julie and Steve finally decided that New Life Church was the best choice for them and their two daughters. As a believer with a special interest in music and its power to bring the unsaved into the church (see chapter 2), Julie was

struck by New Life Church's ultra-contemporary music program. Even though she was sad to give up singing every week and being able "to see people being blessed" through her ministry there, she and Steve saw the large numbers of unchurched people being drawn in by New Life's approach and felt that they were doing important work. Although she went to this new church with no expectation of being able to participate in music ministry there, she auditioned for their music team a few months after they arrived and now sings one or two Sundays a month there. In addition, Julie's parents Deborah and Jack and her aunt Gail (Deborah's sister), who had all come to Mt. Pisgah with Julie and Steve, felt drawn to New Life now that Julie and Steve were there, and especially since Julie was singing. Although they did not all leave at the same time, within two years the entire extended family had joined New Life.

For Julie's extended family, as for many churchgoers, a desire to be together at church—to experience worship together, to share the concerns of a church community, and simply to have more opportunities to enjoy being close—drew them first to Mt. Pisgah, then to another church. But Julie and Steve, as catalysts and scouts for this latest move, did a great deal of thinking about the kind of church community they wanted to call home. Through her time of church-shopping, Julie began to recognize that she no longer required the fiery style of an "in your face" preacher to feel inspired, and being able to experience a variety of musical styles reinforced a sense that (although she could not quite put her finger on it) some music was just "too low-key" for her taste. Interestingly, although Julie is a Spirit-filled Christian and prays "that the Spirit will move" when she sings in church, she did not mention in her deliberations that New Life Church does not practice gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues or laying on of hands for healing, in worship. Already leaning heavily

toward this choice, Julie chose to de-emphasize a factor that had been very important in the previous two churches she had attended. Faced with the reality of “no perfect church,” she had already begun the process of finding a fit between her own religious identity and that of the religious community she knew she would probably join.

**Conflict and ideals of harmony: “This church has never split”**

As the story of Peter and Joyce’s abrupt exit from the Genesis class suggested, the Mt. Pisgah church community thrives on a shared sense of unity and harmony—unity in Christ, harmony within the church family, being united behind a single leader. The strong loyalty and deference of most at Mt. Pisgah for Pastor Jim was foreign to me when I arrived at the church, since my earlier experiences had been either with denominational churches in which members’ loyalty was to more general denominational ideals, or with independent churches that were run by a board of elders or deacons. While a preacher, minister, or pastor carries spiritual authority and leadership in such churches, s/he does not govern the church structurally, and her/his tenure is decided by denominational and/or local leadership. Apostolic churches are a different matter entirely. A single charismatic pastor usually leads such churches in all matters—spiritual, structural, and financial—even though deacons or boards may guide and govern to some extent. In most such cases, the pastor either founded the church, or was hand-picked by the apostle or pastor who did; consequently, the core of these (often quite small) churches tends to be people who are close to the pastor’s family, by blood, marriage, or friendship. In the rare case that such a church is lucky enough to grow into a Saddleback Church like Rick Warren’s or a Brooklyn Tabernacle like Jim Cymbala’s,

then they will need a more elaborate organization and governance; nonetheless, the guiding vision for the church is usually still that of the senior or founding pastor.

Given this pattern, it is no surprise that unity was a regularly mentioned topic in Pastor Jim's sermons during my six years of regular attendance at Mt. Pisgah. In the gospel of John, Jesus prayed for the unity not only of His disciples, but also of those who would hear His message later and follow: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). Later on, the apostle Paul urged the church at Ephesus to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Paul's admonitions found frequent use in sermons at Mt. Pisgah, perhaps because that chapter of Ephesians specifically links the diversity of gifts to the unity of the church, using the potent metaphor of the body:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. . . . [S]peaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

This model of unity-in-diversity is a powerful one for a church of people who are seeking a personal, God-directed walk of faith while submitting to the constraints of Pentecostal doctrines and the leadership of one pastor. It is a model of freedom in one's own calling combined with deference to the common vision of a community of faith, a vision articulated in large part by that community's anointed leader.

