Community, Identity, and Tradition within a Progressive Christian Congregation

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COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND TRADITION WITHIN A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

by

James W. Skinner

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ABSTRACT

Community, Identity, and Tradition Within a Progressive Christian Congregation

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Trends towards religious individualism, the de-institutionalization of religion, and the decline of denominational affiliations potentially impact religious congregations in a range of different ways. Drawing on a variety of theoretical and historical perspectives, this study examines these issues through a qualitative case study of a progressive Christian congregation in Brooklyn, New York. The case study explores the history, worship practices, and culture of the congregation in detail, focusing on the formation of religious identity and community within the context of congregational life. This close examination of the culture of the congregation reveals the ways in which the tensions between religious individualism and congregational religion are negotiated and managed, particularly within progressive Christian congregational cultures. The findings of the study also lend support to the view that denominational identity within mainline Protestantism tends to be ambivalent, at both the individual and congregational level, and that the formation of religious identities instead takes place around more pragmatic, individualized, and local concerns.
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INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in the religious landscape of the United States have meant that Christian churches face a series of important challenges. Amongst the most important of these are the challenges posed by religious individualism and the de-institutionalization of religion. The post-war period, particularly the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, saw an increased skepticism towards institutional religion and a decoupling of spiritual and religious identities from churches (Wuthnow 1993: 5). Among other things, this meant that denominations have declined in the social significance, and the degree to which churchgoers express affiliation with a particular denomination has also been in decline. Church attendance and the retention of congregants is of course a perennial issue of concern in many congregations. Yet religious individualism and the de-institutionalization of religion is potentially a far more a pressing issue for congregations than simply how to get more people into pews. As denominations and their churches become increasingly more accommodating to secular culture they in turn begin to compete with secular culture as a source of identity and community. In addition, religious individualism and disengagement from churches diminishes churches as sources of religious identity and community. Given that church communities are central to the formation of Christian identities, when churches lose their status as centers of community and religious identity, where does this leave the status of Christianity itself? How can churches foster a stronger sense of community in this context? Why do congregants gravitate towards certain kinds of churches more than others? What new kinds of congregations and Christian identities form and thrive in this more de-institutionalized religious marketplace?
This doctoral thesis explores these questions through a case study of a small progressive religious congregation in Brooklyn, New York, called St. Lydia’s. Part congregational history, part qualitative field study, the thesis explores the congregation of St. Lydia’s and the religious lives of those who worship at the church. I provide a detailed description of the congregation and its practices and beliefs, placing the congregation in the context of key theoretical and historical debates in the sociology of religion. In particular, I focus on themes of religious individualism, the formation of Christian identity, and the sociology of religious congregations, exploring how we might understand these issues in relation to St. Lydia’s from a sociological perspective. I argue that St. Lydia’s is an example of a long process of the religious individualization in American religion and Christianity itself, in which religious identities are decoupled from religious institutions in a range of different ways, particularly from denominations. However, my findings also suggest that despite this religious individualism, religious identities at both the congregational and individual levels are nevertheless deeply connected to Christian discourses, histories, and practices in other ways. In this sense, then, St. Lydia’s presents an example of a contemporary progressive Christian congregation where the inherent tensions between religious individualism and corporate worship are successfully negotiated and resolved.

The data for this study were gathered over a period of more than two years, using in-depth interviews with congregants and religious leaders at the church, as well as participant observation within the church. I also analyzed church materials and literature, including sermons and online material. Over the course of this period I attended worship services at the church, as well as congregational meetings and events, and collected as much information on the congregation as possible. I had had very little previous experience of church attendance prior to
undertaking this research, and have always considered myself to be non-religious. During my time in the congregation I became a valued and trusted member of the community at St. Lydia’s, developing trust and rapport with the congregation, even to the extent of taking on prominent roles assisting in the worship services themselves. While most of the congregants were aware that I was a researcher they also came to regard me very much as a fellow congregant.

**Research Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the case study is to explore the culture of the congregation, with particular emphasis on the formation of the congregational community and the kinds of Christian identities which make-up the congregation.

The research questions which guided this study are as follows:

1) What are the key characteristics of the culture of the congregation? (worship, membership, organization, and so on)
   - How and why do congregants worship at this unique congregation? What is signified as being of value to them in the course of their engagement and participation with the congregation?

2) To what extent and in what ways does the congregation as a religious institution, and its congregants as individuals, have a denominational identity, or affiliate with denominations?
   - Is religious identity in the congregation formed around other concerns and meanings?

3) In what ways does religious individualism manifest itself within the culture of the congregation?
   - To what extent does religious individualism exist in tension with, or symbiosis with, the congregation as a religious institution?
An overview of the dissertation

The dissertation is split into two parts. Part One consists of four chapters which explore the theoretical and historical contexts of my case study, and place my research in dialog with key debates in the sociology of religion. In these first four chapters I try to develop two related themes which together form the conceptual framework for the dissertation. The first theme concerns the rise of religious individualism, and the tension between religious individualism and religious institutions. The second theme concerns the relationship between religious congregations, religious identities, and denominations. Part Two of the dissertation consists of seven chapters concerning St Lydia’s itself, with one chapter devoted to methodology, and each of the six remaining chapters devoted to covering a different aspect the culture of the congregation, with particular focus on the themes and ideas established in Part One.

In Chapter 1, drawing for the most part on the work of Robert Wuthnow, I look at religious change in the United States since World War 2, focusing on the decline of the social significance of denominations and trends towards religious individualism. I discuss these two issues and examine the ways in which they have affected the American religious landscape, and consider the questions these religious changes raise concerning Christian congregations.

In Chapter 2 I discuss religious individualism, with particular focus on the history of Christianity. The chapter examines some of the ways religious individualism has been
conceptualized in the sociology of religion. One principle argument of the chapter is that a concern with the individual and individualism has been a key feature of Christianity throughout its history, but that Christianity is also at its core a corporate endeavor which cannot be easily separated from social institutions and practices.

Chapter 3 examines the sociology of religious congregations. I argue for the importance of religious congregations as sites for sociological research, and look at the key sociological features of congregations as social institutions, and the ways in which sociologists have researched and conceptualized them. Drawing on the work of Nancy Ammerman, I also explore the ‘culture of the congregation’ as a framework for the sociological analysis of churches, a framework which my own congregational study uses.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the formation of religious identity, looking at theoretical approaches to understanding identity and religious identity. I consider the ways in which the formation of Christian identity is related to religious congregations, arguing that the strength and vitality of congregational community is important for the strength and vitality of Christian identities. For the most part this concerns congregations and ‘communities of memory’, which carry and disseminate religious narratives, histories, and practices; raising the question of how religious individualism in this context may disrupt or reconfigure congregations as communities of memory, potentially disrupting or reconfiguring Christian identities themselves.
In Chapter 5 I discuss the methodology for my doctoral research and a range of different methodological issues in relation to qualitative research. I discuss the methods I used to generate data on the congregation and other related issues including data analysis, ethical issues, and issues related to the generalizability of my findings.

Chapter 6 looks at the founding of St. Lydia’s, its worship practices, and theology. In examining the history of the congregation, I focus in particular on the biography of the pastor of the church, Emily Scott, and her early career. Tracing Scott’s career reveals, among other things, how St. Lydia’s is closely connected to the liturgical renewal movement, a reform movement within Christianity which seeks to revitalize worship through the arts.

Chapter 7 is the first of three chapters which look at specific key aspects of the culture of the congregation. I begin in this chapter by looking at what is arguably the most central aspect of the culture of any congregation - the worship service. I describe the worship service, with an emphasis on the ways in which worship is organized in order to maximize the formation of congregational community.

Chapter 8 explores the centrality of the idea of community within the culture of the congregation of St. Lydia’s, and the ways in which ideas about community and food are very much linked closely together in this ‘dinner church’. The data show that community is a key theme of importance, both at the institutional and individual level within the congregation, and that food
and the communal eating of food, has a variety of different theological meanings within the culture of the congregation.

In Chapter 9 I look at the role of music in the culture of the congregation, with a particular focus on the ways in which music is performed and played in the congregation, and the importance of music within the congregation and in the religious lives of the congregants. In looking in detail at the ways in which congregants talk about their experiences of liturgical music, and music at St. Lydia’s, I identify some of ways in which churchgoing and religion more broadly appears to be of value to my interviewees.

Chapter 10 looks at institutional statements of faith and belief; official statements made by the church and other associated religious institutions, whether it be through preaching, written documents, or online media. The data suggest that, while the church self-identifies as a progressive church and displays characteristics consistent with the progressive Christian movement, a variety of different institutional religious discourses are in circulation within the culture of the congregation, some of which are complementary, some of which are competing.

In Chapter 11 I explore the narratives of congregants themselves, examining the ways in which they talk about their religious lives and their church experiences. The chapter focuses on two topics in particular; attitudes towards denominations and attitudes towards homosexuality. Interviewees generally expressed a combination of affinity and ambivalence towards religious denominations, and liberal attitudes towards homosexuality. The data also illustrate the ways in
which attitudes towards homosexuality played an important part in the religious lives of some of my interviewees.

Finally, in the conclusion I draw the study to a close by considering some of the main findings of the congregational case study, and the implications the findings may have for the sociological understanding of congregations and religious change in the United States more broadly. I explore how St. Lydia’s is both typical and atypical, what it might suggest about progressive Christianity, and what it might suggest about the ways in which religious individualism can coexist with congregational religion.
PART I - HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

In the following four chapters I develop a range of different arguments and key themes concerning religious individualism, religious congregations, and religious identity, which, taken together form the conceptual framework for this doctoral research. I begin by discussing religious individualism and the decline of denominations as key historical trends in the United States, and building from that discussion, examine religious individualism in more detail, particularly looking at religious individualism within Christianity. I argue that these sociological issues draw our attention to a fundamental tension between religious individualism and institutionalized religion within Christianity, raising a number of theoretical and practical problems, at the nexus of which are religious congregations. I then go on to discuss the sociology of congregations and the ways which Christian identities are dependent upon the strength and vitality of congregational community.
CHAPTER 1 – Religious Change: Religious Individualism and Denominations

In this chapter I begin to introduce the major themes of this doctoral dissertation. The chapter deals with two issues; the rise of religious individualism and the decline of denominations. These being especially important religious trends which have had a significant effect on religion in the United States. I focus on the post-war period, which was one of the most significant periods of religious change in the history of the United States (Wuthnow 1988; Roof and McKinney 1988). In the immediate aftermath of World War Two religious institutions grew in strength and social influence, as economic resources became available which had been lacking during the Depression and during the war itself (Wuthnow 1988). Churches that had long fallen into disrepair could now be fixed and religion underwent a period of revitalization. Religious institutions seemed to be in ascendancy, as did their social reach and influence. The social significance of religion and religious affiliation during this period was illustrated in Herberg’s (1955) Protestant-Catholic-Jew. The principle argument of the book was that a defining feature of identity in the United States was affiliation with one of these three major world religions. Yet as Wuthnow puts it, the period was one of both ‘promise and peril’ for religion; a feeling of dread and fear hung over American society as the specter of the atomic bomb and the threat of Communism permeated the American psyche.

The cultural and political changes of the 1960s were a particularly pivotal turning point for religious change. This period gave rise to strains of privatized, liberal, and anti-institutional orientations towards religion, the effects of which reverberated throughout the religious sphere. Mainline Protestant denominations declined in popularity and political influence. Indeed, the significance of denominationalism itself declined, ushering in a period of denominational
homogenization and an increase in denominational switching and ecumenicalism. Many sociologists at the time considered these changes to be consistent with theories of secularization. The incompatibility of religion with modernity meant that religion was pushed away from the center of social life into the periphery; it had been relegated to a matter of individual and private concern (Luckmann 1967, Berger 1967). The rise in the social and political significance of conservative and evangelical denominations in the 1970s and 80s marked another key turning point in the recent religious history of the U.S. For sociologists, it was also one of a number of factors which threw doubt on the utility of secularization theory as a viable framework work understanding religion in modern society (Casanova 1994). In this chapter I focus on religious individualism and the decline of religious denominations in particular. Looking at each in turn, and considering the ways in which these have been understood sociologically. The principle argument of the chapter is that religious individualism and the decline of denominations are important sociological trends which have shaped American religion in a variety of ways. This reshaping of American religion gives rise to a range of important sociological questions about Christianity and Christian identity, questions which form the core concerns of this doctoral thesis.

**Religious Individualism**

The sociological understanding of religious individualism provides a lens through which we can understand religious change in the post-war period, and indeed, the dynamics of religious change throughout history. Religious individualism poses fundamental challenges to the legitimacy and authority of religious institutions. It affects the way in which religious believers orientate themselves towards established religious institutions, and brings about change within religious
institutions themselves (Hervieu-Leger 2003). The study of religious individualism in sociology has a long history, and has often been tied to theories of secularization (Berger 1967 Luckmann 1967, Luhmann 1982). In broad terms the religious individualism-secularization argument can be outlined as follows. The differentiation of social institutions in modernity, most notably the separation of church and state, reduces the hegemony of religious institutions in terms of their legitimate claim to political, cultural, and religious authority. A major effect of this is that religion comes to play a less and less significant role in social life in general, and religiosity itself comes to be an issue of private individual concern, divorced from the authority of formal religious institutions and traditions. This trend towards religious individualism is compounded by the religious pluralism which differentiation gives rise to. Pluralism has a number of key effects, making religious belief itself less tenable in the face of multiple religious ‘truths’, as well as encouraging a degree of religious hybridity and a transient non-committal orientation to formal religious institutions across the board. Although religious individualism remains a topic of central importance in the sociology of religion sociologists have largely abandoned the view that it is synonymous with a process of secularization. Instead religious individualism and religious pluralism are seen as important characteristics of religion in modern society, characteristics which have a number of effects and implications.

The character and social significance of religious individualism changed in the post-war period. The 1960s in particular are often cited as a key moment of religious change in this regard, giving rise to an increasingly individualized and anti-institutional orientation to religion (see Wuthnow 1998; Berger 1967, Roof 1993; 1999; 2002; also Bellah et al (1985) on ‘Sheilaism’). Carrol and Roof (2002) describe this period as one “characterized by loss of moral, cultural, and religious
consensus… and simultaneously a greater level of individualism, personal choice, and ideological polarization” (p.41), referring to this as a process of “detraditionalization” (p.51). The broader effect of detraditionalization for religion, Roof argues, was that the social significance and stability of religious tradition was disrupted, and replaced by notions of religious choice and hybridity. Wuthnow (1998) noted that this shift in religious sensibility was both a reflection of the counter-cultural iconoclasm of the period, as well as broader social changes, as populations became more mobile and traditional social roles and values concerning gender, sexuality and so on, began to change. The shift towards a seeker-oriented spirituality entailed a rejection of institutional religion as a means of accessing the sacred and a concomitant shift towards non-institutional individualized religious experimentation. It is also a more transient engagement with religion, involving low levels of commitment. Wuthnow contrasted this with what he referred to as dwelling-oriented spirituality, in which religious engagement is oriented towards stable, communal, established religious institutions. The sacred, in this case, can only be accessed through committed engagement with these formal institutions.

While Wuthnow’s concept of seeker-oriented spirituality provides a good starting point for characterizing the shifting religious trends of the period, religious individualism as such should not been seen as a uniquely modern or a contemporary phenomenon. Religious individualism manifests itself whenever engagement with religion becomes divorced from obligatory participation in ritual and moves towards personal interpretation and use of religious ideas in a project of the self. A prime example of this can be seen in the ascetic practices of early Christian mysticism (Hervieu-Leger 2003: 162). The Protestant Reformation and particularly the ethical precepts of Calvinism, and the salvation anxiety it produced, provides a further example of the
transformation of religious observance and salvation into a project of the self (as discussed by Weber). Bellah’s (1964) model of religious evolution illustrated the increasing individualization of religion over time using an ideal-typical model of historical development of religion. The model consisted of five stages, moving from what he called "primitive religion" through to "modern religion". Bellah argued that modern religion is characterized by an unprecedented degree of reflexivity concerning the nature of religion itself, ultimately resulting in the de-legitimization of religious orthodoxy and the authority of formal religious institutions, and the proliferation of individualized and personal forms of religious observance. Following Weber, Bellah cites the Protestant Reformation as a key turning point in this historical development, noting that it instigated a shift from world-rejection to an inner-worldly orientation, in which personal action in the world came to matter as a site to do the work of God. Bellah notes that contemporary religious individualism reached a point at which "...standards of doctrinal orthodoxy and attempts to enforce moral purity have largely been dropped. The assumption in most of the major Protestant denominations is that the church member can be considered responsible for himself. This trend is likely to continue, with an increasingly fluid type of organization in which many special purpose sub-groups form and disband" (Bellah, 1964: 373).

While religious individualism in and of itself is not new, post-1960s religious individualism is significant because it is of a fundamentally different character to the religious individualism of past eras. Hervieu-Leger (2003) noted that while Christian mysticism and Calvinism are key historical examples of religious individualism, they were still fundamentally motivated by other-worldly concerns, whether it be communion with God or eternal salvation as the ultimate motivating factor. Contemporary religious individualism, as exemplified by the New Age
movement, differs markedly from this in that it is primarily concerned with immanent personal self-fulfillment and the autonomy of belief, without concern for transcendent moral authority. She describes this as “the absorption of religious individualism within modern individualism under the aegis of the valorization of the world on the one hand and of the affirmation of the autonomy of the believing subject on the other” (p.165).

For proponents of the secularization thesis this trend towards completely individualized religion signals the demise of religion. However, the waning dominance of formal religious institutions over individuals and society does not in fact tell us anything about the strength, or otherwise, of religiosity itself. It may only be an indication that the hegemonic role of formal religious institutions as the sole arbiters and dispensers of religious experiences and ideas has been greatly reduced (Bellah, 1964: 373). The locus of religious authority and control has certainly shifted away from formal religious institutions and towards the individual. While this shift does not represent a wholesale process of secularization it potentially has two major effects; it alters the nature of religiosity at the level of the individual believer on the one hand, as well as the nature of religious institutions on the other hand, as they change to either accommodate it or reject it. In terms of the effect on the individual believer, Carroll and Roof (2002) imply religious individualism in some way actually leads to a deeper level of engagement with religion. Rather than just ‘going through the motions’ within the context of religious institutions, the trend towards religious individualism “forces upon the individual greater responsibility for his or her own life. We must confront choices before us and reflectively make decisions that we might not make in a more institutionally structured context… there can also be honest searching, self-
conscious deliberation, and creative reinterpretation of tradition as it relates to people’s own lives.” (p.59).

In terms of the effect of religious individualism on religious institutions themselves, it poses a number of potential threats and dilemmas which may have a destabilizing or restructuring effect. Hervieu-Leger (2003) argued that religious individualism prompts religious groups to develop different criteria for the validation of faith from the normative institutional model. Religious groups may develop a communal validation of faith, in which the group belief system is communally developed independently of an overarching authoritative institution. Or at an even more individualized level, groups may develop a regime of mutual validation of faith, where the authenticity of individual personal spiritual experience is seen as more important above all else (Hervieu-Leger 2003: 170). The dilemma for any religious institution or group in the era of post-1960s religious individualism is that they have to balance a willingness to accommodate religious individualism with the need for organizational and doctrinal stability and coherence. In order to remain coherent and internally stable religious institutions require clear ethical and theological teachings. On the other hand, too much dogmatism risks alienating the more individualistically inclined believers. To some extent also religious individualism needs to be kept in check in order to prevent too much internal fragmentation and incoherence (p. 174). One important question this raises is how exactly do Christian congregations operate in a highly individualized religious market place, and in what ways might religious individualism be modified, accommodated, or rejected in the context of religious institutions. This is a question which forms one of the points of inquiry of this doctoral dissertation.
Denominations and their decline

Denominationalization and denominationalism have been important topics of discussion within the sociology of religion. The central concern has been to understand how and why new religious subgroups are formed and why they diminish. In the context of understanding religious change in the United States in particular, there has been considerable interest in the changing social significance and strength of denominational affiliation, and the wider impact these denominational affiliations have had. One of the most striking features of the religious landscape in the United States is the immense degree of religious diversity that it contains. All the major world religions, a multitude of denominations and sects, as well as many new and esoteric religious movements and forms of spirituality can be found within the country’s borders. In large part this religious diversity can be attributed to the three major historical processes of disestablishment which have served to shape the country’s religious history. The first one being the initial allowance of religious freedoms through the First Amendment. The second being the massive Catholic and Jewish immigration after World War One. And the third being the social and cultural changes of the 1960s, primarily associated with the counter-cultural movements of the time (Carrol and Roof 2002).

Sociologists have typically examined the formation and transformation of religious groups through church-sect theory, and it is through this work that the term ‘denomination’ and the study of denominations became a focal concern for sociologists of religion. Beginning with Max Weber (1904, in Gerth and Mills 1955: 302-22) and Ernst Troeltsch (1912) the focus of church-sect theory has been to develop descriptive and explanatory typologies of religious groups. At a basic level church-sect theory describes the characteristics of particular groups in terms of type
of membership and organization. It also explains how religious groups develop over time and how different groups and subgroups are interrelated. Weber used the terms church and sect as ideal-types to differentiate between types of group membership. For Weber, a church is a religious group that a person is born into, it is inclusive, and hierarchical. A sect, on the other hand, is a group whose membership is voluntary, and is exclusive, and democratic. Troeltsch argued that a defining feature of a sect is the degree to which it is at odds with the dominant culture. A church tends to be accommodating towards the dominant culture, whereas a sect does not. Some sects can develop into denominations, and develop more universal churchlike characteristics, some sects will not. Troeltsch’s typology added a third type of religious group - mysticism. Mysticism is characterized by a high degree of religious individualism, a lack of formal organization, and a focus on discussion of religious meanings and ideas.

Richard Niebuhr (1929) further extended church-sect theory and consideration of denominations in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, describing denominations as sects which had become bigger, more inclusive, and more accommodating to the dominant culture. In addition to contributing to church-sect theory Niebuhr’s book also made a significant substantive contribution to the sociological understanding of religion in the United States. As the title of the book suggests, Niebuhr’s principle argument was that denominational boundaries were shaped by race, class, ethnicity, and regional factors, rather than having anything to do with religious belief necessarily. A wide variety of church-sect typologies have been developed since Weber and Troeltsch. There has been considerable debate concerning which criteria should to be emphasized when drawing up the typology. Critics of church sect -theory have questioned the
extent to which such a typology is useful at all, particularly when applied to the analysis of non-Christian religious groups (see Dawson 2009; Hervieu-Leger 2003: 170-172).

However, where church-sect theory may be of value is in illuminating the links between denominationalization and secularization. This is particularly the case if by secularization we mean a decrease in the power and legitimacy of religious institutions in relation to wider society. The church-sect-denomination process means religious institutions increasingly come to conform to societal norms (rather than the other way around), and therefore the political and doctrinal authority of religion becomes diluted over time as a result (Turner, 2011: 139-140). In arguing that denominational boundaries are determined by social factors Niebuhr’s (1929) stated that “the denominations represent the accommodation of religion to the caste system. They are emblems, therefore, of the victory of the world over the church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the Church’s sanction of the divisiveness which the church’s gospel condemns” (p.21). Niebuhr believed this was a bad thing, and that something fundamental in religious life had been lost.

However, given the ideological character of the United States, there is a strong sense of inevitability about the process of denominationalization and the religious individualism it helped to usher in. Religious voluntarism, tolerance, and individualism are synonymous with the ideals of a pluralist liberal democratic society (Christiano et al, 2008:94). The ideology of religious freedom itself, made manifest through the initial disestablishment of religion in the early history of the country and enshrined in the first amendment of the constitution, provided the context for
sects and denominations to freely emerge. This in turn helped to facilitate the emergence of increasingly voluntary, privatized, and individualized orientations towards religion generally (Bellah et al, 1985: 220). The locus of religious authority shifted away from religious institutions and towards the individual. This context also gave rise to the religious character of the denominations themselves. The individual had been placed at the center of an ever expanding and diversifying competitive religious marketplace. The need to compete with one another for membership meant denominations tended to become accommodating towards the dominant culture (rather than opposed to it). Demands on individual followers were usually low. And the distinctions between denominations were often downplayed in favor of more universal religious values (Christiano et al 2008). All of these factors contributed to reducing the legitimacy and power of religious denominations as sources of social and religious authority.