Significantly, this same chapter in Ephesians also cautions against "bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander," encouraging believers not to "let any unwholesome talk

come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Ephesians 4:29-31). Language has the power to cement—or fracture—relationships, whether between friends, between segments of a community, or between an individual believer and God. Pastor Jim sometimes glossed this kind of negative language as “murmuring,” a word sometimes used in the Bible to mean grumbling or complaining. In the Old Testament, the Israelites wandering in the desert “murmured” against Moses and against God. In the New Testament, the Pharisees “murmured” against the teachings of Jesus; later, Peter cautioned Jesus’ followers not to “murmur” against one another. A frequent example of the negative effects of murmuring in Pastor Jim’s sermons was that if he constantly complained and grumbled about his wife Ellen, about what she cooked or how she dressed or things she said, their marriage would weaken, and probably would not last. Yet while he often used the simple example of a one-on-one marital relationship, Jim’s admonishments against murmuring were usually oriented toward a more complex set of relationships between believers and “the church.” And although everyone at Mt. Pisgah Chapel would likely agree that “the church” is the community of believers, language at a church with an apostolic structure often conflates the identity of “the church” and that of its pastor. When Pastor Jim suggested in sermons that some people in the congregation were murmuring against “the church,” his implication (or explicit statement) was usually that people were complaining about him as its leader. And no doubt he was often right, since Mt. Pisgah members are as likely to make that kind of slippage in language and concept as Jim himself is.

Nevertheless, Pastor Jim’s overall assessment of Mt. Pisgah was as a place characterized by Christian unity. One piece of evidence to which he often pointed in this

assessment was the fact that, unlike many other local churches he could name, “this church has never split.” Sometimes rifts in a church’s collective identity grow so large that a group of members leaves to start their own church; or, alternatively, a powerful group within a church may force out the pastor and those who are loyal to him or her. Others may leave during this upheaval and go elsewhere, unhappy with both parties. Needless to say, a church split is an extraordinarily painful experience for everyone, and it takes years for both factions to recover and feel whole again. Pastor Jim is right; there has never been a split of this nature at Mt. Pisgah. However, this language obscures a history of cycles of membership at the church, chapters in the church’s history that unfold over a period of perhaps five to ten years and then end with a large turnover in church members. One such chapter-ending occurred not long before I arrived at Mt. Pisgah, and another drew me into its narrative dénouement in 2007. Ellen and Jim Haywood have suggested in interviews that this cyclical pattern has characterized Mt. Pisgah for a long time. But whether this cycle is a necessary part of the character of Mt. Pisgah, and whether it will continue in the future, is unclear.

Soon after I first came to Mt. Pisgah, Ellen expressed her dismay that people seemed to think of Mt. Pisgah as “a great hospital.” “They say that Mt. Pisgah is a place to come and heal,” she told me, “and then go somewhere else to do whatever,” perhaps to minister to others (2001). Her description rang true for me as I watched, over several years, the apparent cycles of entrances and exits through Mt. Pisgah’s doors. So many, it seemed, arrived at low points in their lives or at times of particular crisis, and found comfort in Jim and Ellen’s nurture of those in pain; in passionate, emotional worship; in fellowship with members who were always willing to share a smile, a hug, a tear. Yet when members (sometimes the same ones that had earlier been at their nadir) emerged as strong leaders, as often as not their

tenure ended relatively quickly—sometimes by a desire to move beyond the role they played at Mt. Pisgah, sometimes by dissatisfaction with some aspect of the church, occasionally by conflict or by a calling to independent ministry. Because Mt. Pisgah is Jim and Ellen’s life work, their social circle, and in large part their family, every departure is a personal loss to them, an occasion for grief, self-questioning, and even resentment. “That’s been one of the hardest things for me to adjust to, is when people leave,” Jim admitted to me in 2009. “And I must say that there have been times that I’ve not been at my best when people leave.” Yet, when I asked him about people moving on from Mt. Pisgah, Jim characterized the situation with a positive spin, noting the many people who, after their time at Mt. Pisgah, have gone on to influence others:

The strength of our church is that—and I hope this is a strength, maybe, and I hope I’m not fooling myself. I think one of the strengths of our church is that we see people get established. What we try to see is people to come, and not only have a surface relationship with God, but have a deep relationship with the Lord, get well established, have a foundation so that they’re not easily shaken. So discipling people is one of the strengths of our church, I believe. And you disciple people not, Marsha, just by preaching to them and teaching to them, but you disciple them by hurting with them, crying with them, laughing with them, building, time. I’m a people person. I am. And so that is one of our strengths—and I’ve seen people get established. We’ve seen a lot of people come through this church, and they’ll leave, and we hear of them, how that they’re ministering here, they’re ministering there.

MM: Do you see Mt. Pisgah as sort of a—I don’t know, a training ground? Or something like that?

I think so. I think it’s a training ground. And I believe people receive from us something that is lasting. And of course, that lasting is God’s Word. It’s eternal, as we know. [He pulls a letter and photo from his desk and hands it to me.] I just got this a few months ago. And that’s from a lady that came through, and that little letter that she has there about what she received while she was here at Mt. Pisgah. And now she’s pastoring a church. And she thanks us for what time we invested in her life, and planted seed in her life, and now she’s planting seed in other people’s lives. And we see that. We get letters. We hear—we get phone calls. And people all over the U.S. that have come through this church, and just like this lady here, that have been blessed. And so our tentacles, I hope, are out there somewhere. (2009)



Pastor Jim knows, as any pastor does, that many people who leave a church do so because of disappointment or conflict with that community, with him personally, or even with Christian life more generally. These sadder aspects of losing church members are what makes this “one of the hardest things” about his calling as a pastor. And yet, that very calling, and a belief, as a Spirit-filled pastor, that he is chosen and ordained in this path, demands that he look for ways God uses these often painful separations as part of a larger plan. While laughing, crying, and hurting personally with one’s church family also implies the more difficult aspects of close relationships—misunderstandings, conflicts, and hurt feelings—Jim tries, most of the time, to focus on the growth and ministry that can arise out of religious community, and can lead people to strike out toward new horizons and new ways of serving God. The conflicts that sometimes precede these exits fade in importance, from this perspective, overshadowed by a larger vision of God’s work in the wider world.

**Conclusions: “I felt like this was my home”**

Suzanne’s comment about Mt. Pisgah at the beginning of this chapter summed up the feeling that “church-shoppers” are looking for: “I just feel comfortable there. . . . It just seemed like that was the place for me to be” (2005). Feeling “comfortable” in a church community has a lot to do with personal connections within the church, with moral convictions and social values, even with personal preferences in music and dress. All of these aspects of identity, of the stories we tell about ourselves, may mesh well or poorly with a larger set of stories that define a church community. But there is another element in connecting with a church community that believers expressed, implicitly or explicitly, in their stories of coming to and leaving Mt. Pisgah. As in so many aspects of their lives, these

believers depend on a personal relationship with God that informs choices and leads them in sometimes unexpected directions. Sometimes this sense of being led to a particular place overrides all other considerations; most of the time, it is part of a set of circumstances that combine to point in a particular direction. Suzanne's sense that Mt. Pisgah was "the place for me to be" was partly due to the friendly welcome she experienced there; she also attributed this feeling to ways that the music and preaching "moved" her. Her husband Dan, for his part, "felt the Spirit" at Mt. Pisgah so strongly that he was willing to risk going back there to face people who knew about a past he would rather have forgotten. For Dan and Suzanne, any disagreements they had with the pastor or the direction of the church paled in comparison to that powerful combination of personal connections and a belief that God had called them to make this church "home."

Making and re-making the stories of who we are, as individuals and as groups, as Christians and as the collective "body of Christ," does not happen only at moments of entrance and exit. But these moments, like any transition, offer opportunities to take stock of those stories, reconsider old narratives, and write new chapters. They are memorable precisely because of this "milestone" quality—quite literally, a point at which people take notice, see where they are, and note how far they have come. In narrative memories, processes of identity transformation that took shape over a long period may coalesce or seem to occur suddenly at such "milestone" moments. When we seek to understand religious identity and experience, we gravitate to moments like these, recognizing that we are never able to study religious experiencing directly, but instead "must study *retrospective accounts* of experience" (Yamane 2000:175, emphasis in original). As David Yamane argues in the special case of religious conversion experiences, "[c]ommitment to the new group is effected

in the process of constructing the conversion narrative,” a process that “links the individual to the group” by using the new group’s vocabulary to make narrative sense of the individual’s experience (2000:185). Once the fleeting moment of “experiencing” has happened, there is no such thing as a “real” experience we can hold onto without interpreting it through narrativization. Experiences, and the identities shaped by them, are narrative through and through, and studying them *as* narratives, forever under construction, gives us a window into precisely that space where individual and collective identities interact and constantly re-make one another.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS: POTTERS AND TIGHTROPES

*Take me, mould me, use me, fill me  
I give my life to the Potter's hand  
Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me  
I give my life to the Potter's hand.*

“The Potter’s Hand” by Darlene Zschech, © 1997 Hillsong Music Australia

Much of Christian language turns “the world’s” values upside-down. Self-reliance becomes a handicap. Shame becomes honor. Weakness becomes strength. And brokenness, rather than something to be fixed, becomes an ideal way to approach relationship with God. A “broken vessel” is useless without the intervention of a Potter who patches up holes, strengthens cracks, and perhaps even breaks down an irreparable pot even further—building a completely new and much improved vessel from the components of the former one. This ubiquitous Christian metaphor carries intense power for people who value submission to and intimate relationship with a loving God above all else. A vessel that maintains an illusion of being whole and without need of repair (and, indeed, perfect wholeness in this life is *always* an illusion) may be useful and perhaps even admired; but it has no need for its Creator’s continued touch. One that is chipped, cracked, or lying in pieces requires that touch, and it submits to continual reshaping and refining in God’s hands. Rather than a flaw that allows the vessel’s contents to escape, each imperfection makes room for God to seep through and fill in the gaps with holiness, perfection, and peace.

Identities, too, are “broken vessels.” Just as the clay begins to harden, we find ourselves in a new social field that shines light through an overlooked crack, or demands that we reassemble some pieces in a new way. Forever under construction, forever incomplete, identities may appear whole—but there is always room for change. Collective identities, too, are continually broken and reshaped, often merely by incorporating new voices or losing old ones. Leaders and authoritative voices may willfully puncture or re-form group identities, with greater or lesser success; and sub-groups may challenge current configurations with new designs that conflict with old compromises. Christian identities, both individual and collective, also leave room for God’s work in their gaps and unfinished places. Here, identities are a ‘middle term’ not just between the individual and the social, but also centered among the individual, the social field, and God. Believers see God at work in and through moments of change, conflict, and growth, when identities transform in sudden and surprising ways. Unexpected revelations and epiphanies—literally, moments when God “breaks through”—are evidence to believers that they are not building religious lives and communities all alone.

“Seeking God’s face” as a believer means, in part, being open to those powerful moments when God “breaks through.” It also means, however, that believers’ day-to-day practices of identity building also entail spiritual practices of discerning God’s will for them and for their faith community. These are common, even daily practices for believers, including acts as simple as listening for God in the music on the radio, as Deborah did in Chapter 2. However, music’s potential for guiding believer’s into a transformative encounter with God, as Tom noted in the same chapter, can also lead the devil to sow discord in that arena. This contentiousness around music requires music leaders to be especially vigilant in