Ultimately, denominationalization, and the voluntary and highly individualistic denominationalism that arose from it, meant that the social and religious authority embodied within religious denominations as institutions declined significantly (Wuthnow 1988; Roof and McKinney 1987). The decline of denominations was amplified by the significant resurgence of religious individualism, as discussed above. The advent of this ‘new voluntarism’, as Roof and McKinney (1988) called it, meant freedom of religious choice began to take precedence over loyalty to religious heritage or tradition. The social factors that Niebuhr had identified as determining denominational boundaries in the 1920s – race, region, ethnicity, and social class – continued to play some role (especially race). However various processes of religious, social, and geographical mobility meant that religious identity became much more fluid and increasingly unmoored from these core key social determinants (p.145-147).
A further key feature of the post-war period was that religious life came to be characterized more by the boundaries between religious liberals and religious conservatives, rather than by sectarian or denominational boundaries, thus creating an entirely different cultural and religious landscape. (Wuthnow 1988). In *The Restructuring of American Religion* Wuthnow examined how religion was affected by a wide range of complex political, cultural, and economic processes from the late-1940s through the 1980s. The data on denominations during this period show increasing patterns of denominational switching, denominational mergers, and a general increasing emphasis on ecumenicalism, all of which indicate that denominationalism became much less socially significant over time. Wuthnow attributed much of the decrease in sectarianism and denominationalism to the expansion of higher education after the war which created a new class of educated politically and religious liberals with weak denominational affiliations. In addition, he describes how the political and cultural changes of the 1960s had an equally significant part to play, this being a period when political and religious liberalism very much became part of mainstream culture. The period also saw a rise in the establishment and popularity of new religious movements, secular counter-cultural lifestyles, pseudo-religious therapeutic groups, and a growing popular interest in eastern religions such a Buddhism. Each of these, in different ways, eroded the hegemony that traditional religious institutions had previously enjoyed in the battle for religious legitimacy and authority.

The increasing political and religious significance of ‘special purpose groups’, as Wuthnow refers to them, was also an important factor in the changing the religious landscape of the post-war period, and affected the power and social significance of denominations in a range of ways. Special purpose groups rose in political prominence during the 1960’s, gaining much support and
political influence. They emerged on both sides of the political religious spectrum, motivated by, and deeply connected to, religious traditions and the moral authority of religious teachings, and often led by religious leaders. However, at the same time they existed independently of any specific affiliation with particular denominations or sects. The rising prominence of special purpose groups has a significant effect on denominationalism, providing a source of religious identity and expression separate from denominations themselves. Therefore affiliation with, and participation in, special purpose groups in some way came to replace affiliation with and participation in denominations. Furthermore, whereas denominations contained both liberal and conservative elements, special purpose groups tended to be one or the other. Thus, as special purpose groups proliferated and gained support this lead increasingly to bifurcation of society into liberal and conservative camps. The social significance of denominational affiliation was reduced as the social significance of special purpose groups increased. This decline in denominationalism and increase in polarization continued into the 1970s and 1980s. Which as Wuthnow describes it was a time of “consolidation and deepening divisions” (p.164) between the liberal and conservative camps. After the shock of the 1960s measures of religiosity and church attendance began to bounce back and plateau out a little, and New Religious Movements became less fashionable and attracted fewer and fewer members. The effects of the expansion of higher education were becoming more pronounced also by 1970s and 80s. The numbers of young people obtaining a college degree was steadily increasing, and the data from this period show that a college education became a significant predictor of liberal social and religious attitudes.

As denominational boundaries became more fluid and denominational affiliations became increasingly weaker denominations ceased to be the “culture-shaping institutions” they had been
in the past (Roof and McKinney 1988: 245). The privatized and individualized nature of religion fundamentally also reduced the degree to which denominations were able to claim legitimate authority over their members, or over society at large. Religious identity itself was no longer tied to religious institutions or denominations in the same way as it has been in the past. This stands in marked contrast to Niebur’s observation that denominations were shaped by social boundaries, which in-turn helped to shape religiosity. Instead, as Roof and McKinney noted, in contemporary society “Faith is shaped less by social background factors and more by the personal choices of believers themselves” (p.147). Nevertheless, despite this observation Roof and McKinney conclude that “denominationalism will survive to the extent it is able to do in the future what it has done in the past: to provide members with a sense of who they are as participants in a reality that extends beyond the self” (p.247). Invoking Bellah’s observation in Habits of the Heart (1985), they note that American culture is somewhat paradoxical, in that it is centered around values of strong individualism as well as a strong adherence to tradition. Denominations may be pluralistic and fluid institutions, but they still remain important holders of religious traditions and providers of religious identity. Thus, denominations have remained an important feature of religious life in the United States, all be it in a modified form. Indeed, as Ammerman (2005: 207-208) notes, the denomination has even become an organizational model for non-Christian religions in the United States, due to the fact that it is the most cultural acceptable way of organizing religion. Consequently Buddhist, Hindus, Jews, and others have tended to organize themselves in ways that look very much like denominations, even though the notion of ‘denomination’ is not originally part of their religion, as Ammerman puts it, in coming to the United States these religions are “shaped by the organizational and cultural imperatives of working as one religion among many in the American context” (p.207).
Conclusions

In this chapter I have reviewed some of the major debates and theories in the sociology of religion concerning religious individualism and religious denominations. Regarding religious individualism, I have explored several ways in which it has been theorized, looking at, for example, Wuthnow's notion of seeker-oriented religiosity, and Bellah's notion of 'modern religion'. I have argued that religious individualism is in tension with religious institutions, but have also suggested that it is not necessarily synonymous with, or symptomatic of, secularization. The second part of the chapter looked at the topic of religious denominations, examining the sociological characteristics of denominations, processes of denominationalization, and the declining significance of denominational identity. We have seen how the increasingly individualized, voluntaristic, and market-driven religious sphere in the United States has contributed to this decline. However, I have also considered the resilience of denominational identity and the potential continued role and importance of denominations in the current religious landscape. Both religious individualism and the declining significance of denominations are issues are of great relevance for considering the ways in which Christian congregations might operate organizationally, liturgically, and theologically, while attempting to balance religious individualism, denominational affiliation, and congregational cohesion. As we will see, St. Lydia’s, the congregation which is the focus of this research, provides an excellent test case through which to explore these questions.
CHAPTER 2 - Christianity, Protestantism, and Religious Individualism

In the previous chapter I discussed the issue of religious individualism in the context of the post-war period, particularly focusing on the rise of ‘seeker’ culture and denominationalization. I argued that a unique form of religious individualism emerged as a result, altering the ways in which people engaged with religion and with religious institutions. Characteristics of this kind of religious individualism include a concern with immanent personal fulfillment with little or no concern for the transcendent, and complete autonomy of belief, with little or no concern for institutionalized religion or a cohesive religious tradition. An often cited extreme example of this type of contemporary religious individualism is ‘Sheliaism’, as described by Robert Bellah et al (1985), in which the self is the principle locus of religious authority and meaning. De-institutionalized religious individualism of this type has often been discussed in relation to the secularization debate, and the so-called ‘privatization of religion’ (Luckmann 1967, 1990; see discussion in Gorski 2000; cf: Casanova (1994) on ‘public religion’).

As I have argued, religious individualism sits in tension with religious institutions in a variety of ways, and this tension raises the problem of how Christian congregations manage or overcome this inherent tension, and how they may be affected by it. In order to begin to answer this question in this chapter I would like to expand my discussion of religious individualism by defining it more clearly and discussing it specifically in relation to Christianity. I begin by outlining how we can think about the term ‘religious individualism’ itself, asking what we mean by religious individualism from a sociological perspective. I divide religious individualism into two main issues; the individuation of forms of religion resulting from religious pluralism and social differentiation, and the individualistic nature of religious content related to the individual
becoming the locus of religious meaning and practice. I discuss this in relation to this history of Christianity, comparing Christianity with Judaism (Parsons 1963) and also the practice of confession (Abercrombie et al 1986). I then discuss religious individualism in relation to the Protestant Reformation, focusing on the individualistic nature of Protestantism compared with the medieval church (Bellah 1964, Gorski 2000).

The principle argument of this chapter is fairly uncontroversial; that religious individualism within Christianity has increased over time as the religious sphere has become more internally and externally differentiated. The issues of social differentiation, religious pluralism, the emergence of Protestantism, and so on, have been extensively discussed in relation to the question of secularization. However, I do not wish to argue that religious individualism is necessarily synonymous with secularization. Religious individualism is a product of these various social processes, and may or may not be ‘secular’ in character, depending on the specific circumstances. Social differentiation over the long term has reduced the political and cultural hegemonic authority of religious institutions, and in this sense, has led to secularization at a macro level. However, this does not necessarily mean that the significance of religion as a political or cultural force has been reduced, or that the vitality of religiosity itself is any less significant for social life. Therefore my intention is not to focus on religious individualism in relation to the question of secularization specifically, but to focus simply on religious individualism as it appears as a characteristic of Christianity. Doing this helps us to locate the place of religious individualism within Christianity as a world religion, and therefore assists in developing a sociological understanding of contemporary trends in Christian congregations in the United States.
What is religious individualism?

There are two main ways in which we can think about what we mean by religious individualism; 1) individualization arising from the various forms religion takes as a result of processes of social differentiation; and 2) an emphasis on individualism within the content of religion in terms of theological orientation, rituals, practices etc. Both of these ways of thinking about religious individualism are interrelated and coalesce around the theme of the deinstitutionalization of religion over time and the concomitant increase in religious agency. The Protestant Reformation and advent of modernity are important historical moments in this regard.

The first issue concerning the differentiation of the form of religion refers to religious pluralism and the internal and external differentiation of the religious sphere. Religious pluralism increases religious agency in the sense of opening up the religious sphere, increasing the voluntary nature of religiosity, the scope of religious choices, and the heterogeneity of religious practice and belief. The external differentiation of religion from other aspects of the social structure weakens the cultural and political hegemony of religious institutions therefore, again, increasing religious agency. In this regard, debates concerning the separation of church and state are important in so far as they can shed light on the extent to which religiosity in particular historical eras is characterized by large-scale conformity to institutionalized and politically sanctioned religious norms, or whether religiosity is characterized by religious deviation and innovation autonomous of religious institutions.
The second way of considering the question of religious individualism is in relation to the content of religiosity itself. Here the primary concern is to understand the degree to which religiosity emphasizes individual faith over communal and ritual life. As well as the degree to which individuals are granted the ability and authority to interpret the meanings of religious texts and experiences, over and above the expertise and authority of religious elites. The more religious ideas and meanings becomes dis-embedded from institutional hierarchies and from the social in general, the more individualistic religion becomes. Additionally, religious individualism can be identified within specific religious practices and ideas. Consideration of religions in terms of their theology, soteriology, practices, and rituals reveals the extent to which they are oriented towards individualism or communalism, innovation or tradition, and so on.

In broad terms, then, the notion of religious individualism is synonymous with the notion of religious agency. It refers to the degree of freedom individuals have to determine the form and content of their religiosity, and the degree to which that content is oriented towards an (immanent) project of the self, or towards the communal and the transcendent. Having established this as a definition of religious individualism I would now like to explore some of the ways in which religious individualism can be identified within Christianity.

**Durkheim and religious individualism**

As is well known, Durkheim’s work helped lay the foundations of sociology as an academic discipline, and the foundations of the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion. The major theme throughout Durkheim’s work is the question of social cohesion and the classic Hobbesian
problem of how and why disparate autonomous individuals can cohere together to form ‘society’. For Durkheim a major part of the answer lay in religion. In this regard the notion of religion as a collective and moral force which affects social cohesion was central in Emile Durkheim’s thinking. This idea featured in all of his most well-known works, *Division of Labor in Society* (1893), *Suicide* (1896), and *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Much of Durkheim’s sociology revolves around dualisms and dichotomies, one of the most central of which is the relationship between the individual and society (Lukes 1985:19-22). Durkheim argued that religion plays an important integrative role by bringing individuals together into social collectivities. Religion is one of a number of social facts which are unintentionally formed by the collective activity of individuals. Once formed, social facts, according to Durkheim, take on a unique character of their own and exist independently, or *sui generis*, of the individuals that created them. These autonomous social facts then in turn have a coercive force upon those individuals. This is in many ways a classic and foundational sociological thesis and was part of Durkheim’s attempt to strongly establish sociology as an academic discipline by clearly delineating the object of sociological enquiry; society and social phenomena as *sui generis*.

This focus on the individual-society dualism and the topic of religion and social cohesion makes Durkheim’s work relevant for considering the topic of religious individualism. He provides a framework through which we can think about how and why religions bring individuals together, as well as the meaning and implications of individualized religiosities. In one sense the notion of religious individualism is somewhat antithetical to Durkheimian sociology, because for Durkheim religion is always fundamentally a social phenomenon and a collective activity. Completely individualistic religiosities such as Sheilaism, for example, do not fit well with a
Durkheim’s theory of mechanical and organic solidarity in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) highlighted religion as a force for social cohesion. In mechanical solidarity societies have low levels of differentiation, the collective consciousness is primarily based on religious morals, and these values are enforced by coercive sanctions (meaning that individuals are punished punitively for violating social norms). In organic solidarity, on the other hand, societies are characterized by high levels of differentiation and a complex division of labor. The collective consciousness in this case, and the social solidarity that arises from it, is therefore based on moral individualism; a respect for individual rights and an acknowledgement that individuals have certain obligations towards each other. These values are enforced by restitutive sanctions, which seek to protect individual rights and maintain a just and fair society. For Durkheim, then, as individualism increases with modernity, institutionalized religion ceases to play the central role it once did in determining the content of the collective consciousness. As Steven Lukes puts it, in organic solidarity the collective consciousness “becomes increasingly secular, human-oriented (as opposed to transcendent) and rational, and ceases to attach supreme value to society and collective interests” (1985: 156). In the shift to organic solidarity religion does not disappear, though it has less influence. Similarly, the collective consciousness still remains, but is weaker and becomes more precarious (For further discussion on Mechanical and Organic solidarity see also Bellah 1973 in Introduction p.xxiii) To some degree Durkheim’s theory of mechanical and
organic solidarity can be viewed as a theory of secularization. Although it seems clear that even in organic solidarity Durkheim is positing the importance of a ‘civil religion’ of sorts. The hegemony of institutionalized religion in providing the main contents of the collective consciousness may be reduced, yet as Durkhiem remarks “As all other beliefs and all other practices take on a character less and less religious, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion” (p.xxv in Bellah 1973 Introduction). Religion, of whatever kind, functions to bring individuals together, and is therefore essential for the existence of society itself. Individualism poses a kind of threat to this, and thus jeopardizes the existence of society also.

The relationship between religion, the individual, and society is also central to Durkheim’s analysis in *Suicide*. Durkheim argued that rates and types of suicide were affected by the degree to which individuals were integrated and regulated by society (Ritzer 2000: 86). Religion was an important variable in this regard, particularly in his discussion of egoistic suicide (Durkheim 1979: 152-170). Durkheim characterized Egoistic suicide as “excessive individualism” (p.209) resulting from a weak collective consciousness and lack of social cohesion. As in *Division of Labor*, religion was shown to play an important role in determining the strength of the collective consciousness. In particular, Durkheim observed that suicide rates were higher amongst Protestant countries compared with Catholic countries, and lowest in Jewish countries (Durkheim 1979: 152-170). The key factor here was the degree of religious individualism. Concerning the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism he notes the following:

> The only essential difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is that the second permits free inquiry to a far greater degree than the first… All variation is abhorrent to Catholic thought. The Protestant is far more the author of his faith. The Bible is put in his hands and no interpretation is imposed upon him. The very structure of the reformed cult stresses this state of religious individualism… We thus reach our first conclusion, that the proclivity of Protestantism
for suicide must relate to the spirit of free inquiry that animates this religion. (Ibid: 157-158 original emphasis)

The specific issue of Protestantism and religious individualism will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter. For now I would just like to highlight Durkheim’s general argument here; that religious plays an important role in the formation of the collective consciousness and social cohesion, and that certain kinds of religion do a better job at this than others, depending on the degree to which they have “a sufficiently intense collective life” (p.170). Consequently, religious individualism, defined here by Durkheim essentially as autonomy of belief, is seen as having a negative effect on the social cohesion and the psychology of individuals.

In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim identifies religion as having an important social cohesion function and a moral function, as well as bifurcating effect, separating the sacred from the profane. Durkheim’s well-known definition of religion is as follows: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995: 44). Religion, then, involves individuals being bound together by shared symbols and shared moral ideas and sentiments. Once the sacred has been delineated from the profane, and has been designated as sacred and imbued with special moral significance, it then functions as a social fulcrum; bringing individuals together into a cohesive collectivity; society. Religion is a social fact arising from the collective activity of individuals and then subsequently having a cohesive and coercive effect upon them.
In terms of our discussion of religious individualism, Durkheim’s definition and treatment of religion is interesting because it provides a theory of the mechanism by which the activity of individuals causes the emergence of social structures and institutions; in this case, religious social structures and institutions. Durkheim argues that large gatherings of individuals create a mutual socially shared emotion of ‘collective effervescence’. This energetic excitement in turn imbues the gathering and the objects associated with the gathering with a quality of specialness and sacredness. In this way particular times, places, and objects become reified as sacred, and demarcated as special in relation to the mundane everyday as aspects of the ‘profane’ world. The sacred also takes on moral significance, becoming imbued with the collective moral ideals and beliefs of the society. It is through this process, according to Durkheim, that religion becomes part of the structure of society. Religion is also fundamental for social cohesion, especially in traditional societies, as it is an important vehicle for the affirmation and dissemination of collective moral sentiments and the development of a collective consciousness. As in the *Division of Labor*, there is the sense, then, in which religious individualism poses a threat to social cohesion. Opting out of collective religious activity means that the strength of the collective consciousness is reduced. Thus, as Turner (2011) puts it “The implication of the Durkheimian theory of social change is that the problem of modern society is the decline of these collective events and festivals which help a society to enforce its collective memory through shared emotions” (p.82).

Where does this overview leave us with regards to consideration of religious individualism in Durkheim’s work? At one level the notion of religious individualism is almost antithetical to Durkheim’s emphasis on the fundamentally social nature of religion, and the religious nature of
society. On the other hand, Durkheim’s work presents a theory of social differentiation and
individuation, the decline of the influence of religion in modern society, and the concomitant rise
of humanistic individualism as the new dominant ‘religion’ in society. Durkheim’s emphasis on
religion as a social activity would seem to render religious individualism almost meaningless as a
concept, if by religious individualism we mean ‘Shielaism’; religiosity without any external
referent or connection with social structures and social institutions. It is for this reason that
Charles Taylor (2007) put forward the notion of a ‘post-Durkheimian’ social form, in which
religion is completely individualized and disconnected from the social. Taylor’s nomenclature of
‘post-Durkheimian’ suggests, probably rightly, that religious individualism of this kind cannot be
accounted for within the context of Durkheim’s theory of religion and society.1

**Religious individualism within Christianity**

In the previous chapter I discussed religious individualism mainly as it relates to the American
experience, and in the above discussion in this chapter I have looked at religious individualism
through the lens of Durkheim’s work. I would now like to move on to consider religious
individualism specifically within this history of Christianity, looking at how Christianity
developed during the medieval period and the Protestant Reformation. This historical context is
important for considering the development of Christianity over time, beyond only the recent
history of the United States covered in the previous chapter. One argument to emerge from
exploring the history of Christianity in this way is that individualistic discourses and practices
have always been a feature of Christianity in one form or another, and therefore have a

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considerable historical lineage. Seen in this light, contemporary trends in American Christianity are arguably the result of long historical processes of religious change, and in fact may be an inherent part of the Christian faith.

Some notion of religious individualism has been at the core of Christianity throughout its history. Indeed, an emphasis on religious individualism within Christianity was one significant way in which it differed from pre-Christian religions, most notably Judaism (Parsons 1963: 39-42; also see discussion in Abercrombie et al 1986: 39-41). In addition to considering some of the specific theological and liturgical characteristics of Christianity we can also consider the relationship between religious individualism and differentiation in more detail. On the one hand there is the issue of what we might call external differentiation; the differentiation of religion from other social institutions. On the other hand there is the issue of internal differentiation; the differentiation within the religious sphere itself. In terms of external differentiation, for example, Parson’s argued that the advent of Christianity itself brought with it differentiation between religion and society. The most important issue to consider in terms of internal differentiation is the Protestant Reformation. From a long-term historical comparative perspective these processes of external and internal differentiation precipitated a general increase in religious individualism; a trend which reaches its peak in modern contemporary society (Bellah 1964).

Comparing Christianity to Judaism Talcott Parsons (1963) points out that whereas Jewish identity emphasized ideas of kinship and hereditary ties, from the beginning Christianity placed more emphasis on individual faith. Therefore, in this sense, Christianity is an achieved rather
than an ascribed religious identity. Christians are brought together as a church through their individual faith in Christ and their relationship to Christ. They are not necessarily brought together due to social origins or social ties in the same way as the Jewish community. Furthermore, the soteriological emphasis in Christianity is on the personal faith and on reaching God through a personal relationship with Christ. It is the salvation of the individual rather than the salvation of the religious community as a whole which is at stake. This decoupling of the individual from the religious community with the advent of Christianity signals a rupture in the intimate coexistence of religion and society; religion and society became differentiated from one another in new ways, as religious identity became autonomous from the social.

In addition to altering the nature of religious identity a further important effect of this rupture was a weakening of the cultural authority of religion. Whereas Jewish law had provided an all-encompassing prescriptive system for ethical conduct, Christianity, in Parson’s words, only “generated motivation to act in accord with the spirit” (p.41). This is one way in which the hegemonic dominance of religion began to be eroded, with religion being relegated to a position of a guide for ethical action, rather than a series of mandatory precepts which the believer was compelled to follow. Crucially also, if religious precepts are a guide for ethical action, this places emphasis on the conscience of individual believers, opening up space for variable individual interpretations and applications of religious ideas. Having said this, Parsons recognizes the danger in overstating the case. It would obviously be a mistake to imply that Christian ethics were entirely subjective, or that Christians did not feel compelled to live an ethical life according to God’s law. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that the dis-embedding of the religious from the social opened up a space for more religious subjectivity. As Parsons puts it, the church is no
longer “an ascribed aspect of a total society” (p.42). Religious identity becomes discrete from non-religious identity in a way that changes the relationship between the sacred and the secular. By virtue of the gap between the two, religion takes on a quality of specialness in relation to the mundane world of non-religious life. In this sense religion finds itself at odds with or in opposition to the secular in a way that it had not before.

A second more minor aspect of Christianity in relation to the question of religious individualism is the Christian practice of confession (Abercrombie et al 1986: p.44-54). In Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism Abercrombie et al chart the historical development of individuality in modern society. Within this broader concern the practice of Christian confession is discussed as being significant because it meant a special emphasis was placed on individual conscience and the self. The Christian confessor was encouraged to reveal their inner thoughts and private behaviors to a member of the clergy, especially with regards to any sinful violations or deviations from Christian ethics. This emphasis on individual ethical conduct, it is argued, was a unique feature of Christianity in Western society. While forms of confession featured in other religions such as Judaism, and in non-Western cultures, invariably these forms of confession concerned the violation of norms of the group or the society as a whole, and would take place within a group context. Christian confession, on the other hand, tended to be a private practice between the believer and a member of the clergy. The content of confession itself differed also, focusing on the individual conscience of the believer and the degree to which they were following ethical precepts of the church, rather than the degree to which they had violated norms of the community per se. Abercrombie et al argue that the religious individualism inherent in the practice of confession coincided with other cultural trends, particularly the courtly culture of the
upper-classes during the Middle Ages, which contributed to a growing cultural emphasis on the self and emotion. Though Protestantism did away with confession in its medieval institutional form, confession of sin and of faith remained a tenant of Christianity. In Protestantism the character of confession changed, with the formal ritual of the confession box no longer being used. But if anything arguably Christianity became even more individualized as a result. Instead of confessing to a priest Protestants would be more inclined to confess their sins directly to God through prayer and supplication, asking forgiveness, or they would confess to each other within a religious context. Sin became very much a personal issue, between the individual sinner and God, and the confession of sins was a part of a conversion process. This altered form of confession within Protestantism is one of a series of characteristics which signals further evidence of a shift towards religious individualism as a result of the Reformation, more of which I discuss below.