seeking God’s will, a lesson I later learned for myself in the wake of upheaval in the church. Chapter 3 added a layer of complexity onto discernment, exploring situations when not just one identity, but the identity of an entire group depended on the outcome of that process. For Mt. Pisgah’s drama team, Dot’s and Drew’s individual messages from God required evaluation to discern God’s will for the future of Destiny House and the alterations in both collective and individual identities that it engendered. Such alterations, we saw in Chapter 4, may also lead to—or result from—the “comings and goings” of church community members, challenging the foundational assumptions of a church in their highlighting of incompleteness and disunity. Here, too, as Lori discovered in her “call” to Mt. Pisgah and I found when I felt pulled to leave, individuals and groups must not only consider practical human concerns, but also discern what God would have them do—and, implicitly, who God would have them be.

The preceding chapters have also built progressively onto an understanding of individual and collective identity formations as fundamentally interdependent. Glenn’s identity as a Christian singer and worship leader/coordinator was markedly different at Mt. Pisgah—where, as we saw in Chapter 2, he recognized that worship music needed to be “a little bit of everything” and always “open for change”—than it was at his former church, where Southern Gospel and traditional hymns predominated. Meanwhile, Greg’s relationships with multiple church communities and with what he described in Chapter 2 as the “my four and no more” mentality shaped his conviction that he was called to push Mt. Pisgah toward “more modern” ways of reaching out to younger people. Conversely, Greg’s pursuit of that calling, through his ministry as a sound and multimedia volunteer, did indeed give Mt. Pisgah a “more modern” feel that was attractive to a different set of congregants and potential congregants, changing the character of the community in subtle but palpable ways.

Examples of even stronger interdependencies between collective and individual identities emerged in Chapter 3, as a group-created drama ministry altered individual identities in significant ways—such as for Brad, who became a “soul-winner” through his experience working in Destiny House. Destiny House reflected Mt. Pisgah’s identity as a “soul-winning” church with an emphasis on God’s grace, but just as strongly reflected the uniquely personal identities of Shaun the comedic actor, Dot the Bible teacher and grieving daughter, and me—the divorcée struggling with loneliness and despair. When individual and communal identities are fundamentally at odds with one another, however, leaving for a different community may be the best option, as some of the stories in Chapter 4 illustrate. Separating oneself from a faith community is painful not merely because of broken friendships or fear of the unknown; it also requires a separation from a crucial part of one’s own identity—the part that formed in relationship with that community and must now re-form itself in a new community with new assumptions, new relationships, and new possibilities for action.

The identities narrated in the preceding chapters have all taken shape in a middle space between the personal, the social, and the divine. No matter how strong the desire to submit to the will of God, every believer comes to a Christian life via a uniquely personal path, shaped by minutiae of everyday life from childhood to the present. Religious communities, too, draw particular qualities to the forefront, and hail different components of identity that may previously have been overshadowed, undiscovered, or even non-existent. Various social fields, religious and otherwise, give religious identities different contours not only over long periods of time, but also sometimes from moment to moment—as believers may present and think of their religious selves differently at work, at home, at church, at a community meeting. When believers then gather themselves into religious community, the

identities of these collectives take shape in an ever-changing milieu of personalities, alliances, relationships to larger social forces, and—of course—a reliance on God through prayer and discernment.

Mt. Pisgah Chapel defines its collective identity in terms of stability, unity, harmony, and the apostolic leadership of its pastor—but it is hardly unchanging. Like any community or group, its priorities, direction, and sense of purpose have shifted through time as its membership, leadership, and everyday practices have changed. About two years after I left Mt. Pisgah, the church hired a new music and youth leader, altered its musical style considerably, and put a new emphasis on outreach and evangelism—changes that were unthinkable a few short years before. The church continues to believe that, while their underlying message is unchanging, their methods must take into account the changing culture they are trying to reach. As Ellen Haywood told me in 2001, “We don’t want God to bless what we’re doing; we want to do what God is blessing.”

Many people have asked me, often incredulously, whether the people at Mt. Pisgah knew what I was doing there. Their assumption seemed to be that my purpose so fundamentally contradicted the church’s that its members must have been either ignorant or deceived to allow me access. I explained that I had told the church about my project, and also that Jim and Ellen Haywood had welcomed many scholars and students into their church and understood exactly what I was doing there. The fond relationship between Mt. Pisgah and UNC faculty members James Peacock and Ruel Tyson, who spent many hours observing and filming services and interviewing members of Mt. Pisgah Chapel in the 1970s, has continued to this day; consequently, when I was introduced as a student of Dr. Peacock’s, I was welcomed into Mt. Pisgah with open arms. However, I went on to forge my own



relationships at the church, many with people who had never known Drs. Peacock and Tyson. I explained to them, in the most general of terms, what an anthropologist was, what a dissertation was. If they asked, I told them that I was raised in church but, before Mt. Pisgah, had not been to church in many years. The guiding belief of nearly everyone I met at Mt. Pisgah was that, whatever my beliefs, background, and purpose, God had bigger plans. “God meets you where you are,” Ellen and others in the church are fond of saying, and they were not worried that I would misuse God or the church for the sake of anthropology. They were confident, instead, that God would use anthropology for His glory—that He would use the circumstances that had brought me to Mt. Pisgah to meet me exactly where I was.<sup>19</sup>

Somewhere along the way, some time between tentatively joining the choir and becoming Mt. Pisgah’s praise and worship team leader, I resolved to live my life as if they were right—without deciding *a priori* whether they were or weren’t. I decided to take a step into religious experience and the life of a religious community that I had seen a few other ethnographers take—to allow the church community and, by extension, the God they served, to drag me across every line I had drawn in the sand. I would give myself over to worship. I would pray and study the Bible. I would take communion. I would join the church as a full member. I would tithe. I would seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I would take every step a convert to Spirit-filled faith would take, and I would be willing to end up a very different person than the one who had first pulled out a notebook in a back pew in 2001. I never expected to spend over six years at Mt. Pisgah. Then again, I never expected to become separated and then divorced from my husband—a process that slowed my academic career, but allowed me the independence and freedom to venture into the heart of the church in a way that I doubt I could have done while married. Personal details like these step over the

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<sup>19</sup>And, by extension, that God would use my words to reach you, the reader, exactly where you are.

bounds of traditional ethnography, but they also illuminate a journey in which I became a large part of my own data.

In entering the world of the believer and integrating so many personal details of my inner experience into my ethnography, I have been continually aware that I am working in a way that, with a few exceptions, the anthropology of religion has historically avoided. It is true that an early father of our discipline, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, often attempted to get “inside” the religions he studied. In living among the Azande, who often made decisions by feeding a “poison oracle” to baby chicks and watching to see whether they lived or died, Evans-Pritchard noted:

I found that in such matters the best way of gaining confidence was to enact the same procedure as Azande and to take oracular verdicts as seriously as they take them. I always kept a supply of poison for the use of my household and neighbours and we regulated our affairs in accordance with the oracles' decisions. I may remark that I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of. (1937:126)

Yet Evans-Pritchard’s method of studying religious life was overshadowed by “the pervasive anthropological perspective on the anthropology of religion: emphasizing its collective public symbols and beliefs, an outer aspect,” rather than inner beliefs and experiences which are unobservable, unpredictable, and to some extent unknowable (Peacock 2001:209). This venerable tradition, represented by the work of such figures as Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and Roy Rappaport, finds structures, symbols, and patterns in collective practices and public myths—at least in part because these things are available to an outsider in ways that inner experiences are not (Peacock 2001). The claim of this historical stream, that a more distanced perspective can better see these larger patterns and symbolic features and can thus discern structural features of religious practices and communities that insiders cannot, carried and continues to carry considerable weight in our

discipline, and for good reason. As others such as Evans-Pritchard have noted, however, this outsider's perspective leaves out a sizable piece of what we call 'religion,' a piece that, for most believers, is the most significant and compelling of all. I mentioned in the introductory chapter that there is another, much smaller historical stream in anthropology in which a few ethnographers have dealt squarely with religious belief and experience. Among these are Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1975), Edith Turner (1994; 2006), Paul Stoller (Stoller and Olkes 1987), and Karen McCarthy Brown (1991)—all of whom attempted the kind of leap into 'insider' religious life that Evans-Pritchard, in a more limited way, attempted many years prior. Whether I have been successful or not as an ethnographer, I now count myself among this group at least in the sense that I have made every attempt to understand the life of a religious community from the 'inside.'