In one sense confession could be seen as the opposite of religious individualism in the way I have previously described it. The act of confession is by its very nature the individual participating, interacting with, and conforming to the practices and precepts of institutionalized religion. Far from eschewing religious authority, the confessor is seeking the approval and pardon of a member of the religious elite and therefore by implication, the religious community. Similarly even in the Protestant case, despite the individualistic nature of confession, it still nevertheless takes place with reference to and in the context of normative institutional expectations. In another sense the classic image of the confession box, with the confessor and the priest divided by a partition could also be seen as a paradigmatic example of the individuation of religion. The religious person is almost completely alone, removed from connections with others,
working through their ethical dilemmas and failings with a priest they cannot quite see properly. The emphasis is squarely on the self, self-exploration, and self-regulation, all be it within an institutional context. Evoking Michel Foucault, Abercrombie et al see the contradiction inherent within confession as exemplifying the paradox of individualism inherent in modern society more generally. They state that “on the one hand the individual in late capitalism appears highly regulated and standardized by social practices, but on the other is also highly emotional, narcissistic and guilt-ridden. In short, Confessing Man is simultaneously regularized and spontaneous, controlled and liberated, incorporated and opposed” (p.54).

The Protestant Reformation

The relationship between religious individualism and Christianity cannot be considered without considering the Protestant Reformation and its impact. Sociologists have had a long-standing interest in the Protestant Reformation, especially in relation to the advent of modernity (Hamilton 1998: 198-220). Max Weber’s seminal thesis on the Protestant ethic has made the Reformation and its implications a topic of perennial interest and discussion for sociologists. In discussing Weber’s thesis Hamilton notes, “More words have been printed on this issue than almost any other in sociology” (p.212). My intention here is to focus on the Protestant Reformation as it relates to the question of religious individualism, rather than modernity or secularization necessarily. Although inevitably the issues are interrelated. The question I seek to address is the extent to which Protestantism was more individualistic than the religiosity of the medieval church. It seems clear that Protestantism departed significantly from the kinds of religiosities that had preceded it, particularly the medieval Catholic church, and the emphasis on religious individualism was a key way in which Protestantism differed (Gorski 2000). Having
said this, it is wrong to over-characterize Protestantism as individualistic as Protestantism was communal and institutional, centered on Christian ideas of fellowship, community, and so on (Abercrombie et al 1985).

Weber’s argument concerning the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism is a good place to begin to consider these issues. Weber was primarily concerned with answering the question of why modern rational capitalism arose in Western Europe as opposed to elsewhere. He argued that the ethical precepts of Calvinism had an ‘elective affinity’ with the spirit of capitalism, the key link between the two being the rational and systematic pursuit of profit. The psychological problem of salvation anxiety and the need for proof of being one of the ‘elect’ gave rise to a range of ethical precepts within Calvinism that focused on money and economic behavior. These ethical precepts included the devotion to work as a religious calling, the need to save money, and to live frugally. Weber argued that over time these economic behaviors became divorced from their religious origins; thus modern secular capitalism arose partly as an unintended consequence of Calvinist religious ethics.

As Weber’s argument demonstrates, salvation within the Protestant sects was individualized, particularly in Calvinism with and the notion of ‘election’ and consequent salvation anxiety. The need for proof of election resulted in a personal devotion to one’s individual work as a religious ‘calling’. Religiosity became dis-embedded from religious institutions as religious meaning became attributed to activity in the secular sphere. This contrasts with the medieval Catholic Church, in which salvation was based on participation in the sacraments and confession.
Religious institutions were therefore the main mediators between the believer and God. While salvation remained the issue of central importance for both Catholics and Protestants, ultimately what set the two apart were the methods of attaining that salvation (Sharot 2001: 211-215). Protestantism reduced the number of sacraments and altered their theological significance. For Lutherans, for example, the sacraments were placed secondary in importance to faith. Similarly, Calvinists reduced the significance of the sacraments to an even greater degree, having developed a theology premised on predestination that rendered ‘good works’ as meaningless in terms of being a path to salvation.

There are a number of other ways in which the Protestant Reformation can be seen as dis-embedding religiosity from religious institutions. The ritualistic nature of religiosity of the medieval church was replaced and actively rejected by the Protestant reformers along with their criticism of idolatry and magic. In addition, the role of religious elites as mediators between God and the believer was reduced. As Stephen Sharot (2001) observes, “The belief that God’s grace of a person’s true faith was manifested in human conduct in the everyday world undermined the Catholic distinction between the other-worldly path of the virtuoso monks, who acted in accord with a higher morality, and the worldly path of ‘ordinary’ Christians” (p.213). The legitimate authority of religious elites was therefore eroded as their special place in the religious hierarchy diminished. The Protestant emphasis on the Bible as the revealed word of God, and therefore as a direct means of salvation, is also significant in this regard. It provides a further example of the way in which Protestant theology cut out the middleman, as it were, in the quest for salvation. The effects of the printing press, the gradual increase in literacy, and the publication of Bibles in languages other than Latin were all major contributions to this also.
We might say that religion was in a sense democratized, as religious hierarchies began to flatten out, and the religious authority of the clergy lessened as lay people were given more direct access to the means of grace and salvation. As Bellah (1964) puts it in his discussion of the Protestant Reformation, “Early modern religious symbolism concentrates on the direct relation between the individual and transcendent reality. A great deal of the cosmological baggage of medieval Christianity is dropped as superstition” (p.369). For Protestants, participation in rituals within the context of a religious institution may have provided a means of connecting to God and of illustrating one’s faith through prayer, for example. But this was different from the more magical meaning and implication of ritual in the medieval church, in which the act of participation itself was viewed as actually imbuing the participant with God’s favor. Similarly, Protestantism eliminated the veneration of the Saints, thus creating a form of Christianity that deemphasized the relevance of supernatural beings and changed the way in which the supernatural was viewed. This can be viewed as further evidence that Protestantism encouraged an individual and direct relationship with God, rather than a diffuse and mediated one. This is not to say of course that the supernatural was entirely absent in Protestantism. Spirits, demons, and angels still very much remained part of the Protestant worldview. However, many Protestants, as Sharot puts it “expressed skepticism towards other beings, including ghosts and poltergeists and the various earth spirits, such as fairies and trolls” (Sharot 2001: 214-215).

To sum up, then, how is the Protestant Reformation relevant for our understanding of the development of religious individualism? In his discussion of the secularization debate Philip Gorski (2000) concludes that the main impact of the Reformation was that it signaled a break from religiosity that was “magical, ritual, and communal” and a move towards a religiosity that
was “ethical, intellectual, and individual” (p.148). This he claims is its major importance, over and above its effect in increasing or decreasing in the influence of religion in society as a whole. Medieval religiosity was predominantly centered around the performance of rituals, based on the belief that such activities would “prompt divine intervention or divine favor” (Ibid), for the benefit the community as a whole. In contrast, early modern religiosity was characterized by a focus on the individual believer practicing ethical conduct and prayer as a path to salvation. The emphasis on ritual was replaced by an emphasis on religious ideas and precepts, and the emphasis on the religious community as a whole was replaced with an emphasis on the individual and, Gorski says “of the community of the living” (Ibid) as opposed to both the living and the dead. Gorksi is quick to point out that, as with any attempt to generalize across large historical time periods, the shift in religiosity described here was not absolute or clear-cut. Indeed, the overall argument Gorski wants to make is that the debate concerning the secularization has tended to overemphasize, and to some extent caricature, the medieval period and the Reformation period, by exaggerating the character and influence of Christianity in each period in various ways. The contrast being drawn here between the pre-Reformation and post-Reformation periods is clearly an ideal typical one.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I have attempted to closely interrogate the concept of religious individualism, moving beyond simply a discussion of religious individualism in the recent history of the U.S., and exploring theories of religious individualism more broadly, and in relation to the history of Christianity. To a large extent the issues involved can be traced back to key themes in classical sociology concerning the relationship between the individual and society, and religion and social
change. As we have seen, both Durkheim and Weber address the issue of religious individualism in the context of understanding modernity. My discussion has shown that religious individualism can be considered in two broad ways. The first being an individualistic emphasis within religiosity itself, in terms of beliefs, practices, and so on. The particular issues of relevance here are shifts in emphasis towards a focus on the self, self-regulation, individualized soteriology, and a greater degree of subjectivity in faith and religious ethics. The second way in which we can consider religious individualism are the processes through which religiosity becomes dis-embedded from the social. Here the separation of religion and society, the separation of church and state are relevant. In addition, I have discussed the reduction of the role of institutions in determining the content of religiosity and/or being the primary sites in which religious practice and belief are played out.

The contrasts that have been drawn here between Judaism and Christianity, and the medieval church and Protestantism have served to demonstrate the various ways in which religious individualism shows up as a key characteristic of Christianity. Broadly speaking we can say that as Christianity becomes more internally and externally differentiated it becomes more individualistic. Therefore we can chart an increase in religious individualism within Christianity at particular historical moments. Parsons argues that the emergence of Christianity reconfigured the relationship between religion and society, enlarging the gap between the sacred and the secular, bifurcating the two and changing their interrelation. With the Reformation there is, in a sense, a closing of this gap and a further reconfiguration of the relationship; the secular sphere gets upgraded as an arena in which God’s work can be done. Religious institutions are no longer
the locus of religious authority, and therefore religiosity is enacted and embodied by individuals in their everyday lives, independent of institutional contexts.

However, in making the argument that Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, emphasizes the individual, it would be incorrect to over-characterize Christianity as individualistic necessarily (Abercrombie et al 1986: 57-60). While the theological and institutional characteristics I have discussed place an emphasis on individual religiosity, clearly Christianity always remains strongly grounded in institutional and social practices and ideas. Ideas of community, fellowship, and unity are central in Christian life. As Ambercombe et al note “Christianity retained the notion of the church as the body of Christ in which the individual autonomy of its members was subordinated to the organizational harmony of the church as a whole” (p.58). Even in its Protestant form these ideas of Christian community remained central. As has been discussed, there may have been an increasing emphasis on individual faith in Protestantism, as opposed to participation in religious rituals. However, Protestant faith was still tied to institutional norms in other ways, most obviously through the primacy placed on the Bible as the word of God. Therefore even in its most individualistic form religious individualism within Christianity is still far from the completely de-institutionalized and individualized Sheilaism. Christianity is intimately tied to the congregational form as a normative form of worship and organization. Indeed, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, the formation of Christian identity happens within congregations, and the strength, vitality, and longevity of Christian identity is dependent upon religious congregations in a range of different ways. There is, then, an inherent and unavoidable tension between religious individualism and religious congregations, particularly in (post)modern cultures in which individualism, religious or
otherwise, is a key feature. It raises the question of how religious individualism can exist comfortably alongside congregational religion, and how it affects congregations, and the congregational field as a whole. My case study of the congregation of St. Lydia’s is in large part an attempt at exploring the answers to this question. However, before looking at the details of this particular congregational case we need to look more closely at religious congregations themselves. It is this subject to which I will now turn.
CHAPTER 3 – Studying Religious Congregations

The discussion in the previous chapters has, among other things, highlighted the fundamental problem of deinstitutionalized religion, at both practical and theoretical levels. At the center of this problem, I have suggested, is the congregation, particularly with regards to Christianity and Christian identity. On its face, religious individualism is antithetical to congregationalism, yet congregations must, to a greater or lesser extent, grapple with the tension between religious individualism and institutionalized religion. The congregation, then, is a site where this tension is played out and negotiated, potentially giving rise to a range of different effects and consequences. But what exactly are religious congregations? What are their sociological characteristics? And how best can we study them? In this chapter I focus on these questions, looking at why religious congregations are an important object of sociological study, and how we might to conduct congregational research. I define the term ‘congregation’ itself, and begin to consider the relationship between congregations, denominations, and religious identities. In terms of approaches to the study of congregations, I examine the idea of the ‘culture of the congregation’ as a framework for sociological study, looking in particular at Nancy Ammerman’s (1998) recommendations in this regard concerning ‘activities, artifacts, and accounts’ of a congregation.

The significance of religious congregations

Religion has a central place in the history and national identity of the United States and religious congregations are one of the country’s most ubiquitous social institutions. There are more than 300,000 congregations nationwide. Approximately twenty-five percent of the population attend a
weekly worship service of one kind of another and over sixty-percent of the population report attending on a less frequent basis (Chaves 2004). The prevalence and popularity of religious congregations places them at the center of social life in the United States. According to Mark Chaves (2004) “no voluntary or cultural institution in American society gathers more people more regularly than religious congregations…” (p.1). Similarly, in his well-known study of social capital Robert Putnam (2000) stated, “Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America” (p.66). As evidence for this Putman showed that participation and interest in religion was highly correlated with civic engagement, as well as sociality more generally, such as friendships, attending social events, and club membership. The primary purpose for people to gather in religious congregations is the act of worship. In addition, religious congregations and their congregants also engage in a wide variety of other activities including religious education, social service provision, and political activism (Chaves 2004; Ammerman 2005).

In addition to having broad sociological significance congregations are of special interest for sociologists of religion. Although the recent work on ‘lived religion’ and ‘everyday religion’ usefully prompts sociologists to look at the ways in which religious discourses and practices show up in nominally secular spheres of social life (Bender 2011), this does not negate the need for continued sociological work on social institutions that are explicitly religious. Given the ubiquity of religious congregations, and the high proportion of the population that participate in them, it seems reasonable to conclude that they are the primary social institution through which people express and learn to express their religiosity. Examining congregations therefore tells us a
great deal about the sociology of religious practices, beliefs, and identities, and how these things are patterned within an institutional context.

In the United States in particular there is a strong relationship between congregational membership and religious identity. With the declining importance of religious denominations, religious congregations have become an important, perhaps the most important, source of religious identity in the United States. Christiano et al (2008) write that sociologists of religion have come to see the “crucial role of the congregation as a place where religious ideology and the lived experience of the people who do or do not choose to wear a particular denominational label meet… American denominationalism is not now, nor has it ever been, realized except through the life of specific local units of congregations…” (p.98, original emphasis). In addition, Christiano et al argue, in the absence of state sanctioned religion “congregationalism has come to symbolize a greater principle - namely, the religious voluntarism of denominationalism” (p.101). Congregants are free to associate with whatever church or religious group they choose, and that church, in turn, is financially dependent on those congregants if it is to sustain itself over the long term. It is this unique situation that places the congregation as a social institution at the center of religious life and religious identity in the U.S. (See Christiano et al (2008) p.101-102).

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2 Also see Chaves (2004: 21), “Organizationally, individuals do not, in general, directly become members of denominations. They belong to congregations which are in turn attached to umbrella religious organizations: denominations”.

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The topic of congregational religion has been of interest to sociologists from the beginnings of the discipline, and was dealt with in different ways by Durkheim and Weber. As we saw in the previous chapter, Durkheim’s treatment of religion emphasized its social and collective nature; the coming together of individuals into a moral community through sacred ritual. In this way Durkheim’s tells us much about how individuals create religious community, and how, in turn, individual religious identities are also shaped by membership within religious community (Wuthnow 1993: 20-22). Weber dealt at length with the characteristics of congregational religion and its implications in his comparative sociology of religion. He explored the term ‘congregation’ (Gemeinde) specifically in some detail, discussing it as part of his exploration of the development and rationalization of prophetic religions (See Swedberg 2005: 51). The term ‘congregation’ in Weber’s specific sense referred to a religious community that permanently gathers around a “prophetic movement”\(^3\). In defining the term ‘congregation’ Weber writes “Primarily, a religious community arises in connection with a prophetic movement as a result of routinization (Veralltaglichung), i.e., as a result of the process whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching and the congregation’s distribution of grace…” (in Swedberg, p.60). For Weber it is this coalescence of a stable set of followers around a prophet or around prophetic teachings that manifests congregational religion as a specific institutional form. Weber’s consideration of religion was of course not just confined to Christianity. It was wide-ranging, both historically and geographically. He notes that different types of religions come together into collectivities in different ways, writing that “congregational

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\(^3\) Congregational religion of this kind is one way in which Weber draws a contrast between religion with magic, in that religion often takes on a congregational of communal form, whereas “The magician, in contrast, exercises his craft independently or, if a member of a guild, serves a particular neighborhood or political group” (1993:61).
religion is a phenomenon of diverse manifestations and great fluidity” (p.64). Weber saw the development of congregational religion as being sociologically significant. Especially the congregational form in which the laity take part in communal religious life alongside religious professionals because, among other things, it shifted the dynamics of power within religions. Congregational religion of this type meant that religious professionals were now, in Weber’s words, “increasingly confronted with the necessity of keeping in mind the needs of the laity, in the interest of enlarging the membership of the community” (p.65).

Since Durkheim and Weber’s foundational work in the sociology of religion the study of religious congregations has become a well-established area of research within the sub-discipline. Religious congregations have been conceptualized from a variety of different sociological perspectives, and there have been a variety of different kinds of studies on religious congregations. This research ranges from large macro studies examining patterns across congregations (Chaves 2004; Ammerman 2005 etc.), to smaller case studies focusing on a handful of congregations (Ammerman 1997; Hopewell 1987; Ellingson 2007 etc.), as well as single case studies, focusing on just one congregation (eg: Marina 2013). Congregational research also varies in approach and focus, involving cultural, ecological, organizational, and other types of analyses (Ammerman et al 1998).

The study of religious congregations is often interdisciplinary, comprised of research by sociologists and religious professionals of various kinds, often collaboratively. Denominations, religious organizations, and congregations themselves have a clear practical interest in
understanding the sociology of congregations. The questions religious professionals ask about congregations are very often similar to the ones that sociologists ask; why do congregations succeed or fail? How is congregational community formed? What types of worship and other activities happen in congregations? How are congregations embedded within broader social and religious ecologies? The interdisciplinary nature of congregational research is exemplified by the earliest examples of this kind of work, done by Harlan Paul Douglass (Douglass 1926; 1927; and Douglass and Brunner 1935), as both he and his colleague Edmund de S. Brunner had professional lives as pastors and as sociologists (See Chaves (2004) p.4 and 6 for more discussion of this work). Congregational studies such as this doctoral dissertation, then, have use beyond the sociological academy; they can be of practical use to religious professionals and religious leaders seeking to understand congregational cultures, dynamics, patterns of membership, and so on.

**Defining the term ‘congregation’**

While the term ‘congregation’ may be somewhat self-explanatory, as with any kind of sociological research it is important to provide a clear definition of the term being used. In what ways do religious congregations differ from other social groups? What distinguishes them in particular? At a basic level we might define congregations as social groups that gather together for the purposes of religious activity, specifically, religious worship. In the context of the United States, congregationalism⁴ is voluntary and has given rise to a wide array of different kinds of

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⁴ As Christiano et al (2008: 98-102) note, the term ‘congregationalism’ has several different meanings and uses. It has been used to refer to the denomination of the Congregational Church, which today is called The United Church of Christ (UCC). Christiano et al also note that congregationalism, in the sense of a voluntary gathering of people
congregations, each with their own unique organization, practices, and so on. A further key feature of religious congregations, as emphasized by Weber, is the involvement of the laity alongside religious professionals. Additionally, religious congregations are intentional, stable, and persistent social groups, not simply ad hoc gatherings of individuals. Many of these points are touched upon by Mark Chaves (2004) in his definition:

By ‘congregation’ I mean a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regular scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather and the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering. (Chaves 2004: 1-2)

The use of the word ‘continuity’ is important here, emphasizing that congregations are stable social groups which display persistent patterns of regular activity and membership over time. This differentiates congregations from other kinds of religious gatherings or events which may involve similar activities, such as preaching, singing, and prayer. Chaves mentions religious holidays and “pilgrimages, rock concerts, passion plays, revivals” (p.2), as examples here. These gatherings may be religious in intent and activity, but they differ from congregations because they occur on a less frequent basis and lack continuity in terms of time, location, and participants.

Chaves recognizes there are problems with this definition, and there may be, as he says, “borderline cases”. It is also important that we do not overemphasize the notion of stability and together for religious worship, is “quintessentially American” in that it “has come to symbolize a great principle - namely the religious voluntarism of denominationalism” (p.101).
regularity. Congregations may be notable in comparison to other religious gatherings for their
relative stability and regularity of membership and location. However, congregations are not
necessarily static or internally coherent. As will be discussed later in this chapter, religious
congregations are dynamic social institutions that are subject to change and variation over time
on a range of different measures, perhaps most notably changes in membership and leadership.
They may also be internally differentiated; made up of different social groups, with each sub-
group having their own activities, power, and religious identities.

Congregations are also not autonomous social institutions. They are usually embedded, to a
greater or lesser extent, within a range of networks and wider social and religious ecologies. In
the first-place congregations are often connected with other congregations and other religious
organizations in various ways. Most commonly this kind of connectedness comes from being a
member of a national or international denomination. Congregations are also embedded within a
variety of different cultural and social contexts, most notably their immediate local community
and society. As with all social institutions, then, we might say that religious congregations are, in
a sense, the result of a dialectic between stability and change; on the one hand displaying
patterns of organizational regularity, while on the other hand being subject to variation over time
as a result of internal and external social forces (See Chaves (2004) Chapter 8 ‘Beyond
Congregations’).

Religious pluralism and the climate of religious freedom and voluntarism in the United States
has given rise to a wide array of different religious congregations. There is therefore
considerable variation amongst congregations in terms of their organization, and the types of worship, religious education, social service provision, and other activities that they engage in. However, in general terms, religious congregations as social institutions display a high degree of uniformity. Nancy Ammerman (2005) writes that religious congregations in the United States, no matter their religious affiliation or denomination, tend to exhibit similar characteristics; characteristics derived from American Protestantism. To quote her at length, she says the following:

…there are common patterns in how people have chosen to gather. Some of those patterns seem to come from the contingencies of being a congregation in the American cultural context. Sociologists call this ‘institutional isomorphism’ – organizations that occupy the same ‘field’ (or category) come to look like each other, both in function and in structure… The pattern that shapes American congregational life is essentially Protestant in form… They build buildings, designate leaders, undertake projects, elect boards of trustees, and schedule weekly worship and religious education. Members voluntarily join and leave and just as voluntarily choose which religious authorities they will honor. Both what they do together and how they do it result in part from a peculiarly American way of organizing religion. (p.3)

From Ammerman’s description here we can identify a series of organizational features and ongoing activities which we would expect to find if we were to examine any given religion congregation. First and foremost we would expect there to be a weekly worship service and a hierarchy of leadership, involving at least one person in a leadership role. Additionally, we would expect to find the congregation involved in other additional activities, such as religious education, which Ammerman mentions. Undertaking “projects” is also motioned, which could mean a variety of different things, from social service provision to political activism, or more

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5 Also see Warner (1994: 54), “In the United States today, we are seeing convergence across religious traditions towards de facto congregationalism, more or less on the model of the reformed Protestant tradition of the congregation as a voluntary gathered community” (p.54).
mundane activities such as social events, perhaps. Finally, we might expect there to be variation in membership and religious belief, as Ammerman mentions the voluntary nature of both.

In addition to understanding some of the main characteristics of religious congregations, it is also important to know what kinds of variation exists in the congregational field as whole. For example, what is the distribution of congregations in terms of religious tradition? And what kinds of activities and characteristics are the most common and least amongst religious congregations? To answer some of these questions I now turn to a discussion of the 1998 National Congregations Study (NCS), as reported by Chaves (2004). This was one of the most extensive studies of religious congregations in the United States in recent years.

**Patterns and trends amongst religious congregations**

Chaves (2004) estimates that there are over 300,000 religious congregations in the United States, with approximately 60 percent of the adult population attending at least once annually, and approximately 25 percent attending on a weekly basis. Congregations are mostly small; 59 percent of congregations have less than one hundred participants. However, Chaves writes that, “although most congregations are small most people are associated with large congregations… The largest 10 percent of congregations contain about half of all church goers” (p.18-19, original emphasis). It is perhaps no surprise that this distribution is mirrored in congregational finances; most congregations operate on slim budgets, but a few congregations have very large budgets indeed. Chaves observes, “the well-endowed congregation is a rarity. The median congregation has about $1000 in a savings account, and even the median person’s congregation has savings of
only $20,000. Only 7 percent of congregations have endowments or savings that total twice their operating budget” (p.20). Chaves draws a couple of conclusions from this. First, that fundraising is almost always a major priority for most congregations. Second, contrary to popular wisdom, congregations generally lack the basic resources necessary to provide effective social service provision or other extracurricular activities.

A complex picture emerges from the data on the denominational affiliation of religious congregations. Chaves’s analysis highlights a number of different distinctions that must be made when considering this issue. For example, Chaves notes a distinction that must be borne in mind between the denominational affiliation of individual congregants, and the denominational affiliation of the religious congregation to which they belong. While there is clearly a high degree of overlap, the two religious identities should not be assumed to be the same. Chaves writes, “Organizationally, individuals do not, in general, directly become members of denominations. They belong to congregations, most of which are in turn attached to umbrella religious organizations: denominations” (p.21). Among other things this observation implies that congregational identity and membership may be more subjectively important to the religious participant, and play a more important role in shaping religious identity, than direct formal denominational affiliation. This fits with the arguments explored in previous chapters concerning the declining social significance of denominationalism (Wuthnow 1988).

In considering the denominational identity of religious congregations Chaves also distinguishes between formal denominational affiliations on the one hand, and the embodiment of religious
traditions on the other. The degree to which religious congregations are affiliated with
denominations varies. It might, for example, be the case that congregations simultaneously
embody a religious tradition while remaining unaffiliated with a formal denomination. Another
issue adding to the complexity here is that several different denominations may be the carrier of
one single religious tradition. As Chaves points out, Lutheranism in the U.S. is an interesting
example in this regard, being split into two denominations; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in
America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Taking these complexities into account, Chaves’s data show that the Baptist religious tradition
has the most congregations in the United States (30%) and accounts for a large proportion of the
total number of churchgoers (21%). Catholicism claims a larger proportion of churchgoers than
the Baptists (29%), but only makes up 6% of the total number of congregations. This, Chaves
explains, is due to the fact that Catholic congregations are usually very large. 16% of
congregations in the United States are Methodist (taking 11% of all churchgoers), 10% are
Pentecostal (taking 6% of churchgoers). 7% are Presbyterian Reformed (taking 7% of
churchgoers). And 6% of congregations are Lutheran (8% of churchgoers). A further way in
which Chaves breaks down the congregational distribution is distinguishing between
theologically “liberal” and “conservative” congregations, which he defines as “religion that
places spiritual value on reformist engagement with the state and society and, on the other hand,
religion in which the primary spiritual goal is salvation for the individual through religious and
moral discipline” (p.27). He breaks down the data on liberal and conservative congregations in
two ways, firstly by looking at the official religious tradition and denomination of the
congregation, and then by looking at how congregations self-identify themselves, regardless of
accounting for their denominational affiliation. In terms of religious tradition Chaves writes “56 percent of American congregations (containing 38 percent of those who regularly attend a religious service) affiliate with predominantly white, conservative, and evangelical Protestant religious traditions. Approximately one quarter of both congregations and regular attenders affiliate with moderate to liberal Protestant religious traditions” (p.28). A broadly similar pattern is present in data concerning self-identified theological orientation; “59 percent of congregations (containing 53 percent of the regular attenders) are theologically ‘more on the conservative side,’ 11 percent (containing 10 percent of the people) are ‘more on the liberal side’ and 29 percent (containing 38 percent of the people) say they are ‘right in the middle’. Only a small minority of American congregations think of themselves as ‘theologically liberal’” (p.28-29).

A key question that Chaves seeks to answer in his analysis is; what do religious congregations contribute to American life? The data on congregations show that they undertake a wide array of activities in addition to religious worship. These activities include religious education, social service provision, political activism, and a range of social activities and events. However, the extent and impact of these activities varies from congregation to congregation, and overall, Chaves argues, religious congregations do not have a great deal of impact beyond the cultural sphere. Although religious congregations are commonly thought to engage in social service provision, charitable giving, and political activism, in fact the NCS data show this is not the case. The degree of activity in these areas by religious congregations as whole is generally quite low and where they do take place their extent and impact is relatively minor. Congregations have the biggest impact in the artistic and cultural spheres of social life. In this regard Chaves states the following:
Three overlapping aspects of congregational culture – the worship events they produce, the religious knowledge they transmit, and the artistic activity they facilitate – occupy more congregations, engage more people, and use more resources than either congregations’ social service provision or their political activities. They are the most important means by which congregations involve individuals and connect with the world outside their walls. (p.181)

As mentioned, religious congregations generally lack the resources to sustain effective social service provision and other extracurricular projects. The resources that religious congregations do have are usually put towards their primary activity and institutional purpose; the act of worship. Congregations may vary in terms of the extent to which they are willing or able to prioritize charitable giving, serving the local community, and so on. However, religious worship is almost always the central activity for every congregation, no matter what their budget and resources. The argument Chaves is making here is that religious worship involves a broad range of creative arts, including singing, the performance of music, dance, plays, or any number of other art forms. Given the prevalence of religious congregations and their popularity, this intensive and pervasive artistic activity serves to greatly enrich the cultural sphere. Just as congregations are the primary social institutions through which religiosity is expressed and learned, they are also the primary institutions through which most American’s regularly engage with ‘the arts’, broadly conceived; the production or the consumption of artistic activities. By way of conclusion, Chaves writes “Although many might wish it otherwise, congregations facilitate art, and perhaps on occasion, even beauty, more commonly and more intensively than they pursue either charity or justice” (p. 201).
The culture of congregations

Looking at the National Congregations Study, and the other literature discussed in this chapter, has helped us to arrive at a clearer sense of what religious congregations are, the denominational distribution of congregations, and what the main priorities and activities of congregations are as social institutions. Having explored the main characteristics of religious congregations I would like now to turn to the subject of how we can approach studying them, with particular focus on the analysis of congregations as religious subcultures.

Ammerman et al’s (1998) *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* recommends four ‘frames’ for congregational research; ecological, cultural, resource, and process. While all of these frameworks are important, given that my focus is on the questions concerning religious identities, the culture frame is particularly important. In this regard Ammerman’s chapter titled ‘Culture and Identity in the Congregation’ (in the same book) provides a useful conceptual and practical guide for conducting research into the culture of congregations. In this chapter Ammerman conceptualizes congregations as dynamic and complex social groups, each with their own unique subculture. The congregational subculture is composed of many different elements and influences, including “the congregation’s history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals and worldview. It is shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together” (p.78). Congregations are always, no matter how tangentially, connected to wider religious traditions and structures. Congregations are also always embedded within societies which themselves have particular normative cultural expectations. These external cultural influences may affect the kinds of language used in
congregations, how congregations are organized, when the congregation meets, and expectations concerning dress, and so on. However, the degree to which a congregation is integrated with and influenced by the wider society around them may vary. It may be, for example, that a congregation is consciously ‘world-rejecting’, as it were, and actively distances itself from the practices and norms of the society around them.

The congregation is, in a sense, a combination of the local and the global. It is comprised of members from the immediate neighborhood, and is always adapting to local circumstances and contingencies. At the same time it is always embedded within, or related to, wider social and religious structures. The culture of a religious congregation is not a fixed static thing; it fluctuates and changes over time, according to fluctuations and changes in internal and external circumstances. Congregations are therefore dynamic organizations. They may change, grow, or perhaps decay and die, depending on specific circumstances. Whenever a congregation moves to a new location, or takes on new members, or undergoes a change of leadership, or the norms of wider society around the congregation change, the culture of a congregation will often change accordingly. In addition to being dynamic organizations religious congregations are also internally stratified subcultures.

Ammerman suggests that the researcher can break the culture of a congregation down into three areas of inquiry; activities, artifacts, and accounts (p.84-101). Interpreting these three aspects of a congregational life provides a window, not only on what the congregation does, but how the congregation sees itself and the religious meanings it generates. Analysis of congregational
‘activities’ obviously starts first and foremost with whatever worship activities the congregation engages in. Worship is the primary purpose for people to gathering together in religious congregations. As Chaves suggests, worship is the central aspect of the life of the congregation and its identity. Analysis of the religious rituals of a congregation might include consideration of a wide variety of issues, such as what people are wearing, the various objects that are used, the music being played or sung, the words and gestures that are used, and so on. Ammerman notes that rituals are often sensory and sensual experiences, engaging the senses and emotions in different ways. Rituals also provide insight into the social structure of the congregation. Ritual participation may be hierarchical, with particular roles reserved for religious professionals or for lay people. Ritual participation might also be gendered, or characterized by other kinds of boundaries. In this way rituals of worship can reveal divisions and boundaries within congregational life as a whole, or perhaps widely held attitudes, or cultural and religious values specific to that congregation. Rituals also of course help to reveal the theological orientation of the congregation, and what matters to the congregation in terms of religious beliefs and meanings. Whenever the congregation engages in rituals, whether it is a regular weekly service, or special meetings, or individual rites of passage such as a baptism, the culture of the congregation is revealed. Beyond, rituals of worship Ammerman notes that congregations invariably participate in other activities, such as educational activities, community outreach, and social activities. These can also be taken into consideration as part of the culture of the congregation, and signifiers of values, beliefs, theological predispositions, and so on.

The ‘artifacts’ of a congregation, or what we might call the material culture of congregational life, also needs to be considered. Ammerman writes that “Congregations are both producers and
consumers of vast arrays of material objects” (p.91), and that these artifacts are an integral part of the culture of a congregation. Beyond the objects directly used in ritual, the material culture of a congregation includes the building in which it meets and the way in which the space is furnished and laid out. Analysis of the use of space again may provide insights into the social structure of the congregation, such as boundaries, divisions and hierarchies.

Finally, consideration of the culture of a congregation must, Ammerman says, include consideration of the ‘accounts’ of the congregation, or “The Stories Congregations Tell” (p.92). The language the congregation uses to name particular aspects of their religious life may be of significance here. Each congregation also has a history that is an integral part of its identity. Important moments in the life of the congregation, and how its members recount those moments, can reveal much about the ways in which congregational life may be meaningful for those involved. It may be that these stories concerning the history of the congregation also have religious significance for the congregation, taking on the quality of myths. “Myths”, Ammerman writes “are stories that ground our history in something bigger” (p.95). Therefore the accounts the congregation gives about its origins and particular moments of struggle in its history may be directly or indirectly contextualized with reference to God, the transcendent, or the divine. The accounts, whether mundane or mythic, which congregations give about themselves and others may be indicative of a particular worldview. While Ammerman notes, not all congregants will necessarily share precisely the same worldview. However, she writes that “there are often dominant worldviews in a congregation that follow one of these themes more than another” (p.96). Finally, Ammerman notes that the researcher should consider the kinds of symbols, images, metaphors and theologies that most frequently circulate within the congregation (p.97-
Explicit use of visual symbolism, such as, most obviously, displaying the cross in Christian congregations, may feature prominently as part of the ritual life of the congregation, or within congregational spaces. However, the more mundane aspects of congregational life may also have implicit or explicit symbolic significance, again revealing something about the congregation’s worldview or theological orientation.

Clearly, then, the analysis of the culture of a congregation in terms of activities, artifacts, and accounts, potentially encompasses an extremely wide range of data. By way of summary Ammerman (p.101) suggests the use of six questions to guide data collection and organization. These recommendations were extremely helpful for me in designing my own congregational study, and considering the kinds of data I would need to collect in order to construct an account of the culture of the congregation. The questions are as follows:

- Which rituals are most predictable and central to the congregation’s culture?
- Which other activities are most instrumental in shaping the people who participate and in influencing what this group thinks of itself?
- What symbols best describe who they are? What objects, people, and events carry meanings linking them to the ideals of this group?
- Which routine practices and styles of relationship best capture what this congregation values most?
- What stories are the essential myths of this people?
- What beliefs and ideas best describe what they think a practicing member ought to be like?
Conclusions

Having suggested in early chapters that the congregation is an important site conceptually with regards deinstitutionalized religion and religious individualism, in this chapter I have sought to explore the sociology of religious congregations specifically, and approaches to studying congregations. I have tried to suggest how and why congregations are important sociological objects of study in general, and how, therefore, congregational research can make important contributions to scholarship, as well as be of practical use for religious professionals. I have explored some of the aspects of the congregational landscape of the United States, and touched on the ways in which the sociology of religious congregations is linked to, and has a bearing upon, the sociological study of religious identity and religious denominations. Some of the principle arguments to emerge from this chapter are, firstly that religious congregations are ubiquitous institutions within the American landscape, encompassing large numbers of the population in their activities. Secondly, that religious worship is unsurprisingly the central activity of religious congregations, and perhaps more surprisingly that, according to Chaves’ findings, the primary contribution of religious congregations to social life in general is a cultural and artistic one. However, one key question still remains – what is the precise relationship between religious identity and religious congregations? This is the final piece of the theoretical puzzle which forms the conceptual framework of this doctoral research, and is a question that I will now explore in the fourth and final chapter of this first part of the thesis.
Chapter 4 - The Formation of Religious Identities

To bring Part One of this dissertation to a close I would now like to turn to the question of religious identity. So far we have looked at the rise of religious individualism, the decline of denominationalism, individualism within Christianity, and the sociology of congregations. A number of key sociological problems and questions have been identified in relation to these issues. In many respects these problems and questions coalesce around the issue of religious identity, how it is defined, understood, and expressed by individuals and institutions, and how we as sociologists can best study it. In this chapter I consider the concepts of ascription, achievement, and narrative, as providing a framework for understanding religious identity.

Following arguments made by Robert Wuthnow (1993) in *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, I discuss how Christian identity contains a strong element of ascription, in so far as it is intimately related to membership of, and engagement with, religious congregations and congregational practices. This important observation suggests two things of note. First, that religious congregations and congregational communities are especially important sites for the formation of Christian identity, and the continued validity and vitality of Christianity itself. Second, that religious individualism, in a sense, poses a fundamental problem for the formation of Christian identity, to the degree that it manifests itself as disengagement from religious institutions.
Theorizing identity and religious identity

Religious identity is a somewhat understudied subject in sociology, with the main work in this area focused on the relationship between religious identity and immigration (Peek 2005)\textsuperscript{6}. There is a sense in which thinking about the question of identity cuts to the core of the sociological problematic at the heart of the discipline; the relationship between the individual and society, structure and agency (Ammerman 2003; Cadge and Davidman 2006). Who are we? And how is who we are related to the wider society in which we live? Mills (1959) famously argued that sociology was about uncovering how our individual biographies are related to the wider histories of which we are a part, and in so doing, helps to relieve a sense of existential crisis or powerlessness that we might feel when confronted with seemingly personal ordeals. Equally well-known is Karl Marx’s proclamation that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (p.595, in Tucker 1978).

One key way in which premodern and modern identities are contrasted is in terms of ascribed and achieved identity. Identities in premodern society are seen to be based on ascription, while identities in modern society are based more on achievement (Wuthnow 1993; Cadge and Davidman 2006; also see Linton 1936, Parsons 1982). Here ascribed identity refers to characteristics that are conferred upon an individual, either by virtue of their location within the

social structure, or by virtue of inherited or biological characteristics. Achieved identity, on the other hand, refers to status or identity conferred upon an individual on the basis of their own agency. The dichotomy between achieved and ascribed identity provides one way in which we can theorize about religious identities.

There are a variety of ways in which religious identity manifests itself as an ascribed identity. Being born into a society in which citizens are expected and assumed to practice an official religion of the state might be an example of religious identity being inherited at birth. Similarly, an individual might be born into a family that are carriers of a particular religious identity. Therefore, that individual is expected and assumed to also take on the religious identity of the family themselves. In both examples, the individual is socialized into that religious identity by default, as it were; by virtue of being born in a particular time and place. In the context of the religious voluntarism of the United States, religious identity is perhaps best thought of as an achieved identity, something which is chosen rather than something which is imposed or inherited. This reading of religious identity fits with the notion that identity in modern society is not as wedded to traditions and social structures as it may have been in premodern societies.

However, recent research is generally dismissive of the simplistic either/or binary reading of identity which this dichotomy tends to suggest (Peek 2005; Cadge and Davidman 2006). It seems clear that religious identity is always in fact a mixture of both ascribed and achieved aspects, and that the ascribed/achieved dualism is something of a false dichotomy. In their research on Jews and Buddhists, for example, Wendy Cadge and Lynne Davidman (2006) found that the
narratives of their respondents usually began with an account of being born into a particular religion (ascription) and then subsequently involved the active cultivation of that religious identity (achievement), particularly through ongoing reflexive engagement with religious practices most associated with their respective traditions. Similarly, Lori Peek’s (2005), examination of Muslim identities in the United States after September 11th 2001, found that the formation of religious identity moves through three stages; 1) ascription 2) achievement, and 3) declaration. At the initial ascription stage, religious identity is inherited at birth, but is not a particularly important aspect of the individual’s sense of self. It is at the second stage, when religious identity shifts to become an achieved identity, becoming a prominent aspect of the self. This is “religion as a chosen identity” (p.236), an identity that individuals “consciously decided to embrace” (Ibid). At the third stage, religious identity is a declared identity, something which the individual consciously asserts. In the case of the Muslims interviewed for Peek’s research following the September 11th attacks, this declaration of religious identity was motivated by a desire to “retain a positive self-perception and correct public misperception” (Ibid).

**Religious identity: interaction and institutions**

Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of identity in (late)modern society, religious identity is best thought of as one aspect of identity in general. Religious practices are one set of practices amongst many that an individual engages in. Similarly, religion provides one lens amongst many through which an individual comes to understand themselves, understand the world around them, and take action in the world. Religious identity, like all aspects of identity, can be comprised of both subjective and objective aspects. That is, identity is to do with how we perceive ourselves and the world around us, as well how we are perceived by others. In addition,
the formation of identities happens through formal institutional processes; an educational institution officially confers individuals with educational qualifications, an employer officially confers an individual with an occupational status, a nation-state officially confers citizenship status. Alternatively, the formation of identities happens through informal processes, for example, through everyday social interaction or the kinds of media we consume.

We can consider religious identities in the same way. They can be formed through informal or formal processes, and have subjective or objective characteristics. For example, we might informally come to learn about a particular religious faith through a chance encounter with religious literature or other media. In contrast, we might have a religious identity formally conferred upon us by a church or other religious institution, usually after engaging in particular rituals and rites. At a subjective level, we might perceive ourselves as having a religious identity of some kind, and might self-identify ourselves in the presence of others as being Christian, or Muslim, etc. (Or perhaps self-identify as having a less clearly delineated faith, religiosity or spirituality). At an objective level, others can perceive us from their perspective as having a particular kind of religious identity, and label us as such. In considering the formation of religious identity as a whole, the informal/formal and the subjective/objective should not be seen as mutually exclusive categories. Each of the categories may also not necessarily be mutually supporting; the formation of religious identity may be the result of informal non-institutional processes and experiences without any official religious identity being conferred through formal institutional processes (and vice-versa). Similarly, concerning subjective/objective identity formation, someone might self-identify subjectively as ‘Jewish’, for example, while others, for
whatever reason, may disagree, or perceive the religious identity of that person in a different way.

Whether the formation of religious identity is a subjective or objective process, an informal or a formal process, in all cases, from a sociological perspective, we must see the formation of identity is a *social* process. That is, it happens through social interaction between individuals, and between individuals, social institutions, and social structures. This was very much the argument made by Robert Wuthnow (1993) in *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, in his discussion of the formation of religious identity, and the formation of Christian identity in particular. Christian identity, Wuthnow argues, usually takes place in the context of, and in relation to, a broader religious community. He writes “We discover our identity as we interact with people. Most communities exist prior to us, and in this sense are already there as potential sources from which we can derive our identity. If religious identity is to be significant to the individual, it must be developed in relation to some community” (p.7). This therefore draws our attention to congregations as sites in which religious identities are formed. They are sites of preexisting and historically grounded religious culture, featuring a high degree of social interaction and shared practices and rituals.

A second key way in which religious communities are linked to religious identity is the role they play as the sole gatekeepers of legitimate religious knowledge, and the official conferrers of formal religious identity. By engaging in rites and rituals (in the case of Christianity, confirmation and baptism) within the context of a religious community, an individual can have a
religious identity formally conferred upon them. For Wuthnow, it is for precisely this reason that churches will continue to hold an important role in the formation of Christian identity; because they and they alone retain the legitimate authority to confer that identity. Despite trends towards religious individualism, non-institutional spirituality, religious voluntarism, and the decline in denominationalism, churches remain, Wuthnow argues, the gatekeepers of Christian identity. When all is said and done, churches, and churches alone, can confer that identity; they are the holders of official Christian knowledge, education, means of salvation, and the official arbiters of rites at the key moments of a Christian’s life, such as birth, death, and marriage (p.44-45).

Whereas religious institutions of the past may have held legitimate authority in a variety of spheres of life, such as education, law, spirituality, and politics, those functions have now diminished. Wuthnow therefore speculates that a primary function of churches, one of the few meaningful functions that they in fact still retain in contemporary society, is as a source of Christian identity. Additionally, Wuthnow notes that churches have an important “memory-preserving function” (p.47), being one of the few sources left of deep community in the contemporary social landscape; a landscape in which the secular sources of community, such as the workplace or the mass media, only provide “shallow ties to the past” (Ibid).

Religious identity is in some way a function of church membership or association with a religious institution or tradition. Indeed Wuthnow’s argument is that the future viability and strength of Christian identity itself is dependent upon the strength of religious communities and their ability to effectively confer that religious identity through the sharing of stories, narratives,
and symbols of belief and faith, in the context of strong religious community\textsuperscript{7}. The strength and viability of Christian identities and communities, in turn, itself is dependent on the ability of churches to continue to tell and retell narratives of the past, narratives that are seen as legitimate, authoritative, and meaningful to those who hear them, in the context of a society that is increasingly dominated by secular institutions and communities, which are more transient superficial, and divorced from the past. I will now move onto address the relationship between narrative, community and religious identity in more detail.

**Narrative and narrative identities**

A core theme running through much of the work on religious identity is the role of narrative, and how narrative contributes to the formation of religious identity, both at an individual level and at a communal or institutional level (Wuthnow 1993; Ammerman 2003; Somers 1994; Hopewell 1987; Hervieu-Leger 2000). A key assumption here is that how we speak about ourselves – the words we use, the stories we tell about ourselves (to others and to ourselves) – all play a major role in the way in which we construct our identities. It is through narrative that we come to understand and explain who we are and what our place is in the world around us. Importantly, also, narratives link the speaker to the past, to social institutions, to histories, to practices, and to other identities; it places the speaker within a plot, generating a story which has a coherence, a chronology, and an internal logic (Ammerman 2003). Narrative therefore provides a context and explanation for action, and in so doing provides meaning for that action.

\textsuperscript{7} See Wuthnow (1993) p.99-101, p.188-190
The function of narrative as a link with the past is important in terms of providing a strong and deep grounding for religious community and religious identity. As discussed above, Wuthnow (1993) argued that the strength and viability of Christian identity was dependent upon the ability of churches to continue to disseminate the core narratives of the faith, and for those narratives to be heard, and to be seen to be legitimate accounts of the sacred. He writes “while the idea of church-as-storyteller may seem to diminish its importance, this function must actually be seen as having the utmost significance for the very likelihood of anyone in the future retaining the identity of ‘Christian’ depends on it” (p.48). Using a phrase also used by Bellah et al (1985: 152-155) Wuthnow describes churches as “communities of memory” (p.47), carriers of historical traditions; traditions which are embodied within narrative. The implication of Wuthnow’s argument being; take away the narrative links to the past, and you severe something vital in formation of Christian community, and by extension, the formation of Christian identity. This approach to conceptualizing religion resembles Danièle Hervieu-Leger’s (2000) notion of Religion as a Chain of Memory, in which the mobilization of “collective religious memory” (p.124) is seen as being a fundamental defining feature of religion itself.

Bellah et al’s (1985) use of the term “communities of memory” is also instructive here, illustrating further a number of important arguments about the relationship between narrative, community, and identity. Discussion of this topic showed up in Habits in the Heart in the context of a broader concern in the book about the ambivalence within American culture between an ideology of individualism and a desire for community membership:

Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history – in an important sense they are constituted by their past – and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory’, one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a
community is involved in the retelling of its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. These stories of collective history and exemplary individuals are an important part of the tradition that is so central to the community of memory.