Nonetheless, the work I have produced here is not fully an example of autoethnography. The elements of personal narrative I have included in these pages are bound up with more conventional social-scientific modes of analysis, interpretation, and theorizing (Ellis and Bochner 2006). In this, the product of my six years at Mt. Pisgah reflects the journey itself. I had never heard the term "autoethnography" before I began research at Mt. Pisgah, and even the idea of joining the church choir left me feeling as if I had transgressed some stern anthropological taboo (Ewing 1994). Feeling comforted or enthralled by aspects of communal worship and individual religious practices as part of the church was even more difficult for me to reconcile. In my weakness, working through the failure of a marriage, was I succumbing to some kind of naïve panacea? The metaphor of a tightrope haunted me during those years: I felt I needed constantly to engage in a sort of cognitive balancing act. Neither of the secure, stable platforms—on the one end, the

intellectual security of the university; on the other, the spiritual and social comfort of the church—were, I felt, places I could afford to rest for long. No, I walked continually between them, balancing every step and seeing how long I could live in that liminal, tenuous space. In like manner, I have incorporated elements of autoethnography here because my embeddedness in this community and this experience has demanded it. Yet the anthropological tradition from which this work springs also demands theorization, comparison, and interpretation. Ruth Behar acknowledged the historical assumptions of that tradition and the challenges her “vulnerable” ethnography posed to it, saying, “[W]hen the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you’ve read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you’re on your way to doing anthropology” (1996:5). Nevertheless, as Behar, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991), Renato Rosaldo (1984), and many others have shown us, becoming vulnerable enough to tell one’s own story can take ethnography farther than mere “participant-observation.” It can bring readers into a level of intimacy with another’s lived experience in a way that more distanced perspectives cannot. It allows readers who “take the voyage through anthropology’s tunnel [to see] themselves . . . in the observer who is serving as their guide” (Behar 1996:16). In my case, I have shared my own journey into Pentecostal lived experience as a self-conscious tightrope walker between two worlds and multiple identities. I do so hoping that you will be able to see yourself in my identity struggles and experiences of betweenness, and that this connection will allow you a deeper understanding of Pentecostal lived experience and what it can tell all of us about religious identities. Were it not for the journey I have taken, I could never have fully understood the Pentecostal experience of feeling loved, led, and protected by a personal and

intimate God—nor could I have guessed the transformative power that relationships with such a God and with a faith community could have on identities that seem so stable and so independent. This kind of ethnography, as sociologist Carolyn Ellis puts it, “enlarges [our] social awareness and empathy,” bridging worlds that seem incommensurable (Ellis 2004:30).

Sociology has forged ahead of anthropology in pioneering and supporting the creative, evocative autoethnographic format. Interestingly, however, sociologists have tended to shy away from the realm of religious experience, leaving this arena either to anthropologists who focus on culturally situated “altered states of consciousness” or to the psychology of the individual mind (McGuire 2008:94). Somewhere between anthropologists who gravitate to unfamiliar peoples, sociologists who rarely delve into religious experience, and psychologists who examine the physiological processes underlying extraordinary states of consciousness, there must be a space for engaged, autoethnographic fieldwork and writing on everyday religious experience—but it appears that only a few dare to tread there. For myself, I felt that I failed in my tightrope act much of the time. The more engaged in worship I became, the less able I was to record my experiences. The more I became embedded in the assumptions of religious community, the more distant I was from social theory I might have used to reflect on those assumptions. Some of the more useful methods of autoethnography that I could have employed in this journey I learned only after my fieldwork was over. I found myself saying, no doubt like many after their dissertation research, “If only I knew then what I know now.”