(p.153)

In the context of community, narrative provides connections with past, and hope for the future. It also provides examples of good conduct and morality, and examples of, as Bellah el al say, “what a good person is like” (Ibid). Additionally “A genuine community of memory will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes creates deeper identities than success” (Ibid). While it is clear that narratives have the capacity to ground religious identity and community, it is also clear that there are multiple narratives circulating in any given social setting, at any one particular time (Ammerman 2003). There is, in a sense, a push and pull between structure and agency, in which cultural and institutional narratives meet and interact with individual narratives, and individual narratives meet and interact other individual narratives. In this regard, Ammerman writes, “Action takes place in a relational setting, which is composed of institutions (recognized patterned structural relations), public narratives, and social practices, all of which are both pattered and contested – constructed and constrained” (p.215). There is, then, a dynamism to the ways in which narratives are constructed, disseminated, and appropriated within religious settings. However it is also clear that while there is a multiplicity of narratives in circulation, not all narratives operate on an equal playing field; social interactions and the circulation of narratives which take place within religious institutions are governed by relations of power. For example, the narrative constructed and disseminated by a religious institution may provide the master narrative, forming the dominant context for action and interpretation of meaning within the setting. Strongly institutionalized master narratives may limit the space available for the
circulation of new narratives, and the degree to which agency can be enacted to alter or contest existing narratives. In other circumstances it may be the case the dominant narratives are less pronounced and a higher degree of agency is permitted. Congregations are, to evoke Ammerman’s phrase again, a “relational setting”, containing both institutional narratives, individual narratives, and public narratives. On the one hand, there are the dominant narratives carried by religious institutions which serve in the formation of an institutional religious identity. Though obviously religions differ widely, broadly speaking we would expect religious institutions to implicitly and explicitly embody and disseminate narratives concerning the sacred, faith, belief, the nature of God, morality, death, the afterlife, and so on. For Christians, the Bible itself is a series of narratives; stories which address each of these issues. These stories provide points of reference and meaning which play an important part in the formation of religious identity. The telling and retelling of Bible stories is usually a central part of church life, a central aspect of the church as a religious institution. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ particularly, as related in the Gospels, might typically be interpreted as a story of hope, of sacrifice, of the redemption of sins mankind. While clearly interpretations of this narrative differ in highly complex and nuanced ways between different branches of the faith, the story of the life of Jesus provides the central master narrative for Christianity itself, a master narrative which Christian institutions therefore embody and are oriented towards disseminating.

A second type of religious narrative present within religious settings are the religious narratives of individuals themselves. Ammerman (2003) writes “If we are to understand religious identities… we must begin by attending to episodes of social interaction (whether face-to-face or mediated) that are emplotted in a religious narrative – one in which ‘religious’ actors, ideas,
institutions, and experiences play a role in the story of who we are and who I am” (p.216, original italics). This observation is extremely important for orienting research into religious identity because it helps us as sociologists to identify what exactly qualifies as a ‘religious narrative’ from a sociological perspective. Given that identities are multifaceted and that religious identity is therefore only one aspect of identity as a whole, it is important to be clear about this point, so that we know what we are looking for in the process of trying to characterize and analyze individual religious identities. Where an individual’s worldview and subjective understanding of their life involves reference to the ‘religious’ (whether institutional or non-institutional), we can reasonably call an account given in these terms a ‘religious narrative’.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have looked at the topic of religious identity, considering the ways in which it can be studied from a sociological perspective. In examining ideas concerning ascribed and achieved identity I have indicated the ways in which Christian identity is intimately related, and arguably dependent upon, the strength of religious congregations. At a practical level, this has implications for clergy and religious professionals, drawing attention to the importance of religious community as a fundamental source of Christian identity, as well as drawing attention to the potential damage disengagement from religious institutions can cause, should worshippers

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8 I, like Ammerman, put ‘religious’ in quotations marks here to highlight the fact that what an individual perceives as religious may differ between individuals, and be unexpected. Obviously attending church can be fairly straightforwardly characterized as an interaction with a religious institution. And it would not be unreasonable to expect both a church attendee and a sociologist to characterize the act of someone attending church in this way. However, as Ammerman points out, ‘religious’ experiences, interactions, ideas and so on, can also be encountered outside of religious institutions, in the so-called secular sphere of everyday mundane life (p.216-217). And indeed these encounters with ‘the religious’ outside of formal religious institutions may play a very important part in the formation of religious identity and the religious narratives that comprise that identity.
choose to look elsewhere for fulfillment in their religious lives. At the level of sociological theory, it reinforces the importance of the congregation as a site for sociological research, and in particular, it prompts us to research the ways in religious identities are formed within congregational contexts, the degree to which religious individualism may be in tension with congregations, and the degree to which congregations enable or constrain particular kinds of religiosities. Finally, this chapter has examined narrative as the key medium through which religious identities are formed, expressed, disseminated, and perpetuated. This again highlights the importance of religious congregations as potential carriers of authoritative narratives. In addition, it also highlights the ways in which religious identities are expressed through narrative, and how, from a methodological perspective, religious narratives are an important source of data in this respect, indicating what is meaningful and why, in the religious lives of those we study.
PART II - ST. LYDIA’S: A CASE STUDY

Having outlined a number of key arguments and problems in relation to religious identity, denominationalism, community, and congregations, in this second part of the dissertation I explore these issues through an examination of my particular congregational case, a church called St. Lydia’s in Brooklyn, New York. I begin by discussing methodological issues, including my methods of data collection, and then move on in the remaining chapters to explore several different aspects of the culture of St. Lydia’s, looking at the church’s worship practices, the planting and history of the church, the centrality of community and food in the congregation, and a variety of other issues. I bring Part Two and the dissertation as a whole, to a close by considering what an exploration of the culture of St. Lydia’s tells us about religious change in the United States, particularly in relation to Christian identity, and also how it contributes to the sociological understanding of the tension between religious individualism and congregational religion.
CHAPTER 5 - Methodology

In this chapter I provide a detailed description of the methods I used to generate my data and a rationale for the methodological decisions I made at each stage. The chapter is divided into six sections\(^9\) discussing sampling, methods of data generation, methods of data analysis, ethical issues, credibility and generalizability, and the limitations and delimitations of my methodology and research design. Throughout the chapter I address how my methodological choices were informed by my research questions and my theoretical concerns, and I emphasize some of the distinctive epistemological features of qualitative research. I also consider my methodology in the context of the literature on qualitative methods, touching on a number relevant debates and issues concerning qualitative research approaches and their application in sociology.

I consulted a range of different texts on research methodology during my doctoral work. Of particular importance were Jennifer Mason’s (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, a general text covering all aspects of qualitative research, Robert Yin’s (2009) *Case Study Research*, which shed light on issues of research design, and Nancy Ammerman et al’s (1998) *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, a book which was previously referenced and discussed in the preceding chapters, and which is specifically concerned with doing research on and in religious congregations.

\(^9\) The structure and content of this chapter have been developed with reference to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) ‘Presenting Methodology and Research Approach’, describing best practices for reporting qualitative research methodology in doctoral theses.
Research purpose and research questions

This research is a case study of a religious congregation, driven by a range of theoretical concerns outlined previously. For convenience, here is a restatement of the research questions guiding this research (which were also stated in the introduction):

1) What are the key characteristics of the culture of the congregation? (worship, membership, organization, and so on)
   - How and why do congregants worship at this unique congregation? What is signified as being of value to them in the course of their engagement and participation with the congregation?

2) To what extent and in what ways does the congregation as a religious institution, and its congregants as individuals, have a denominational identity, or affiliate with denominations?
   - Are religious identities in the congregation formed around other concerns and meanings?

3) In what ways does religious individualism manifest itself within the culture of the congregation?
   - To what extent does religious individualism exist in tension with, or symbiosis with, the congregation as a religious institution?

3) What does an exploration of this particular congregation suggest about the sociology of religious change and progressive Christianity in the United States?

Overview of information and data needed

In Chapter 3 I discussed Nancy Ammerman’s suggestion that a researcher focus on the ‘activities, artifacts, and accounts’ in developing an understanding of a culture of a congregation. This provided one key framework to guide my research. Additionally, I consulted Robert Yin’s work on case study research in which he argues that there are six main types of evidence that are appropriate to gather in case studies in particular, allowing the researcher to develop a holistic data set (2009: 101-118). These six types of evidence are; 1) Documentation about or by those
being studied; 2) Archival Records, including sources such as the U.S. census, or maps: records which may provide a context for the case; 3) Interviews with those involved; 4) Direct observation of the setting; 5) Participant observation in the setting 6) Physical Artifacts from the setting itself. One primary advantage of gathering a wide range of evidence such as this is it allows for data triangulation. That is, it allows the researcher to confirm, disconfirm, and ultimately strengthen the study’s findings and conclusions through the comparison of different types of data from different areas of a data set. This is in contrast to research which might draw conclusions from only one type of data, such as observational data, for example (Thumma 1998: 203). My data set on the congregation of St. Lydia’s required information on how the congregation came into being, what its history and origins were, what its worship practices were, the nature of its theology, and its organization. I also needed to gather data about the pastor herself, the other employees of the church, and of course, the congregants who attended the church. I was particularly interested in who the congregants were, what the nature of their faith was, and what motivated them to attend St. Lydia’s and become regular congregants at the church. I also wanted to understand something about the denomination the congregation was a member of, and the wider movements within Christianity with which the congregation self-identified with or was connected to.

*Rationale for the use of qualitative methods*

I considered qualitative research to be an ideal methodological approach to take for this research. The features of qualitative research matched how I conceptualized religious congregations, the kinds of data I needed to obtain to answer my research questions, and the way in which I wanted to approach the research process as a whole. I conceptualized the congregation as a site where
religion is produced, reproduced, and consumed. As well as a site in which religion is experienced, and where religious meanings and ideas circulate and are interpreted. As my research questions indicate, I was first and foremost interested in the culture of the congregation, and the everyday practices, interactions, and experiences which occurred within the congregation. I was also interested in the religious identity of the congregation as a religious institution, and the religious identities of the congregants that went there to worship.

Defining the characteristics of qualitative research is not necessarily straightforward as there are many varieties of qualitative research approach (Silverman 2003; Mason 2002; Marshall and Rossman 1995). While laying out the intentions of their book on designing qualitative research Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (1995: 4) say:

…mainstream qualitative research… entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, values and seeks to discover participants perspectives on their worlds, views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, is both descriptive and analytic, and relies on people’s words and observable behavior as the primary data.

I took this as a guiding statement for my research. I saw it as a statement about what qualitative research is, and what, at best, qualitative research perhaps should be. Marshall and Rossman’s statement also suggests that despite the diversity of qualitative research approaches there are some general principles and features common to most qualitative research. David Silverman (2003: 38), drawing on the work of Martyn Hammersley (1992), discussed this issue also, noting five preferences qualitative researchers usually share. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, qualitative researchers work with qualitative data; that is, their work involves the analysis of texts (broadly conceived). This of course contrasts with quantitative research, which uses
statistical data. Second, qualitative researchers prefer naturally occurring data, which Silverman describes as “observation rather than experiment, unstructured verses structured interviews” (Ibid). Third, central to qualitative research is a focus on the experiences of those being studied, and what those experiences mean to them. Fourth, is a rejection of, (or perhaps skepticism towards) “natural science as a model” (Ibid) for doing social research. And fifth and finally, Silverman notes qualitative research is often inductive, “hypothesis generating research rather than hypothesis testing” (Ibid).

Mason (2002: 3-4) pins down the common features of qualitative research in a slightly different way, highlighting the epistemological distinctiveness of qualitative research. She writes qualitative research is “Grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted” (p.3). Additionally Mason notes that methods of data generation in qualitative research are flexible (as opposed to standardized, as is the case in a paper-based questionnaire, for example), and that qualitative research “aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data” (Ibid). It is worth noting that the epistemological positions and ideas described here very much contrast with the positions and ideas underlying quantitative research, which usually follows the positivistic approach of the natural sciences more closely; focusing on the analysis of large-scale numerical

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10 Though it is also simplistic to simply define qualitative research as ‘not quantitative’ research, and the differences between the two approaches can be overdrawn, and done so in artificial ways (See Silverman 2002: 25, 40).
data sets with the intention of examining formal statistical relationships of causation and correlation between a limited number of specific and clearly defined variables.

Rationale for case study research design

In addition to using qualitative methods as a means of data generation my research uses an embedded single-case study research design, as described by Yin (2009: 46-64). As the term implies, a single-case study refers to research focused on only one case. In this instance the case in question was one religious congregation. This approach contrasts with a multiple case study or a comparative case study design, which might have involved multiple congregational cases. The term ‘embedded’ in this context refers to multiple units of analysis embedded within the single case. For example, in my research I conceptualized individual congregants as units of analysis which could be compared and contrasted with each other, and which were embedded within the wider case of the congregation. Similarly events and occurrences within the setting, such as individual worship services, could also be considered as individual units of analysis embedded within the wider congregational context.

Case studies in general are an appropriate research design choice when the researcher seeks to understand “a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (Yin 2009: 18). Like qualitative methods, this deep and contextual approach is a major strength of case study research designs. As mentioned, experimental or quantitative survey research designs focus on controlling particular variables and examining relationships between them in a decontextualized and abstracted way. A case study approach, on the other hand, focuses on how
the case (or cases) in question is related to the social context in which it is embedded, and examines a multiplicity of different variables and types of data. Yin argues that this complexity means that theory can (and should) play an important role in case study design. The case study researcher uses theory to focus the study, illuminate key research questions and propositions to test, as well as to define the units of analysis, and how to approach the analysis of the data generated (see Yin 2009: 17-19, 35-40). To some extent this marks a degree of difference between qualitative and case study methodologies. As described above, qualitative research is very often inductive; “hypothesis generating research rather than hypothesis testing” as Silverman (2003: 38) noted. Whereas case studies, as described by Yin, use theory to generate hypotheses and provide focus to the research process. Of course it would be wrong to overdraw the distinction here and claim that the two approaches are incompatible. In my own case, my research design contained both deductive and inductive aspects, being driven by particular theoretical concerns, while at the same time seeking to find emergent themes and issues within the data inductively as the research process progressed.

Yin notes five potential rationales for using a single case study design, rather than a multiple case study design. Single case studies are appropriate when the case in question is, 1) a critical case for testing or developing theory; 2) an extreme or unique case, providing insight into something very rare; 3) a representative or typical case in a population, providing insight into a common phenomenon; 4) a revelatory case, providing insight into something not previously studied; or 5) a case studied longitudinally, allowing the researcher to chart development and changes within the case over time (p.47-50). For the most part my single-case study of the congregation St. Lydia’s fits many of these criteria. It is a case study that assists in testing and
developing theory, it is a congregation with unique characteristics, and it is also a revelatory case to the extent that the congregation has not been the object of sociological research previously. My case study is also longitudinal, allowing me to look at changes in the congregation over a period of months and years.

**Sampling**

Sampling is an important aspect of any research process. However, the language of ‘sampling’ and the formal scientific implications it carries is also problematic in the context of qualitative research, and in the context of case study research designs. Generalizability and representativeness matter in different ways in qualitative research and case studies than in other kinds of research. For example, because statistical generalization is not the goal of a qualitative case study, issues of ‘sample size’ and ‘sample characteristics’, and so on, are rendered relatively meaningless (see Yin 2009: 38-39). Similarly, the notion of sampling is problematic in qualitative research because sampling and the research process itself is often iterative and flexible, and therefore is not necessarily as procedural or as formal as the term ‘sampling’ implies. I discuss many of these issues in more detail later in this chapter when I consider the credibility, dependability, and transferability of my findings.

Despite the ambivalence around the term ‘sampling’ in qualitative case studies, the issue still needs to be carefully considered, not least because, at the most general level, where data come from has a profound effect on the outcomes of any research and the potential significance of the research findings. There were at least two major sampling issues that had to be considered in the
course of my doctoral research. First, the decision to conduct a case study on one specific religious congregation was a sampling decision; a choice of a research setting amongst a variety of different possible research settings. The second sampling decision concerned the selection of interviewees; who exactly would I conduct in-depth interviews with?

Each of the sampling choices I made followed what is commonly described as strategic sampling; choosing the congregation and units of analysis within it on the basis of my particular research questions and theoretical concerns. In discussions of sampling in social research it is common to differentiate between strategic and representative sampling procedures (Mason 2002: 123-127). Strategic sampling (sometimes referred to as purposeful sampling) refers to a sample constructed on the basis of the purpose and focus of the research. This contrasts with representative sampling, referring to a sample constructed so that its characteristics reflect the characteristics of the population from which it is drawn. In my own case, the main goal of my research was to produce a case study of a particular congregation through which I could explore a variety of theoretical issues. I was employing strategic sampling procedures by selecting a congregation on the basis of its relevance to specific sociological questions and theoretical issues. Rather than attempting to construct a sample that was statistically representative of a specific population. As Linda Dale Bloomberg and Marie Volpe note “The logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (p.104). Additionally, I was employing a theoretical sampling strategy; that is, sampling on basis of a desire to explore specific theoretical
questions or develop particular theoretical ideas (see Mason 2002: 123-127; Bloomberg and Volpe 2012: 104).11

There are clear benefits of this focused and theoretically driven approach, with its emphasis on ‘information rich’ cases. However purposeful sampling inevitably raises the problem of the limitations of small-scale qualitative studies. An issue which I address below when discussing the limitations of my research. For now, I would like to briefly note in the following subsections the rationale for my sampling choices regarding the congregation and the congregants.

*The congregation*

I chose the congregation of St. Lydia’s as the focus of my research because of its unique characteristics which would provide research site through which to explore a number of important theoretical debates in the sociology of religion, debates and problems outlined in Part One of this dissertation. Initially, my research was driven by a general sociological interest in the culture of religious congregations, especially congregations which appeared to differ from the norm and were outliers in the congregational field in some way. Congregations of this kind seemed to me to be the ideal setting through which to explore issues of secularization and ‘secularized religion’, debates which have tended to dominate in the sociology of religion. I considered these self-consciously innovative congregations of sociological interest because I viewed their religious innovation as shifting the boundaries and defined parameters of religious

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11 Also see Glaser and Strauss (1967); Strauss (1987); Strauss and Corbin (1990) on theoretical sampling in grounded theory, also Charmaz and Mitchell (2011): 168-169 on theoretical sampling in the context of grounded theory and ethnography.
norms and organizational forms, creating new kinds of worship spaces, practices, and experiences. I therefore anticipated that these settings would contain marginal, liminal, and ambivalent religious identities, and that examining the formation of these new and dynamic religious cultures would provide insights into what was meaningful about religion to the people who engage in it. I would also encounter, I assumed, the tensions between the religious and the secular, and the tensions between religious tradition and religious change, all being played out within the context of a religious institution, a church setting. Although the way in which I framed my research shifted in different directions over time (away from the secularization debate per se) my principle interest in the sociological value of innovative and non-normative religious congregations remained the same.

**Interviewee sample**

I interviewed as many congregants as I could, and as many different types of congregants as I could (in terms of demographic characteristics, length of membership in the congregation, frequency of attendance, etc.). This is a general approach recommended by Scott Thumma (1998: 205) in his discussion of interviewing as a method in congregational research. I wanted to construct an interviewee sample that was as large as possible and would contain enough variety so as to provide a holistic account of my congregational case, and the congregants therein. Obtaining maximum variation within the sample allowed me to build a picture of the religious identities of the congregants as individuals, and to identify patterns, commonalities, and trends amongst the congregants. However, the degree to which I was able to achieve a large sample of interviewees was necessarily limited given that the congregation was so small, with approximately 20-40 congregants attending worship services at the church on a regular basis, and
a degree of transience and variability in congregant attendance. There was also no sampling frame available, in a formal sense. In other words, there was no official membership list for the congregation from which to sample from in a systematic way. In addition to sampling congregants I also sought to interview the pastor of the church, and other employees, as well as congregants in key leadership positions and those who had been involved in the early stages of the congregation’s life. Interviewing the pastor and others in leadership positions provided perspectives on the congregation which differed from the congregants. It also provided information I needed concerning the founding of the congregation, as well as resource and organizational issues that lay congregants were unlikely to know about.

My final interviewee sample consisted of fourteen congregants and the founders of the congregation itself, pastor Emily Scott and Rachel Pollak. I also interviewed Julia Macy Stroud when she was hired to replace Rachel Pollak as community coordinator at the church. Finally, I interviewed pastor Johnathan Linman, the assistant to the Bishop for Faith and Leadership Formation, in the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the synod of which St. Lydia’s is a part.

**Data Generation Methods**

My primary means of data generation were in-depth interviews with congregants and the congregational leadership, supplemented by participant observation within the congregation. Additionally I collected documents and materials written and used by the congregation (and written by others about the congregation). These documents included worship scripts, sermons,
minutes from meetings, websites and online articles. Taken together, in-depth interviews with
the congregation, participant observation at the church, and the collection of documents provided
a comprehensive and holistic data set on the congregation.

**In-depth interviews**

The main goal of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews was to understand the
perspectives of the congregants concerning what mattered to them about their participation at St.
Lydia’s and their religious belief and faith. I also wanted to understand the religious lives of the
congregants, their denominational affiliations, and their previous histories of going (or not going)
to church. The interviews usually lasted between two and five hours, depending on how willing
the interviewees were to talk and how much time they could spare.

In-depth semi-structured interviews are conducted with a degree of conversational informality.
This distinguishes them from more structured forms of interviewing, such as asking a set of
standardized open-ended questions, or more formally, asking a set of closed-ended questions
based on a standardized interview schedule or script (see Silverman 2003: 90-94 on semi-
Interviews of this type, and the data generated from them, are situational and contextual; the
result of a specific social interaction between interviewer and interviewee. A major benefit of the
conversational flexibility of semi-structured interviews is that it allows the interviewee space
within the interaction to discuss issues they feel are relevant to them concerning the topics under
discussion. The interviewer chooses the topics, themes, and questions to be covered in the
interview. However, the interviewer-interviewee interaction is a mutually generated conversation, rather than a structured ‘question-and-answer’ session.

This interview style is advantageous because the interviewee may take the conversation in new directions, discussing issues that the interviewer had not anticipated or considered to be of relevance to the research. Thus, potentially expanding the parameters of the research itself, opening up new areas of inquiry, or casting new light on existing research issues. It also allows for a degree of depth and complexity to emerge within the interview discussion which may not have arisen in the context of a more structured interview. The interview schedule (the list of questions) functions more as a thematic guide for a structured conversation, rather than a strict script to be followed. The interviewer can probe and use prompts liberally if necessary to illicit further information, or to prompt the respondent to elaborate on a point, or to talk in more detail on a particular issue. I considered this need for depth, complexity, and a degree of flexibility within the interviews to be particularly important, especially given that a primary research goal was to gather data on religious identity, a complex and multifaceted topic, requiring interviewees to articulate their religious narratives and thoughts concerning faith, belief, and their congregation. As will be discussed in Chapter 11 on congregant narratives, this semi-structured interview approach paid dividends by revealing a number of unexpected and emergent themes in the data set, themes which were not necessarily aspects of my initial research design or questions, but which nevertheless were shown to be important in developing an understanding of the religious identities of congregants and the congregation.
**Participant observation**

I conducted fieldwork in the congregation using participant observation as a method of data generation. This fieldwork involved attending worship services at the church, and writing notes about what I had observed and experienced. When I began my research the church was holding two worship services a week on Sunday and Monday evenings from 7pm to 9pm. I began by attending the Monday evening service at the church. I also attended other worship services and events over the course of the research. The primary goal of the participant observation was to ‘get inside’ the congregation, both literally and conceptually. I wanted to see for myself what the congregation did, how the congregation worshipped, and how the congregation was organized. I also wanted to build relationships of trust and rapport with the congregation in order to facilitate further data generation, particularly in order to recruit interviewees.

I considered myself to be carrying out a case study of a religious congregation using qualitative methods. I did not consider myself to be doing or writing an ethnography, as such. There are important distinctions to be made between the terms ‘ethnography’, ‘fieldwork’, ‘participant observation’, and ‘case study’. In discussing the distinctions between these terms Harry Wolcott (2009: 81-86) argues “participant observation, broadly conceived, serves as the core for all qualitative work” (p.84, original emphasis), in the sense that almost all qualitative approaches require the researcher to be in the social world they seek to examine, to a greater or lesser extent. However, participant observation is also a method for data collection in its own right. Though often carried out by ethnographers, it is distinct from ‘ethnography’, or even ‘fieldwork’. It is a method that can be used to generate data (used by ethnographers, or by fieldworkers, or by other kinds of researchers). As Wolcott writes “A study influenced by an ethnographic approach… is
not the same as a study well grounded in these approaches” (p.85, original emphasis). My study is certainly influenced by ethnography and uses participant observation, but it is far from being an ethnography.

Wolcott speculates that a case study could be thought of more as “a genre for reporting than as a strategy for conducting research” (p.85, original italics). I agree with Wolcott to a degree here, though I also see the case study approach as being as much about overall research design and conceptualization as it is about a style for reporting. Identifying a case (or multiple cases), and drawing conceptual boundaries around that case serves to delimit the research, providing focus and clarity. However, if the case study is indeed a ‘genre for reporting’, ethnography is certainly a genre for reporting also, a genre with its own characteristics and style. Finally, ‘fieldwork’ can encompass many things, and while participant observation may be one of them, again, the two should not be assumed to be synonymous. Fieldwork could involve, for example, observation (without participation), or structured interviewing, or photography. (Wolcott 2005: 80-81).  

While participant observation is not in and of itself ethnography, the researcher conducting participant observation nevertheless must consider many of the same dilemmas and problems that ethnographers face in the field. There is the question of the extent to which the researcher can or should be a full participant in the setting, or whether it would be more appropriate to

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12 Also see Yin (2009: 17) on the distinction between case study and ethnography.
13 Also see Atkinson and Hammersley (1993), and Delamont (2007) for extended discussions on the differences between ethnography and participant observation, definitional issues, and the differing uses of these approaches in sociology and anthropology.
adopt a stance that is more observational. The degree of immersion the researcher seeks to establish in the setting is also a concern, with the insider/outsider dichotomy potentially affecting research outcomes, and perhaps affecting the researcher personally. Further related considerations include the degree to which participant observation can or should be overt or covert, and the kinds of relationships the researcher establishes with those in the setting (see Mason 2002: 91-96; Thumma 1998: 199-203).

I decided that full participation in the congregation would be the most effective and appropriate approach to take. I engaged in the worship practices and activities of the church in the same way as any other congregant. My rationale for this approach was that it would provide me with a deep understanding the culture of the congregation and the religious identities of the congregants. Integrating myself into the congregation would also allow me to develop relationships of trust and rapport with the congregation; relationships which would provide me with the status of an ‘insider’ rather than an ‘outsider’, and would assist me in the recruitment of interviewees and other aspects of the data generation process. It is also worth noting that practically speaking, observing without participating would have been inappropriate, marking me out clearly as a ‘researcher’, alienating me from the congregation, creating disruption within the congregation, disturbing its ‘natural’ state, and ultimately jeopardizing my ability to carry out the research.

**Data analysis**

Data were coded combining a deductive and inductive approach (Bloomberg and Volpe 2012: 109-111), with a handful of initial of codes being generated on the basis of my research
questions, my theoretical concerns, and issues that I initially thought were of conceptual importance. These deductive categories included, for example, “denominations”, “religious individualism”, “attitudes towards the congregation”, and so on. The data were also coded inductively, with the relatively modest list of initial codes expanding over time to fifty-two different codes over the course of the data analysis, on the basis of emergent themes within the data set (See Appendix). With my main concerns being centered around religious identity and religious individualism, the interview transcripts in particular were the main focus of my data analysis, with fieldnotes and other documents helping to fill out the findings and provide supplementary evidence and perspectives. Drawing on Mason’s (2002: 148-150) recommendations for analyzing text, I read the interviews for their explicit content as well as for what they might infer or imply, or about how what is said might relate to broader theoretical and conceptual concerns. In this regard Mason makes a distinction between reading qualitative data literally and interpretively, “If you are intending to ‘read’ your data literally, you will be interested in their literal form, content, structure, style, layout, and so on… An interpretive reading will involve you in constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent” (p.150). The coding scheme provided in the Appendix indicates the codes which were generated from the data analysis and their descriptors, and provides an indication of the extremely wide range of topics and ideas that emerged within the data set.

**Ethical considerations**

Social researchers have an ethical responsibility not to harm or exploit those we write about, to inform our research participants about the purposes of our research, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and to ensure data will be collected, retained, and used, in ways that are carefully
considered and morally responsible. I took a range of different strategies over the course of my research to ensure I was acting in a way that was consistent with good ethical research practice. In the first instance the research received approval from the CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board (IRB). As part of this IRB process, I obtained permission to conduct the research from the pastor of the church Emily Scott, and of the congregation as a whole. To do this I initially met with the pastor and we discussed the research I was proposing to do, as well as any questions or concerns she had. Pastor Scott then discussed my proposed research with the Leadership Table of the congregation. The Leadership Table at St. Lydia’s is a group of lay people from the congregation who act as consultants to the pastor and assist in major decision making processes related to the life of the congregation. The Leadership Table of the congregation approved my going forward with the research. After the approval of the Leadership Table pastor Scott and I drafted an appropriate consent form together, which we then both signed. As my research progressed pastor Scott and I met on a regular basis to discuss my ongoing work and address any concerns either of us had.

The congregation as a whole was informed that I was carrying out participant observation at the church through several announcements in the weekly church email list, which included a request from me for interviewees. I often discussed my work with congregants whom I met and interacted with at the church. However, at the same time, because of the degree to which I participated in the life of the church, for the most part congregants thought of me as simply a fellow congregant. When I interviewed congregants, all my interviewees were asked to sign a
consent form, indicating that they agreed to be interviewed\textsuperscript{14}. The data were also anonymized and any identifiable information was removed.

**Issues of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012: 112-114) argue that issues of credibility, dependability, and transferability are of central importance in qualitative research. Credibility referring “to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them. In other words, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think, feel and do?” (p.112). Dependability in this context, referring to the degree to which readers “can track the process and procedures used to collect and interpret data” (p.113) (I have attempted to fulfill this requirement in this methodology chapter, detailing my research processes and procedures). Transferability refers to “how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site” (Ibid). Bloomberg and Volpe argue that while qualitative research may be weak in its capacity for generalizability, this idea of transferability remains a potential strength.

In terms of the credibility of my findings, I engaged in almost all the processes and research strategies mentioned by Bloomberg of Volpe to ensure that my findings were an accurate portrayal of the research setting (most of which I have discussed throughout this chapter). These strategies included extensive long-term involvement in the field conducting participant

\textsuperscript{14} Obtaining informed consent from research participants is a central aspect of ethical research practice. Though the researcher’s ability to obtain informed consent, and the very notion of informed consent itself is also problematic in a range of different ways (see Mason 2002: 80-82).
observation (as opposed to a brief or short term engagement, which may have resulted in a more superficial understanding), and generating data from multiple sources, including interviews, fieldnotes, church documents, online articles, and so on. All of these strategies, therefore, together assisted in enhancing the credibility of my findings.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research makes the problem of credibility particularly acute. The qualitative researcher must interpret what is happening and what is being said, and draw conclusions. Because of this the researcher has to be especially sensitive and reflexive about their own subjective perspective on what they are studying and how that perspective may impact the outcomes of the research. There is, as Riis (2011) refers to it, a “dilemma of subjectivism” (p.235) inherent in qualitative research. A potential strength of qualitative research can be that the researcher is visible in their research; the researcher’s role in shaping the research outcomes is acknowledged, and even perhaps emphasized. This is in contrast to the researcher rendering themselves invisible in their work under the pretense of doing ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ social research. On the other hand, a study that is overly subjective clearly runs the risk of having no sociological value at all. If there is too little “critical distance” (Ibid) between the researcher and the object of their research the study can said to be biased; the researcher is, in a sense, too close to what they are studying. However, too much critical distance and the research findings may be equally skewed; the researcher may be approaching the work with too many a priori assumptions or negative preconceptions. There is, therefore, a delicate balance to be struck. Having a team of researchers working on a project (as opposed to just one individual researcher), and taking a systematic approach to analyzing the data are some of the ways in which subjective bias can be reduced (Riis 2011: 235-236, 238-239). Openness and honesty on
the part of the researcher is also important here. While it may not reduce subjective bias, the researcher revealing their own standpoint in relation to what they are studying allows the reader to judge the research findings for themselves. I have tried to implement these recommendations as far as possible by making it clear at the outset, for example, that I am not a Christian or a regular churchgoer, and to provide details of the way in which I conducted myself ‘in the field’ in this chapter.

Thumma (1998: 197-198) discusses subjectivism in relation to congregational research in particular. He writes, “A novel view of a familiar subject helps the observer become constructively reflective, critical and analytical”, and therefore that a researcher would do well to “disrupt [their] ‘taken-for-granted’ perception of the congregation” (p.198). Thumma recommends a number of disruptive strategies which I used in the course of my research. These include reimagining the congregation from the perspective of a newcomer, or from the perspective of someone of a different faith, race, class, and so on. Additionally, Thumma recommends varying your physical location within the congregational setting during worship services, varying the route you take to get to the church, even varying the entrance through which you enter the church building. All of these strategies can be used to encourage a researcher to evaluate and reevaluate their subjective perspective of a religious congregation, helping to cultivate and maintain a position of appropriate critical distance.

In terms of transferability of my findings, I would argue that the sociological processes we see at work in any one congregation are likely to replicated in other congregation settings. Clearly no
two congregations are the same, and in my own particular case, the congregation that is the object of this study is unique and innovative. However, questions concerning the formation of religious congregations, the relationship between religious identity and congregations, how we should understand congregational worship practices, how ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ show up and interact in congregational settings, and so on, are important questions in the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion. In this sense findings and conclusions drawn from one congregational setting are of use in developing and extending the sociological understanding of religious congregations as a whole. More generally a key criteria for the transferability of the findings of qualitative research is the degree of detail the researcher presents; the more detailed the study, particularly regarding the context and background of the study, the more readers can judge the extent to which the findings may be relevant in different settings or research contexts, (Bloomberg and Volpe 2012: 113). Therefore, in order to enhance the transferability of my findings, a major goal throughout my research process and subsequent data analysis and the presentation of my findings has been to provide as much detail and detailed description as possible. I discuss the potential contribution my research makes to scholarship in more detail in the conclusion of the thesis.

Limitations and delimitations

Notwithstanding the potential for the transferability of the findings, my doctoral research, as with all research, also has potential limitations. Most of these have been discussed during the course of this chapter, and I have attempted to indicate the ways in which I mitigated against these limitations as far as possible. I have discussed, for example, the problem of subjectivism and the various ways in which I dealt with the issue. I have also discussed ethical issues related to
conducting fieldwork and interviewing. Perhaps the biggest potential limitation of my research is that it is very much a micro-sociological approach, focusing on a small congregation and a small number of congregants. As I have indicated, findings concerning organizational processes, forms of worship, religious identity and so on, may be transferable, extending the sociological understanding of religious congregations and these other related issues, perhaps providing a starting point for further research or serving as a comparison case for sociologists examining similar issues. In addition my research is also very much grounded in particular sociological problems and questions, and therefore, despite being a small study, can still potentially shed light on these theoretical questions, even if only to a modest degree. It is clear that in terms of generalizability in the proper sense of the term the findings of a study such as this are necessarily limited; any generalization can only be done in the most tentative way at best. For this reason the degree to which this research can contribute to an understanding of macro sociological processes is also necessarily limited. Having said this, as I will go on to argue in subsequent chapters and in the conclusion of this dissertation, the religious identities and forms of worship that we see at St. Lydia’s are indicative of wider religious trends, and do suggest ways in which we can understand religious individualism within congregational settings similar to the one that is the focus of this study.

The limitations of a research study are closely related to its delimitations; the way in which the researcher defined the research at the outset, and how the research design itself was initially defined. Indeed, delimiting the research appeared to me to be a very important task at the beginning of the research because I wanted to conduct doctoral work that was manageable and doable in the time that I had available. I initially began with the notion of conducting a much
more formally ethnographic study, comparing several different types of congregations and their characteristics. Over time I refined my research approach, confining myself to a detailed qualitative case study of a one religious congregation. While studying one religious congregation clearly contained inherent limitations at the outset it also served to delimit the research topic and the object of my research in a way that was very clear and very well defined. While, again, I hoped my findings would speak to wider theoretical issues, I intended to get at those wider theoretical issues through closely examining this one congregation.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have outlined my methodological approach, detailing the methods I used to generate data, the rationale for these choices, and how I mitigated against potential limitations of the research and other issues that arose during the course of the research. A major goal of the chapter has not only been to discuss my methodology but also to indicate how that methodology is related to my research questions, my theoretical concerns, and the characteristics of the religious congregation that I studied. I have indicated, for example, that the choice of this particular religious congregation as the focus for my case study was driven by the unique characteristics of the congregation and how those characteristics could potentially allow for the exploration of particular theoretical issues. Similarly, I have discussed how the choice of qualitative methods was driven by my research questions; a major goal of the research being to understand the religious identities of the congregants, their beliefs, their values, and how they interpret their faith and the congregation of which they are part.
CHAPTER 6 - The Origins and History of the Congregation

To develop a sociological understanding of a religious congregation it is necessary to understand how the congregation came into being, how its organization and religious characteristics were formed, and how these characteristics may have changed and developed over time. In this chapter I address these questions by looking at how St. Lydia’s was founded and discussing some of the major milestones in the history of the congregation. I discuss how the church was initially founded and planted, and how it developed over time; from its beginnings as a small house church, to eventually becoming a fully realized church with its own storefront location.

The major intention of the chapter is not only to relate the chronology of this story, but perhaps more importantly, to shed light on the various factors that contributed to the formation of the church. As we explored in Chapter 3, religious congregations and their practices do not form in a vacuum. As with any social organization or institution, the formation of a religious congregation involves a wide range of historical, geographic, economic and cultural processes. The individual biographies of the pastor and others involved in founding the congregation are also important factors which determine the shape a congregation finally takes. In this chapter I particularly focus on the biography of Emily Scott, the founding pastor of St. Lydia’s. One finding to emerge from an examination of the pastor’s biography is how her work at St. Lydia’s is very much related to the liturgical renewal movement in American Christianity. The chapter also begins to introduce some of the major theological discourses and liturgical practices within the culture of the congregation, and to consider the kinds of Christian ethics, beliefs, and values that they are most reflective of.
An overview of the main features of St. Lydia’s

St. Lydia’s is a small Christian congregation in Brooklyn, New York, affiliated with the Lutheran and Episcopalian denominations. The congregation self-identifies as a progressive Christian congregation, which on the church’s website at the time of writing was defined as meaning “that we approach the bible both spiritually and intellectually, we embrace sexuality and all sexual orientations, and we affirm the spiritual journeys of those of other faiths”\textsuperscript{15}. The church was founded in 2008 by Emily Scott, in collaboration with Rachel Pollak. Both Scott and Pollak received graduate degrees from Yale Divinity School in 2007. St. Lydia’s began as an independent church plant, unaffiliated officially with a denomination. In 2012 Scott became an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Church in American (ELCA) and St. Lydia’s became an official affiliate of the ELCA and the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island. The first St. Lydia’s worship services were pilot house church services which took place in 2008. St. Lydia’s subsequently had a number of different temporary locations in Manhattan and Brooklyn, eventually moving to its own storefront location in Brooklyn in 2014.

There are two main features of St. Lydia’s which are innovative and which give the culture of the congregation a highly distinctive character. Firstly, the main worship service of the church is a Eucharistic meal, involving communal cooking, singing, eating, praying, as well as a scripture reading and a sermon. Scott based the liturgy for the service on the Eucharist as practiced by Christians of the early church. Specifically, the liturgy is based on the \textit{Didache}, the earliest known Eucharistic prayer dating from the first century. The Eucharist in the early Christian

\textsuperscript{15} St. Lydia’s website - Frequently Asked Questions, retrieved 2/16/16 from http://www.stlydias.org/faq
church was a sacred meal that involved blessing and eating bread and wine, considered to be the body and blood of Christ. It was common for early Christians to share sacred meals such as this. The practice had its antecedents in Jewish culture with the Jewish Sabbath supper and Sedar meals. Indeed, the Last Supper itself is thought to have been a Passover Seder. Over time the practice of the Eucharist in Christian culture changed from being a shared meal, and became institutionalized in different ways in different branches of the Christian faith.

The second liturgically innovative and unique feature of St. Lydia’s is the use of paperless music for congregational singing. Although not the first to use a paperless approach for liturgical music, Scott helped to develop a particular paperless singing style in collaboration with Reverend Donald Shell and Reverend Rick Fabian, pastors at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. This work began in 2005 while Scott was working as an intern at St. Gregory of Nyssa. As the term implies, paperless music does not use a hymnal. Instead the congregation is led in song by a Song Leader who teaches the songs orally using call and response techniques. Anyone who feels willing and able to take on the role of Song Leader is allowed to do so. It is not necessary for them to have any special musical talent or ability, other than the ability to lead song in the paperless music style. This is a simple skill which can be taught. Usually congregational singing of this kind takes place with participants standing in a circle, in contrast to more traditional seating arrangements of standing in pews or in rows. The paperless music approach to singing, as developed by Scott, plays a central role in the liturgy at St. Lydia’s and is used in a variety of different ways throughout the worship service. It is almost always accompanied by simple instrumental accompaniment. Most often the congregation sings while being accompanied by a drone played on a shruti box, an Indian instrument similar to an
accordion or a harmonium. At other times a djembe drum and other percussive instruments are used as additional accompaniment. Sometimes the congregation also sings acapella, without any instrumentation at all. A fuller description of the worship service and the use of this paperless music style is provided in the next chapter, Chapter 7, and is also discussed further in Chapter 9, a chapter entirely devoted to the subject.

St. Lydia’s began to diversify and expand the types of worship services it offered in 2015. However for most of its history the church self-identified as a ‘dinner church’ and the Eucharistic meal modelled on the early Christian practices remained the main worship service at the church. The innovative way in which Scott revived and reimagined the Eucharist liturgy of the early Christian church defined the identity of St. Lydia’s. This, in combination with the extensive use of paperless music techniques, set the church apart as unique and different in comparison to more normative forms of Christian congregational worship. Having briefly summarized some of the main organizational and liturgical characteristics of the congregation I would now like to turn to a more detailed discussion of the history of the formation and development of the congregation.

**Beginnings and early influences**

In many ways, the story of the development and formation of St. Lydia’s is the story of Emily Scott, the founding pastor. As will become clear, the discourses Scott uses to frame her work usually emphasize ideas of lay leadership and working collaboratively. However, in this chapter part of what I will argue is that the congregational practices (and indeed, the discursive emphasis
on lay leadership and collaboration itself) have in large part been intentionally developed by Scott, based on particular theological premises. The official story of the church is that it was founded by Scott in collaboration with her friend Rachel Pollak, and in collaboration with other congregants. Accounts of this kind concerning the origin of St. Lydia’s are given on the church’s website and in a number of online articles about the church\textsuperscript{16}. While this is to some extent the case, it is clear that the church has always been primarily driven by Scott’s vision and her ideas about what a new church might look like. St. Lydia’s was the culmination of Scott’s religious upbringing and training, her experiences in seminary, and especially her training and interest in liturgy and music, and her connections with the liturgical renewal movement.

Emily Scott was born in Bothwell, Washington and was raised as an Episcopalian. She attended Sarah Lawrence College in Westchester, New York, where she studied music. It was here that Scott met Rachel Pollak, with whom she would later found St. Lydia’s. Pollak came from Salt Lake City, Utah and was raised as a Unitarian. The two women became friends at Sarah Lawrence and subsequently went on to attend Yale Divinity School together. Both studied liturgy and the arts at Yale, with Scott focusing on liturgy and music. While at Yale Scott and Pollak began discussing liturgical ideas based on their studies and training in liturgy, art, and religion. In 2005 Scott worked as an intern at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. While there, Scott also worked with All Saints Company, an organization connected with St. Gregory’s,

on a project called Music That Makes Community. As we will see later in this chapter, this internship work, Reverend Donald Shell at St. Gregory’s, and Music That Makes Community, were all very influential in the development of Scott’s liturgical ideas.

Scott and Pollak graduated from Yale Divinity School in 2007. Scott graduated with a Masters of Divinity from the Institute of Sacred Music, with a focus on liturgy and music. Pollak graduated with a Masters in Arts and Religion. Following graduation from Yale, Pollak went on to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. Scott moved to New York City to work as Director of Worship at Riverside Church in Manhattan (a position that she remained in until 2009). Riverside Church is a large, well-known, historic, interdenominational church. The church has strong ties to the American Baptist Churches and the United Church of Christ, and is well-known for its history of political activism. Most notably, Riverside Church was the venue for a speech Martin Luther King Jr. made in 1967, opposing the Vietnam War. The church is also well-known for its architectural beauty and grandeur, and the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012. While working at Riverside Scott began to seriously develop the idea of starting her own church, the church that was to eventually become St. Lydia’s.

When discussing this period Scott talks about the isolation she experienced when moving to New York City, and how she thought many other people felt a similar sense of isolation in a city as large and impersonal as New York. Scott began to host dinner party’s for her friends at her

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apartment as a way to combat this isolation. Having a home cooked meal, in an intimate family-like setting was something she felt she was missing in her life, and that others were also missing too. The idea of dinner as a way of making connections and forming community would become a central idea in the church she would later go on to develop. This idea was also familiar to Scott because St. Gregory’s had held dinner events called ‘The Feast of Friends’, events which were intended as a way for congregants to informally socialize and get to know each other. Scott eventually pitched her idea for a ‘dinner church’ to her friend Pollak while they were riding on a Metro North train together to New Haven, Connecticut in the Spring of 2008. The church was grounded in ideas about food, the Eucharist, and the formation of Christian community in the context of the city. The church and the worship service itself would combine Scott’s studies in liturgy and music at Yale, as well as her experiences working at St. Gregory of Nyssa, and developing the paperless music techniques with All Saints Company and Music That Makes Community.

St. Gregory of Nyssa and the liturgical renewal movement

The influence of Reverend Donald Schell and St. Gregory of Nyssa was particularly formative for Scott. Many liturgical elements and ideas at St. Gregory’s were appropriated by Scott and used, in modified form, in the worship service at St. Lydia’s. St. Gregory’s is a liturgically innovative church which places considerable emphasis on art and music in worship. St. Gregory’s also organized dinner events called ‘The Feast of Friends’. These dinner events provided Scott with a blueprint for a dinner church modelled on the Eucharist of early Christians. Scott also developed the paperless music approach for congregational singing in conjunction with Schell and Reverend Rick Fabian while she was at St. Gregory’s.
St. Gregory of Nyssa is discussed in detail by Robert Wuthnow (2005:168-172) in *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American religion*. Wuthnow identifies St. Gregory of Nyssa as an exemplar of the liturgical renewal movement, a movement that sought to rethink and revitalize Christian worship through innovative and experimental use of liturgical art and music. Wuthnow dates the liturgical reform movement from the 1960s, “following the Second Vatican Council’s call for greater lay participation in the mass” (p.168). Vatican II promoted a range of different changes in Catholic worship with the aim of increasing lay participation and making worship simpler and more accessible. This in turn began a period of liturgical experimentation in Catholic congregations, and then in Protestant congregations also:

Catholic services in the United States shifted quickly from Latin to English. Seating was rearranged to put parishioners closer to the altar. More congregational singing was encouraged, and many parishes quietly shut down the organ in favor of guitar accompaniment… By the mid-1970s… Protestant and Catholic congregations across the country were experimenting with new hymnbooks and new ways of integrating worship and preaching. Handmade felt banners added color to previous drab sanctuaries, altar cloths and vestments took on new designs, and sermons often became more informal, self-disclosing, and even conversational. (Ibid)

Wuthnow argues that the liturgical renewal movement and its repercussions are still ongoing and that the movement has had a “profound impact on American religion” (Ibid). Innovations in liturgical art and music were especially important in the push to revitalize Christian worship. Pastors and congregants have been inspired to experiment and innovate, to develop new liturgies which reimagine worship. At the same time the inspiration for these new liturgical approaches are often drawn from earlier Christian practices. Wuthnow writes that the liturgical renewal movement “is encouraging churchgoers to rediscover the vitality of their traditions and to gain a new appreciation for the beauty of timeless sacred music. It has forced pastors and worship leaders to be more intentional about how they structure the morning service. In some
congregations, it has given musicians and artists new ways in which to serve, while in others, it has helped parishioners understand more clearly what they like or dislike about familiar patterns of worship” (Ibid). Wuthnow argues that innovative churches like St. Gregory of Nyssa provide new liturgical models and ideas which other churches and pastors then look to as sources of inspiration for developing or rethinking their own worship services. This argument appears to be correct to the extent that St. Gregory’s appears to have had a direct impact on the development of St. Lydia’s and how, in turn, St. Lydia’s itself went on to inspire other churches.