Nevertheless, this venture into the intersection of identity and everyday religious life has shed some light on both. Religious experiences are not only those extraordinary ‘mountaintop’ experiences in carefully constructed worship settings. For believers who seek

intimate relationship with God, they happen in the car on the way to work, while washing the dishes or rocking the baby, or in casual conversations with a friend (see McGuire 2008).

Listening to Christian music at home may prompt a tearful communication with God.

Working on a project with others at church may reveal a new sense of connectedness with one's faith. Visiting a new church may provoke a personal revelation about God's will for one's life. Whether these happen in solitude or with others present, however, they happen in relationship with a community of faith that helps believers prepare for, interpret, and act upon these experiences. For believers, they also happen in relationship with a living, present God who actively communicates with them and works in their lives. Other agents, such as Satan, demonic spirits, and angels, also find their place in the everyday lives of these believers, placing stumbling blocks in the path, infiltrating the mind with doubt or fear or unholy thoughts, or protecting from hidden dangers. God and these lesser entities are, in a sense, the supernatural component of the social field in which believers find themselves.

As a part of that social field, these supernatural agents join with more mundane social forces in shaping both individual and collective identities for believers. Common wisdom and uncommon insights from believers at Mt. Pisgah reflect understandings of the everyday process of building religious identities that have much in common with complex social theories of identity and everyday life, but are in some ways broader and more holistic. Consider a believer who, having been told that a particular song made a friend think of her, listens to the song and finds that it applies perfectly to a difficult personal challenge in her life. She may recognize that her friend was subtly offering both comfort and advice through the words of another. She may hear the musical artistry of the band and absorb the theological underpinnings of the lyrics. It may occur to her that this song would not have

touched her in the same way before she became a Christian a few years ago. She may find significant similarities between the song lyrics and last Sunday's sermon, and go back to re-read relevant passages of Scripture and talk with the pastor about it. She may decide that some insight from the song will change the way she approaches and overcomes the challenge she is facing, and she may testify about overcoming this challenge in a Bible study meeting. In and through all these personal and social perspectives on this event, she is also likely to see the everyday agency of God: inspiring her friend to give her the song, anointing the songwriter and musical artists, bringing her closer to/through a community of faith, confirming messages He has given to her through other means, continually transforming her life through loving intervention, and offering her an opportunity to strengthen others by telling her story. Believers who seek God's face in this way do not limit their religious lives to circumscribed "religious" times and spaces; and they are pleased, but not at all surprised, when revelations, epiphanies, and moments of spiritual growth happen in very mundane and non-"religious" ways and places. Indeed, believers at Mt. Pisgah rarely refer to God as "supernatural," seeing Him not as an inscrutable, impersonal force outside of normal life, but as a familiar companion and conversation partner. "Don't be afraid to ask God anything," Ellen Haywood once assured me with a smile when I confessed that I had fundamental doubts. "God's big enough to handle your questions."

My hope in writing about my years of interaction with this small church in one corner of America is not that this work answers big questions about religious identity and experience, but simply that it is not afraid to ask them. Some of the best ethnography serves to "open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as it 'truly' exists outside the

contingencies of language and culture” (Ellis and Bochner 2006:435). And if I have found anything in living a believer’s life and surrounding myself with believers, I have found that many Americans—perhaps most, to one degree or another—live a life suffused with a search for God’s touch, for a divine purpose for them personally, and for the peace of knowing that they are in harmony with these. They invest a great deal of their limited time and energies into communities and personal practices built around that search and the beliefs accompanying it. This glimpse into their everyday lives has opened up and continued conversations about how those of us who study religious life can interpret and speak about believers in ways that do not ignore, talk around, or contradict their most basic understandings of their own lives, communities, and identities. It is our ongoing task to keep these conversations alive with each other and with believers themselves, who still have much to tell us about piecing together religious lives out of shards and pieces of unfinished clay.



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