For Wuthnow St. Gregory of Nyssa is “the epitome of a beaux arts congregation” (p.169). A beaux arts congregation being “a church in which the beaux arts excel, not just for the sake of exhibiting the fine arts, but as a special rendering of beauty and harmony in divine worship: the organist and choir are exceptionally talented, great care goes into the selection of hymns and anthems, the church probably makes good use of its architectural space, and it may be innovative in other uses of the visual and performing arts” (Ibid). The innovative use of liturgical art, music, and dance is central in worship at St. Gregory’s, intended as a way of revitalizing how the Christian message is communicated and expressed, and as a way of bringing congregants closer to one another and closer to God (p.170-172). Some of the main features of worship at St. Gregory’s includes the congregation gathering together at the beginning of the service, then walking to seats while singing a hymn. There are scripture readings and a sermon, interspersed by “Quaker-style time for silent meditation, after which people who are led to do so may offer brief statements or observations” (p.171). The service ends with communion, singing, and a dance (see p.170-171 for full description of the worship service at St. Gregory’s). As will become clear in subsequent chapters, there are striking similarities between the liturgy at St.
Gregory’s and the liturgy at St. Lydia’s. The two worship services contain many of the same liturgical elements and are based on similar theologies of Christian fellowship and community. A further similarity is an emphasis in both congregations on the arts as a central vehicle through which to communicate and express the Christian faith, an idea central to the liturgical renewal movement.

The Feast of Friends

A further influence on Scott were The Feast of Friends dinners at St. Gregory of Nyssa. These dinners were informal social gatherings in which small groups of up to ten congregants would have dinner together. The dinners would usually take place at the home of a congregant, and would occur about every month or so. The dinners were based on the idea of the developing Christian fellowship, community, and making new friends, ideas that are common in many churches. However, the dinners were explicitly framed as a spiritual practice which reflected and embodied Christian values in a particular way. The following is an extract from an online advertisement for The Feast of Friends at St. Gregory’s:

“Every Sunday we declare the truth that, ‘Christ is here, right now, making peace!’ The peace of Jesus Christ spreads from person to person every time we gather at his table. That same peace continues to spread when we gather with friends and strangers around our home tables, sharing a meal, breaking down the walls that can divide us. Table time is when we can share our experiences, ask for support and prayer, celebrate the ways that God is blessing us, and grow in friendship with one another as we are formed in friendship with God.”

The language used here is very much the kind of language Scott would later adopt and expand upon in framing the Christian meanings underlying ‘dinner church’ at St. Lydia’s. We see the notion of the dinner table being talked about as a site where Jesus is in some way present, and as a site through which people can unite together, “breaking down the walls that can divide us”. Connectivity and mutual sharing are also core discourses here. Sharing food is mentioned, as well as, in a sense, the intimate sharing of oneself and ones “experiences” is an implied goal of the gathering. The connectivity being sought here, and being discussed here, is also connectivity with God: “Table time is when we can… grow in friendship with one another as we are formed in friendship with God”.

Music That Makes Community

The paperless approach to congregational singing at St. Lydia’s is something Scott herself helped to develop in collaboration with Shell and Fabian and All Saints Company, an organization focused on liturgical renewal. This work began in 2005 while Scott was interning at St. Gregory of Nyssa. A Composer’s Retreat was held in 2006, at which Scott was a participant, the results of which were published in *Music by Heart: Paperless Songs for Evening Worship* (2008). The development of paperless music by Scott and All Saints Company led to the founding of an organization called Music That Makes Community (MMC) in 2007, an organization focused solely on teaching and developing this style of liturgical music¹⁹. In 2014 Rachel Pollak left her role as community coordinator of St. Lydia’s and became the Executive Director of Music That Makes Community. It was around this time, according to the Music That Makes Community

¹⁹ Music That Makes Community website, retrieved 1/16/2016 from http://www.musicthatmakescommunity.org
website, that All Saints Company provided a grant to Music That Makes Community, and MMC became an incorporated not-for-profit organization. There are, then, a number of ways in which Music That Makes Community and paperless music that was developed as part of that organization is directly connected to the development and formation of St. Lydia’s. The histories of Music That Makes Community, All Saints Company, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Lydia’s itself, are intertwined. Many of the same liturgical practices and ideas appear across each of the congregations and organizations, and many of the same religious professionals and lay participants are involved.

In much the same way that the advertisement for the Feast of Friends dinners tells us something about the theological ideas informing Scott’s development of St. Lydia’s, the mission statements and theological ideas behind Music That Makes Community are similarly revealing. The MMC website states their “mission is to help people connect and learn through singing. We do that by developing and teaching a practice of paperless song leading grounded in a theology of welcome and generosity for the benefit of musicians, clergy, congregants, students and lay leaders, who want to use the practice to enrich and enliven their worship and community life” (Ibid). In discussing the early development of paperless music the website mentions “During the summer of 2005 Donald and Rick and Emily Scott… found they had a desire to have music for worship that would leave congregants free to move around, use their hands, and be fully present with one another in worship”. The ‘Core Values’ page of the MMC website reveals further detail about the theological ideas informing the paperless music approach. “The practice of teaching music forms us for: Generosity, Forgiveness, Creativity and engaged freedom, Collaboration,
Compassion, Love of God and one another” (Ibid). The same webpage then develops a longer explanation of the theology behind Music That Makes Community:

At Music That Makes Community, we’re discovering how everyday life and worship are equally (and synergistically) labs or seedbeds for living fully human lives. We make liturgy to form a porous bond of solidarity. The bond is porous so that we can continue to welcome strangers, those ‘not like us’ and ‘the unworthy’; the bond is stronger for it. This work is essentially a practice of hospitality that welcomes all into a group collaborating in making music.

Within this bond of solidarity, we form our character as people: our leaders imitate Christ and we imitate our leaders, and in the process we move towards generosity, freedom, and spontaneity, both in our liturgies, and in our lives. To paraphrase Simone Weil, ‘absolute attention is prayer.’ We seek to engage our whole mental, physical and spiritual attention in worship. Our fully engaged presence is our best gift to one another and to God.

In order to connect in a real, honest way, we must be vulnerable to one another. We take risks in our leadership, and when we choose the wrong pitch or our voices crack or a song doesn’t work, we model forgiveness. We live into the dissonance and consider it all part of the holy work of coming together in song, in worship, in our life as the body of Christ.

There are number of key themes running through this passage that are of note. It is also noteworthy that many of these themes resemble the theological ideas grounding the Feast of Friends dinners. Perhaps the first striking thing is the way in which liturgy itself is placed at the center of what it means to be a Christian. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that liturgy is seen as a method, or a practice, through which Christian ethics can be taught, demonstrated, and in some way embodied. The practice of making music together is open to anyone, at any skill level. Anyone can sing, and anyone can lead the singing. Paperless music making is therefore framed as a practice that embodies ideas of openness, “hospitality”, and “generosity”. The ideas of “vulnerability” and “forgiveness” are also important here. Singing together is seen as a way of being vulnerable, of letting ones guard down, in a sense. And the group itself is

20 Music That Makes Community Website, retrieved 1/16/2016 from http://www.musicthatmakescommunity.org/core_values
framed as a setting in which that vulnerability is allowed, and indeed, is given space to exist. The setting is one in which mistakes or imperfections are generously welcomed and accepted.

The other central theme running throughout is one of connection or “solidarity”; a desire to connect with each other, a desire to connect with ‘the other’, a desire to connect with Christ, and with God. Liturgy is framed as a practice through which all of these connections can be made. The “porous bond of solidarity”, as it is described, frames paperless music as a practice which contains within it the capacity to generate solidarity between people. Solidarity, not just internally within the group, but externally with those outside the group also. This notion of porous bonds extends to the relationship between liturgy and to the world outside the church, or the religious and the secular. We see explicit connections being sought and posited between “everyday life and worship”; two spheres which are seen as operating in concert with one another, “synergistically”. In particular, ethics are embodied in liturgical practice and are seen as transferable to life beyond the church. Liturgy allows ethical practices (generosity, hospitality, forgiveness, and so on) to be learned and demonstrated so that they can then be practiced outside the church, in the world of ‘everyday life’. As we begin to examine the culture of St. Lydia’s we will see the many ways in which these theological discourses concerning liturgy are replicated within the culture of the congregation.

**Forming a church and finding a home**

Having discussed Scott’s early career and liturgical and theological influences I would now like to return to the history of St. Lydia’s itself and how Scott first started the church. Having initially
pitched the idea of dinner church to Pollak, Scott went ahead and organized some pilot worship services to begin experimenting with her liturgical ideas. The first St. Lydia’s worship service was held in the apartment of pastor Daniel Simons, in the financial district in Manhattan, New York City, in December 2008, on the first Tuesday of Advent. Simons was an Episcopal priest who worked at a church called Trinity Wall Street. He was also the Executive Director of All Saints Company (the liturgical renewal organization connected with St. Gregory’s). The liturgy for the first St. Lydia’s service, which was to remain the core liturgy throughout the church’s history, used the *Didache* as the basic structure, and paperless music. As Scott was not yet an officially ordained pastor at this time, Simons acted as the Presider for the service. Twelve people attended the first St. Lydia’s service. Four of these initial pilot services were held during the Advent season. Between nine and twelve people attended each service. Pollak, still residing in Chicago at the time, did not attend the first St. Lydia’s worship service. However, she was able to attend the second pilot service while visiting Scott in New York City that same December.

Following the initial four worship services in 2008 Scott decided that her new church was a viable possibility, and that she should continue to develop and expand it. However, to do so it was necessary for her to find a larger venue in which to hold worship services. Simons’ apartment could only accommodate a maximum of twelve people, and therefore provided no room for growth. In early 2009 Scott approached Pastor Phil Trzynka at Trinity Lower East Side, a Lutheran church in Manhattan, to ask if the church could provide worship space for St. Lydia’s. Scott was particularly drawn to Trinity Lower East Side as a possible venue for St. Lydia’s as it operated a soup kitchen for the homeless and therefore had the appropriate kitchen
facilities needed for a dinner church. Scott submitted a proposal to pastor Trzynka for her new church. Then she and Pollak met with the pastor to discuss the plan. Trzynka agreed to provide space rent-free for Scott and Pollak to hold worship services at Trinity Lower East Side.

In spring 2009 Scott began holding regular St. Lydia’s services at Trinity, initially holding eight consecutive Sunday worship services there from Lent into Easter. The worship services were held upstairs in the sanctuary of the church. In the summer of 2009 the service schedule changed to the first Sunday of each month. In September of that year Scott officially hired Pollak as a paid employee of the church, paying her for fifteen hours work a week in the role of community coordinator. The money for Pollak’s salary was paid for by congregant donations and outside donors. At this point St. Lydia’s began holding weekly dinner church worship services at Trinity. Meanwhile Scott herself left her job at Riverside in 2009 to work as Director of Family Music Ministries at First Presbyterian Church, also in Manhattan.

The next two years saw St. Lydia’s grow and stabilize over time while housed at Trinity Lower East Side. The church began to attract a regular group of worshippers of between fifteen and twenty people during this period. In 2010 Scott and this small group began to discuss becoming affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). This formally affiliation was secured in July 2011, when St. Lydia’s was officially listed by the ELCA as a “synodically authorized worshiping community”. Not wishing to indefinitely depend on the hospitality of Pastor Trzynka and Trinity Lower East Side, Scott began looking for a new home for St. Lydia’s. In September 2011 the church briefly held worship services at Church of the Redeemer, in
Brooklyn. Then, due to structural problems with the building at the time, St. Lydia’s moved again in November of that year, to the Brooklyn Zen Center, a Buddhist center in Carroll Gardens. The Brooklyn Zen Center was large and spacious, and perhaps most importantly, it had excellent kitchen facilities tailor-made for communal cooking and eating. Pollak was baptized at the first St. Lydia’s worship service at the Brooklyn Zen Center.

In 2012 Scott was ordained in the ELCA, and in the Fall of that year the denominational status of St. Lydia’s changed from a “synodically authorized worshiping community” to an official ELCA “congregation under development”. This meant St. Lydia’s was now officially a church plant with denominational support and 22% of its operating budget was provided by the ELCA. For the first time Scott herself began to receive financial compensation for her work at St. Lydia’s, receiving a housing allowance from the ELCA in exchange for twenty hours work a week. In December 2012 a Leadership Team was established at St. Lydia’s. The Leadership Team was a small group of congregants who acted in an advisory capacity to the pastor, working in collaboration with the pastor in making major decisions concerning the congregation.

The congregation held worship services at the Brooklyn Zen Center for the next two and a half years, until July 2014. During this period at the Zen Center the number of congregants again steadily grew. In June 2013 Scott left her other church position at First Presbyterian, and in September that year she became the full-time pastor at St. Lydia’s, receiving a salary from the ELCA. While there was, and had always been, a significant degree of variation in the size of the congregation on any given Sunday, the worship service at this time would frequently attract up to
forty people. With congregant numbers increasing, and Scott now the full-time salaried pastor of the church, St. Lydia’s began offering a second weekly dinner church service on Monday evenings in addition to the normal Sunday evening service.

In 2014 the church raised $160,000 in a fundraising campaign which, in addition to funds provided by the ELCA, allowing the church to move into its own storefront space nearby to the Zen Center, in the Gowanus/Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn. The move itself took place in July of that year, and marked what was perhaps the most significant change and expansion in the church’s short lifespan. Prior to the move, in May that year, Pollak had left her position as community coordinator at St. Lydia’s, moving on to become the Executive Director of Music That Makes Community. Julia Macy Stroud was hired to replace Pollak in the part-time community coordinator role. Stroud, a thirty-year-old lifelong Episcopalian had obtained an MDiv from Union Theological Seminary. In addition to working at St. Lydia’s, Stroud also worked as a part-time Program Minister at an Episcopal church, All Saints in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Alongside the move in location and new hire, St. Lydia’s significantly expanded in a variety of different ways during 2014 and 2015. The expansion of St. Lydia’s meant that revenue generation became an increasing concern for Scott and the congregation. Additionally, the goal of the congregation was to become financially stable and eventually self-sufficient. Scott began a co-working business at the church which offered desk space to freelance workers in exchange for a modest fee. In 2015 the church also began offering two new worship services. The first of these
was a service called ‘Vespers’. This service took place once a month on Thursday evenings. The Vespers worship service was a contemplative service which involved a similar liturgical approach and style as the dinner church service, containing paperless singing, a sermon, a period of congregant sharing, and a prayer. However, the service was intentionally contemplative, with emphasis placed on moments of silence and meditation between these other practices. Vespers was also a shorter service than the dinner church service, lasting only an hour. It did not involve a meal or food. Another further difference was that guest musicians were often invited to play music at each service, rather than instruments being played by congregant volunteers. The other new service started at this time was dubbed ‘Waffle Church’. This service was specifically designed for children and families. It took place on Sunday mornings, once a month, and was presided over by Reverend Sarah McCaslin, an ordained Presbyterian minister. The service involved singing and a sermon geared specifically towards children, and also involved craft activities and eating waffles. As the church expanded, so too did its public profile, and the profile of Scott herself. Scott was invited to speak and the ELCA Youth Gathering in 2015, a large ELCA ministry event attended by approximately 30,000 young people. In the same year St. Lydia’s was profiled in The Atlantic and in the Wall Street Journal\textsuperscript{21}. This marked the culmination of a long church planting process, characterized by a move to a permanent location, the expansion of types and frequency of worship, growing congregational numbers, and a growing public profile.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have attempted to outline a brief history of the congregation of St. Lydia’s from 2008 to 2015. In so doing I have sought to say something about the church’s core practices, its liturgy, and theology, and to chart the major milestones in the formation and development of the congregation over time. I have also sought to explore some of the main liturgical and theological influences on the formation of the church, especially important events and relationships in pastor Emily Scott’s biography and her professional background. Tracing these influences allows us to begin to develop some understanding of the origins and intentions behind the formation of the congregation, and some of the main features of the culture of the congregation. It is a starting point from which we can begin to talk about the religious identity of the congregation and the congregants that go there to worship. As with all congregations, St. Lydia’s is embedded within a range of denominational, organizational and inter-personal networks. I have especially emphasized the influence of St. Gregory of Nyssa and the liturgical renewal movement which appear to have significantly informed Scott’s work. In fairly obvious ways, The Feast of Friends dinners and Music That Makes Community can be seen as antecedents to St. Lydia’s itself. The theological thinking which informed those organizations and practices reveals much about the theological thinking behind the practices at St. Lydia’s.

This leads me to an important point; the way in which religious practice is framed theologically. This chapter has highlighted some of the discourses the pastor and congregants use to frame the church and its practices. The paperless style of singing, combined with Scott’s ‘dinner church’ liturgy, provided St. Lydia’s with a unique set of worship practices and congregational culture. Yet for Scott these approaches to worship are not just novel for novelty’s sake. They have a
particular theological basis and logic, reflecting her perspectives on the nature of God, what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to be a church. Beyond the manifest Christian significance of the Eucharist, the act of eating a meal together is seen by Scott to have wider significance and meaning, pointing towards broader progressive Christian values of inclusivity, generosity, and acceptance. The dinner table is conceptualized as a place where strangers meet each other and get to know one another. It is a setting which is welcoming and open to all, where everyone is accepted, where everyone can be fed; both literally and spiritually. It is a setting in which people serve, and are of service to, each other in the acts of setting the table, and cooking, and sharing food with one another. I will explore this point further in much more detail in the next chapter on ‘Community and Food’.

Similarly, paperless music is framed through a discourse that emphasizes congregants being connected and present with one another, singing together in an unmediated, unfiltered way, without the ‘barriers’ of pews and books. The role of Song Leader and other key roles and responsibilities in the worship service are usually taken by lay congregants. This egalitarian and participatory approach is seen as a way of flattening out congregational hierarchies, as well as a way of recognizing, accepting, and valuing the talents and contributions each congregant can make, however small or imperfect those talents might be. The idea of flattening out congregational hierarchies is also part of the discourse Scott used to frame the establishment of the Leadership Team. Just as congregants are encouraged to take leadership roles in worship, they are encouraged to take leadership roles in the church as whole. The Leadership Team is framed by Scott as a way of decentralizing power; in a sense, democratizing the decision-making process within the congregation by enhancing the degree to which congregants can have a say in
what happens in the church. While Scott remained at the top of the organizational hierarchy, the establishment of the Leadership Team in theory allowed decision making processes to be more diffuse; more bottom-up rather than top-down. Inclusion and participation, and congregants leading each other rather than being led in an authoritarian way, are all clear themes running through the church’s worship practices and organization.

This chapter has also pointed towards the ways in which the congregation changed as it grew and became more established over time. There were a number of pivotal moments in the formation of St. Lydia’s. The hospitality of Pastor Phil Trzynka and Trinity Lower East Side played an important role in helping to establish the church, providing St. Lydia’s with its first official home. Gaining official denominational status with the Evangelical Church in America was significant. The move to the permanent storefront space was also a major turning point in the life of the congregation. Not only did the permanent location mean the church had its own purpose-built worship space, it space meant St. Lydia’s was open and visible to the public in a way that it had not been before. Over time we also see the congregation becoming more routinized and professionalized, shifting from a small private group built on affective bonds of friendship-like relationships, to becoming a more formal organization increasingly built around impersonal and instrumental relationships. A key example of this professionalization is Scott replacing Pollak, her close friend, with Stroud in the role of community coordinator (Stroud being an outside hire). The increasing emphasis on revenue generation and the establishment of a coworking business are also illustrative in this regard. In addition, further evidence of this affective-instrumental shift

22 Trzynka also played an important role as mentor to Scott herself, helping to guide her to an eventual decision to become ordained in the Lutheran church, and later sponsoring Scott’s ordination in the ELCA (which took place in 2012).
in the character of the congregation can be seen in the way in which the number of congregants increased. Though to a large extent the congregation always remained comparatively small and close-knit, becoming an increasingly public congregation meant the composition of the congregation became increasingly open to the public, and not simply based on a small friendship network. With all of these changes the identity of the congregation itself also shifted. Most notably, the move to the storefront location saw the church increase and diversify its worship services. ‘Dinner church’ was no longer the only worship service that it offered. While dinner church may have remained the church’s main worship service and the principal component of its identity, the need for the expansion and diversification of worship services, driven by financial needs, shifted the emphasis of Scott’s work. St. Lydia’s was no longer just about offering a dinner church service. Running the church as a viable and economically sustainable enterprise necessitated a subtle re-framing and rethinking of the church’s mission, practices, and identity.
CHAPTER 7 – Worship and Ritual

The previous chapter looked at the history of St. Lydia’s and some of the main theological and liturgical influences on the development of the congregation. Following on from this, in this chapter I would like to look in more detail at the worship service at the church. As has been discussed previously, particularly in Chapter 3, acts of religious worship are central activities in congregations. For Chaves (2004) the act of worship is definitional in terms of understanding what a religious congregation is and what religious congregations provide for society. The National Congregational Survey (NCS) data show almost all religious congregations, no matter what their size or type, engage in some form of worship. In addition, Ammerman’s (1998) recommendation to focus on the “activities, artifacts and accounts” (p.84-101) in an analysis of the culture of congregations encourages us to hone in on acts of worship in congregations. Worship is the primary reason that people congregate together as a church or religious community and the primary activity of the social group. Important artifacts and accounts within a congregation are also likely to be directly or indirectly related to worship activities.

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a descriptive account of what a typical ‘dinner church’ worship service looked like at St. Lydia’s, what the liturgy consisted of, and what activities the congregation engaged in during worship. Throughout the chapter I draw on fieldnotes, interview data, and worship scripts from the church, focusing not only on what happens during worship, but also on the ways in which the worship service is intended to function to build congregational community and congregational engagement.
The Worship Service

I first attended a worship service at St. Lydia’s in September 2013. At the time the community was worshiping at the Brooklyn Zen Center. The church had not yet made the transition to a permanent storefront space, a move which would take place the following year. I had little idea of what to expect when I first visited St. Lydia’s or whether it would feature as part of my doctoral research. Though I had an inkling it might. Thinking back now to my first visit to St. Lydia’s I remember feeling nervous and apprehensive about what I might experience that night. I did not quite know what was going to happen at this so-called ‘dinner church’. I also felt some degree of anxiety about my own identity as a non-Christian and as a sociologist, and how I would fare ‘in the field’. Some of these thoughts and feelings are evident in rereading the fieldnotes I made on the experience:

> It was a dreary and grey September day. I left my apartment in Greenpoint at around 5.30pm, having been asked to arrive at the church between 6.30pm and 7.00pm. But it took longer to get there than I had anticipated. It was quite a few stops on the G train to get to Carroll Gardens, and then some five or six long blocks to walk to the Brooklyn Zen Center in the Gowanus/Park Slope area of Brooklyn. I was nervous before arriving. ‘What was tonight going to be like?’ I wondered, as walked all those blocks from the subway stop, crossing the little wooden bridge over the Gowanus Canal on Carroll Street. I realized that I hadn’t been in that part of Brooklyn for a long time. I wasn’t sure what to expect when I arrived at this church, and I had a feeling it was going to be intense. Having not been to church much before, was this going to be manageable?

> I had checked out the website beforehand to get an idea of what it was all about. It said that 10-12 people show up on a Monday night, more on a Sunday night. The website is very well put together, attractive, and contains a lot of information about the church.

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23 At the time I was more interested in the research potential of a smaller Christian community called Revolution which met each Sunday in the backroom of a bar in Williamsburg, also in Brooklyn. The founder and pastor of Revolution church was Jay Bakker, son of infamous televangelists Jim and Tammy-Faye Bakker. I had begun to conduct some preliminary fieldwork at Revolution and had begun to interview Bakker and other members of the community. One Sunday after the service, over beers and some informal chit-chat about my work, the co-pastor at Revolution, Vince Anderson, happened to mention another Emergent church in Brooklyn, a ‘dinner church’ called St. Lydia’s. Intrigued by the description of St. Lydia’s I decided it would be an interesting church to check out. I later began to regard the research work I did on Revolution as something of a pilot study for my research on St. Lydia’s, giving me a sense of a field of study and methodological approach, and some preliminary interview data.
including a very well-produced video. I had emailed Emily Scott, the pastor there, to let her know I was coming that night (the website recommended that people do this in advance, so that they know how many people are coming on any given night). Emily emailed back promptly saying they were looking forward to meeting me. I mentioned in my email that I was a graduate student studying the sociology of religion, thinking it was best to be upfront about this from the beginning. Emily didn’t mention anything about this in her reply, so I assumed it wasn’t an issue.

I arrived at around 6.45pm, a little later than I had expected. The Zen Center looked impressive and very large from the outside, kind of like a small school. There was a sandwich board sign on the sidewalk outside of the building with ‘St Lydia’s Dinner Church. All Are Welcome’ written on it neatly in chalk. A slightly disheveled looking man, perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties, wearing a checkered lumberjack-type shirt, was sitting outside on the steps of the building, scrolling through his smartphone screen. He looked up from his screen as I approached, “Are you here for St Lydia’s?” he asked. I said I was, and he stood up and buzzed the intercom panel, signaling for those inside to open the front door. The door opened and the man led me up a short flight of steps and into a room on the second floor.

I immediately saw Pastor Scott inside the door, recognizing her from the church’s website. She was wearing a shirt and jeans. “You must be James, welcome” she said energetically with a bright smile. I said, yes, I was, and I thanked her for having me. “So, you’re a sociology student studying religion, we’re being researched are we?” She said, in a joking tone. I said I hoped that she didn’t mind that. And she said no, she didn’t mind at all… We talked briefly for a moment or two, exchanging pleasantries, and she introduced me to a couple of other churchgoers at St. Lydia’s who were also standing at the entrance way. I began to get some sense of my surroundings. It was clearly a Buddhist meditation space now repurposed, at least for tonight, as a space for Christian worship. There were various shelves filled with jars of tea, Buddhist symbols on the walls alongside posters concerning upcoming meditation events and lectures being held at the Center. There were also coatracks and shelves to stow away our shoes and belongings.

After I had taken off my shoes, put down my bag, and hung up my coat, Emily led me into a much larger more spacious room with a high ceiling. A large table had been set up in the center of the room with plates, cutlery, glasses, and jugs of water all laid out, and seating for about fifteen people or so. Various paintings were on the walls that looked like they had been done by children at the Buddhist Center. A few people were standing around quietly talking in the room. A kitchen was on the other side of the open plan room where a couple of women were busy cooking. One of the women, perhaps in her 40s, seemed to be in charge of the cooking. She had made a salad of some kind.

Emily introduced me to John and Robb, both dressed very casually in t-shirts and jeans. Robb, perhaps in his twenties, John, perhaps, in his late thirties. We chatted for a while. John told me that he was an intern at St Lydia’s. He asked me how I had found out about St. Lydia’s and I told him that a pastor at another church had told me about it. I mentioned what a lovely space the Zen Center was, saying that it must be expensive. John said that it was expensive, and that the church was planning on getting their own storefront space soon. They are in the process of raising money for it apparently. Robb was quiet and didn’t say too much. We talked briefly, and it turned out that tonight was
his first time at St. Lydia’s too. He said his dad was a pastor and that he had heard about St. Lydia’s through his dad’s church.

A few moments went by and then I heard a strange loud droning sound. For a moment I was slightly startled, not knowing what the sound was or where it was coming from. It must have been 7pm at this point, the scheduled start time for the service, because as the droning sound started a woman came over and asked John, Robb, and I to go and join the small gathering of people near the entrance to the room, near where we had left our shoes and bags. It was then that the evening began. (Fieldnotes 9/16/2013)

Over time, as I attended the church more and more what had first appeared very alien and strange during this first visit became extremely familiar to me. As we saw in the previous chapter, the liturgy at St. Lydia’s was based on the practices of the early Christian church, particularly the Eucharist as described in the Didache, a Christian text which dates from the first century. The worship service lasted for two hours and was broken up into thirteen sections or events, as follows:

1. Gathering/Gathering song
2. Collect
3. Introductions
4. Candle Lighting
5. The Meal [The Bread]
6. The Word [Scripture and Sermon]
7. Prayers
8. Poem
9. Blessing the Cup [The Wine]
10. Departing/Cleaning up
11. Offerings and Announcements
12. Closing Hymn
13. Passing the Peace

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24 Chapters 9 and 10 of the Didache in particular describe how to conduct Eucharistic worship.

25 The Collect prayer is common amongst many Christian traditions. It dates back at least as far as the fifth century in the history of Christian worship. The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) contains several examples of Collects. The BCP being a popular liturgical resource for Anglicans, and other related denominations, including Lutherans, and in the United States especially, for Episcopalians
The worship service was led by a Presider (an ordained pastor). A team of lay congregants volunteered for the other roles in the worship service each week. The worship roles were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presider</td>
<td>Leads the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deacon</td>
<td>Instructs congregants through the various parts of the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Leader</td>
<td>Leads the singing during the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>Reads the poem and any other reading material, including some prayers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shruti Box Player</td>
<td>Plays the shruti box</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A congregant volunteer also acted as a Rehearsal Leader, taking responsibility for the rehearsal of the worship service beforehand, particularly the music and the musical cues. Congregants were asked to arrive around thirty minutes in advance, so that they could help cook and prepare for the service. Congregants who volunteered for the specific worship roles were asked to arrive at the church even earlier, in order to properly rehearse the worship service and the music. Each person involved in leading worship was provided with a worship script. The script was a photocopied booklet detailing everything that was said and sung during the worship service, as well as other instructions, such as, for example, when and where to move to in the room. The terms used above for the parts of the worship service and the worship roles are as they would usually appear in worship script. I have added text in square parentheses to indicate the points at which consuming the bread and the wine occurs in relation to the scripture reading and the

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26 Important non-worship related roles include the Cook (a congregant responsible for cooking the meal), and the Greeter (a congregant responsible for welcoming people as they arrive at the church, though this role is often filled by the pastor the church, Scott herself). The community coordinator, a part-time employee of the church, also plays a significant role in the organization of the worship service, making sure that each role is filled, and that the service runs smoothly during the evening.
sermon. One reason for highlighting this is that the order of service is unusual in this regard. The sacrament of the Eucharist most often happens at the end of a Christian worship service. In this case the two components of the sacrament in effect frame the service, bookending the scripture reading and the sermon.

_Greeting_

One of the noticeable features of the culture of the congregation was an extremely strong ethic of hospitality and acceptance, and a related concern with building community. Indeed these ethical attitudes appeared throughout the culture of the congregation in a variety of different ways. In the worship service, it was particularly noticeable in the way in which a high degree of emphasis was placed on ‘greeting’, that is, the process of greeting congregants as they arrived at the church. The extract at the beginning of this chapter described my first visit to St. Lydia’s. It gives some indication of what it was like to arrive at a worship service at the church. While I was not aware of it at the time, each moment of the worship service, including how congregants arrived and were greeted, was carefully considered by pastor Scott. A principle aim in this regard being to maximize the degree to which congregants are engaged in the worship service, the degree to which congregants interact with one another, and the degree to which congregants feel invested in what was happening at the church. For example, the worship script gives the following instructions for the first part of the worship service, the ‘Gathering’, indicating the intention of maximizing the inclusion and participation of the congregants:
Gathering
6:15

Congregants are welcomed at the door by the Presider. The Presider brings them inside, gets them a name tag, and introduces them to the Coordinator or other congregant, who hooks them into preparations for the meal.

(Worship Script - Lent 2016)

As indicated here, from 6.15pm the Presider (the ordained person conducting the worship service, most often Scott herself) is at the door of the church in the role of Greeter. The person arriving therefore meets the Presider immediately as soon as they enter the church. The intention behind this is that the new arrival is acknowledged by someone as they enter, they do not enter the church anonymously. As is also evident from this brief extract, each congregant is provided with a nametag, on which they write their first name. This is another practice designed to facilitate social interaction, community, and mutual recognition within the group. The nametags of all the congregants and visitors to the church were kept in alphabetical order in recipe boxes on a table near the entrance. Regular worshippers at the church found their nametag and put it on when they arrived. Newcomers were instructed to make a new nametag for themselves using blank nametags and pens provided. After being welcomed and receiving a nametag the person arriving at the church is encouraged to interact with other congregants and to help with the preparation work for the worship service. Again, this interaction and participation is designed to enhance the integration of new congregants into the activities and community upon arrival. The Greeter introduces the arriving congregant to the community coordinator or to other congregants, “who hooks them into preparations for the meal”, as the worship script says. This usually involved helping to set the tables for dinner.
The concept of ‘working together’ was a recurring discursive motif’s in the culture of the congregation, and a concept demonstrated in the way in which congregants are encouraged to engage in the preparations for the communal meal. The tagline “sharing the meal, telling our story, and working together” appeared in many of the church’s documents and mission statements, and other places, including the front of the worship script itself (See Figure 1). In an interview I conducted with pastor Scott she talked about the importance of the notion of ‘working together’, mentioning the process of greeting congregants as they arrive, as well as other aspects of the worship service as being important in this regard:

…the way people are greeted and given a nametag, there’s an intentional… I really try to work with the greeters, and I do this myself, when someone new arrives, or if they’ve been there just a few times, to walk them up the stairs, and then they get their nametag, and then the critical moment is introducing them to someone else, hopefully more than one person. So there’s this connection that’s made immediately with somebody else. As opposed to when you usually walk into a church you get greeted, no name is exchanged, and then you’re seated by yourself, you know, or by your family, or whatever. So there’s kind of an assumption underneath that you’re an audience member, and you’re with your little group, and nobody’s communicating to you it’s time to meet other people now… I just feel really strongly that whatever it is that we’re telling people is supposed to be happening in faith or in life we have to actually literally do it in our liturgies… you don’t teach people by telling them stuff, you teach people by doing things. I mean it’s both. But, you know, if you’re saying to folks ‘I want you to take part in what we’re building here at St. Lydia’s’, and you’re standing in a pulpit that’s, like, three million feet removed from the people and they’re sitting in the pews looking at you not moving, then what are you doing that says to them “I really want you to participate”? Whereas if you ask them to do stuff right when they come in the door that sends a whole different signal about who the church belongs to… (Pastor Emily Scott)

Here Scott contrasts arriving at St. Lydia’s with “when you usually walk into a church”, and uses the word “intentional” when talking about the structure of St. Lydia’s worship service. In addition to describing the rationale behind the greeting process Scott also touches on a number of key themes and concepts that recur within the culture of the congregation in different ways. At St. Lydia’s the aim is for each congregant to be an engaged participant in the act of worship,
Figure 1 - St. Lydia’s Worship Script, Fall 2015, Front Matter
rather than a passive “audience member”, as she puts it. Getting congregants involved in the day-to-day work activities of the church is seen as a way of generating this sense of engagement. The concept of levelling traditional congregational hierarchies of leadership is also apparent here, with Scott being critical of “standing in a pulpit that’s, like, three million feet removed from the people”. This discourse of hierarchical levelling is also closely related to fostering engagement and participation in the worship service and the church as a whole, in that important tasks and responsibilities (such as roles in worship) are shared amongst the congregation, rather than being reserved for those with training or special status.

Gathering

Once everyone arrives, is greeted, the food has been prepared, and the tables are set, then the worship service is almost ready to begin. The lighting in the room is usually turned down low. A Christ Candle is lit, (this being a large candle often used during Christian worship and often carrying special significance particularly at Easter). The Deacon has the responsibility of checking that the dinner tables are set properly (with the appropriate number of dishes, cutlery, and so on). At the storefront space, there were three large oval dinner tables each of which could comfortably seat about eight people. The Deacon also has the responsibility of asking the congregants to gather together for the beginning of the worship service. Following the words in the worship script, the Deacon announces, “Come gather round the candle”, and ushers those in different parts of the room to move to the front where the Christ Candle is located.
As the congregants gather in a circle at the front of the room near the Christ Candle, the Deacon cues the shruti box player to begin playing, marking the beginning of the worship service. The shruti box is a harmonium-like instrument which accompanies most of the liturgy at St. Lydia’s. It is usually the only instrument used during the worship service (though a drum is sometimes used also). It provides a droning note or chord underneath the congregational singing. It also helps to establish the musical key for each song. The instrument is very simple to play; bellows are squeezed to illicit a sound through a series of valves. At St. Lydia’s the instrument had colored tape attached next to each valve. This indicated which combinations of notes fitted together to form a particular chord. These colored pieces of tape (silver, blue, and black), made it possible for any congregant to easily find the appropriate notes to play without having had any prior musical training or instruction on the instrument.

The worship service begins with the congregation gathering together in a circle around the Christ Candle. When the community was worshipping at the Brooklyn Zen Center, this initial gathering took place in a small area near to where worshippers left their coats and shoes. When the community moved into its own storefront space, the initial gathering took place at the front of the room, again, near the entrance door, where bags and coats were stalled. The following is a fieldnote extract describing the beginning of a worship service at St. Lydia’s:

By this time the room had filled-up significantly. More and more people seemed to be arriving. There must have been 30 people or more in the room, and seating for 36 people. Julia [the Community Coordinator] seemed to be keeping count of the numbers of people, saying to me on more than one occasion, perhaps to reassure herself more than anyone else, that “there would be just enough seats”… I noticed Emily [Scott] and David, the

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27 At the Brooklyn Zen Center it was a requirement that everyone using the space take off their shoes when entering. When St. Lydia’s moved to its storefront location this practice was not continued.
Song Leader for the evening, gathering at the front of the room near the Christ Candle table. And other people were starting to gather in a circle there also. The shruti box drone began, and Diane [the Deacon] said loudly to everyone “Come gather around the candle!” the usual Deacon script, motioning with her hand to encourage everyone to move down towards the front of the room…

David began to lead the congregation in song. He sang very expressively, moving his hands and his body, and exaggerating his facial expressions as he mouthed the words to the song. He held up his right hand momentarily to his ear as he began to sing. This was a sign for the congregants to listen to him. As David sang he raised and lowered his hand to indicate the rising and falling parts of the melody, “Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ”. The shruti box continued droning away in the background. Suddenly the room was filled with voices singing, as everyone repeated the phrase together two or three times, mirroring what David had just sung, “Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ”. As we sang Diane began distributing long candles to everyone, walking around the circle of people, carrying a small oval basket of candles, handing out small bunches of the candles. We then passed candles out to each other, until everyone had one.

“This is the harmony part!” David said enthusiastically, and proceeded to sing a higher harmony line. The harmony part had a slightly different rhythm but the same words, “Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ”. As before, everyone repeated this new harmony line a couple of times, now standing holding the candle they had just received. “Now bring in the first part” David said, encouraging the congregation to sing both of the melodies together. And indeed, as instructed, some people began singing the original melody while others kept singing the higher harmony. And we went on and on repeating the phrase over and over, “Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ/ Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ/Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ”. Perhaps after five or six repetitions the song seemed to come to a natural end, slowing down gently with the help of David signaling with his hands, conducting the congregation to stop singing. (Fieldnotes 10/12/15)

This is an account of the congregation singing a Gathering Song at the beginning of a worship service. It is an extract from notes I made on a visit to St. Lydia’s at a late stage in my research. By this time, I had a much clearer understanding of the structure of the worship service and its components. I had also learnt to navigate my insider/outsider status. I also felt more self-assured about my task and role as researcher and had been accepted as a regular member of the church community. There are several noteworthy observations in this account which tell us something
about the culture of the congregation and its worship practices. We might notice first of all that the congregation gathers and sings in a circle. This style of gathering together recurs at different points during the worship service. Also of note, though not apparent in the above description, is that those leading the worship service, the Presider, the Deacon, the Song Leader, and so on, stand in amongst the gathered circle. This style of gathering is, again, related to the concept of breaking down hierarchies of authority and creating an inclusive and participatory congregational culture. The congregation are gathered in close proximity to one another, facing each other, and there is no pulpit or barrier between congregants and those in leadership roles, or between the congregants themselves. It is worth restating here too that the leadership roles themselves are for the most part occupied by volunteer congregants.

The song and the style of singing is also noteworthy. We see here a typical example of the paperless music style of singing discussed in the previous chapter in the exploration of Music That Makes Community (MMC). It is a call and response style of singing. The designated Song Leader sings the song, or a part of the song, on their own. The congregation is encouraged to listen and then to repeat the song, copying what has been demonstrated. Typically at St. Lydia’s the song contained only a few words that were repeated several times over. In the example above there are only three lines in the song, “Christ is our mirror/Open your eyes and gaze/See your face in Christ”. Although the words are relatively few and simple, the melodies and approach to singing is a little more demanding and involved. For example, in the extract above we can see the congregation being encouraged to sing a harmony part complementing the main melody. We can also see the way in which hand signals and gestures were often used by the Song Leader.
(depending on how conversant and confident they are in this form of singing) to indicate when the congregation should listen, and when and how they should sing.

_Eating, Sermon, and Prayer_

When the gathering song stops, the Presider introduces themselves, welcomes everyone to the church, and then introduces the Community Coordinator, The Deacon, and the Song Leader. The Deacon then provides a series of instructions to the congregants, informing them about the next stages of the worship service and what to do at each stage. Congregants sing again, light each other’s candles, and move over to the dinner tables. The congregants then light candles on the tables, put their candles on the table, and then stand in a circle around the tables.

At the tables the Presider and the Song Leader lead the congregation in call and response singing again, in what is referred in the worship script as a ‘Eucharistic Prayer’, based on the _Didache_. Congregants then give communion to each other. The Presider holds a loaf of bread, breaks a small piece from the loaf, and gives the piece of bread to a congregant, saying the words “This is my Body”. The congregant receiving the piece of bread says “Amen” as they take it, and then they eat it. The Presider then gives the congregant the loaf of bread, and the ritual continues with the congregant breaking off a piece of bread, giving it to a congregant, saying “This is my Body”, who in turn says “Amen” as they receive and eat the bread. They then take the loaf of

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28 The initial candle lighting is done by the Deacon lighting their candle from the Christ Candle, then lighting the candle of the person next to them, who in turn, lights the candle of the person next to them, and so on, until everyone’s candle has been lit.
bread, break off a piece, and so on, until everyone in the circle around the room has had communion. The last person to receive communion is the Presider; as the loaf of bread reaches the last congregant in the circle the Presider approaches them, receiving a piece of bread from them in the same fashion.

When everyone has had communion the congregation is asked to sit and eat. The communal meal consists of a different dish each week. The meal is always vegetarian to accommodate any dietary restrictions or preferences. The food is typically something relatively inexpensive to prepare and something that can be prepared easily in large quantities. Lentil and pasta dishes, for example, were common, accompanied by salad and whatever bread is left over from the opening Eucharist. Water and grape juice are provided to drink, the grape juice being used as a substitute for wine at the end of the meal in a second Eucharistic prayer.29

After a period of eating and talking over dinner at the candle-lit tables, the Presider leads the congregation in reading a scripture passage and then gives a sermon. A photocopied scripture passage is given to each congregant while everyone is eating. The Scripture is read by the congregation as a group using a technique inspired by Lectio Divina, a contemplative and experiential approach to reading scripture, originally derived from the Benedictine tradition. At

29 During the time I observed and participated in the worship service at the church there were two reasons given for substituting wine for the grape juice. When the church was worshipping at the Brooklyn Zen Center the Center did not allow alcohol on the premises, so wine could not be used. However, pastor Scott also explained that the use of grape juice in the Eucharist is preferable because there may be congregants who have a history of problems with alcohol, for whom drinking wine would be problematic.
St. Lydia’s this usually involved the Presider asking for three volunteers from the congregation to read the passage aloud, asking that a brief pause to be left between each reading. The scripture passage was typically two or three Bible verses in length. After the scripture passage has been read by each of the volunteers, the Presider then asks the congregation to, “please share a word or phrase that struck you in the text”\(^{30}\). Anyone who wishes to say a word or a short phrase from the text can do so at this point, after which the Presider proceeds with the sermon for the evening. Pastor Scott’s sermons tended to begin with a story or an anecdote, either drawn from her personal experience or from current events, or invariably, from both at the same time. The pastor would then draw connections between the story or anecdote and the themes of the scripture passage previous read by the congregation, often discussing some of the historical and biblical context of the scripture passage, its authors, and the main characters or events described. The sermon would close with some kind of resolution or conclusion, combining the ideas introduced in the story or anecdote with the ideas that emerged from an interpretation of the scripture passage.

At the end of the sermon pastor Scott would invite congregants to give their thoughts on what had been said. This invitation to talk was always made in a very specific way; “We share the sermon at St. Lydia’s. We’ll have a few moments of silence, and then, when I ring the bell, you’re invited to share a story or experience related to what you’ve heard tonight. We try and stick to stories and experiences, rather than opinions, because that helps us get to know each

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\(^{30}\) This is the exact phrase most often used by Pastor Scott at this point in the worship service.
other better\textsuperscript{31}. This opportunity to share “stories and experiences” elicited a wide-range of different responses and reactions by members of the congregation. Usually time was given for three or four congregants to speak (though sometimes more congregants spoke, sometimes less). Congregants would typically share a personal story of some kind related to the themes of the scripture passage, or the themes and ideas discussed in the sermon itself. Congregants would sometimes offer an interpretation of the scripture passage, or offer a comment on it. Though it was certainly not always the case, it was not uncommon for congregants to share stories of personal hardship, whether concerning difficulties in their relationships, their finances, their careers, their families, or other issues. Some stories would be more emotionally charged than others, with congregants occasionally becoming teary-eyed as they spoke. At other times the contributions made by congregants were merely general observations or comments, half-thoughts, and not infrequently, jokes or humorous anecdotes.

At this point, there is a time of prayer after the sermon. The Presider sits down and the Deacon reads instructions from the worship script telling the congregation to hold hands, and to sing a prayer song led by the Song Leader. Everyone seated at each of the tables would then hold hands, usually also closing their eyes. The Song Leader then sings the lines of the song on their own, after which the congregation joins in singing. Much like the other songs at St. Lydia’s, the prayer songs were typically very short, containing only a few lines which were repeated a number of times. Congregants would sing this prayer song with their eyes shut, sitting at the candle-lit tables, holding hands. The Presider would then say a brief prayer, then ask the

\textsuperscript{31} Again, this is a verbatim quote, the exact phrase always used by pastor Scott at this point in the worship service.
congregation to offer their own prayers, asking “For what do we pray tonight?”32. Congregants then would say their own brief prayers, still holding hands in the same fashion. Congregants’ prayers varied in style and in length. Most often congregants would pray for family or friends in a simple way by quietly speaking a person’s name out loud, “For Kate”, or “For Bill”. Sometimes prayers were more expansive, for example, “For my sister Kate who has a job interview tomorrow, I pray that she does well and gets the job that she deserves”33. Sometimes congregants’ prayers touched on current events or personal crises, or took the form of giving thanks, either for good news or happy events in someone’s life, for example, “Thank you God for my sister’s son who was born on Wednesday”. Occasionally congregants offered longer prayers which lasted for several moments. When the prayers are finished, there is a brief period of silence, as congregants sit, still with their eyes closed holding each other’s hands. Then, after several moments, when the Song Leader feels the time was right to begin34, the congregation would begin singing the prayer song again, bringing the prayer time to a close. It was at this point in the worship service that whoever had volunteered as Reader for the evening read a poem, the style and content of which could vary greatly, but which was most often related in

32 Exact phrase usually used by pastor Scott at this point in the worship service.

33 The prayer examples here are only examples of the kind of prayers that were made, these are not exact quotes. Pastor Scott requested that I did not report private or personal things congregants said during worship, primarily this was due to her concern for her congregants and their privacy during worship. I have therefore refrained as far as possible from doing this throughout.

34 Over time I came to learn that this gap of silence was intentional, functioning as a way of leaving space so that anyone who wanted to offer a prayer could do so. The Song Leaders were often instructed by the Rehearsal Leader to be sure to leave this gap of silence at this point. This moment of silence was also a meditative moment, where the congregation remained silent and still together, with their eyes closed, in a similar way as one would while meditating. Though in this case the congregation were seated and holding hands.
some way, if only tangentially, to the themes and content of the sermon or the scripture passage for that particular week.

The communal dinner ends with ‘Blessing of the Cup’ as it is referred to in the worship script, the final part of the Eucharistic rite. The congregation are asked to fill their glasses or cups with grape juice and to stand up, at which point the Presider and Song Leader lead the congregation in another Eucharistic Prayer, (again derived from the Didache), sung in a similar fashion to the beginning of the communal meal. At the end of the prayer the congregations drink their grape juice and take their seats again.

Cleanup and Closing
At the end of the communal meal The Deacon and the community coordinator ask for volunteers for a variety of different jobs to help clean up the dinner and the room. These jobs included the washing up, wiping down tables, putting tables away, putting plates and other items away, and sweeping and mopping the floors. The cleanup period then takes place, with the congregants busy with these various tasks. Once the dishes have been done and put away and the room is clean and tidy, the congregants then gather in a circle again at the front of the room, just as they had done at the beginning of the worship service. The Song Leader leads the congregation in another song while an offering plate is passed around. At the end of the song the Presider thanks the congregation, and gives announcements concerning the congregation, future worship services, upcoming church events, fundraising initiatives, and so on. A closing hymn is then sung, with a hymn sheet being given out to each congregant. This is the only time when the congregation uses printed music during the worship service (as opposed to the paperless call-
and-response technique). Finally, the service ends with “Passing the Peace”, with the congregants shaking each other’s hands, and often hugging, greeting each other by saying “God’s Peace” or simply “Peace”.

Conclusions
In this chapter I have attempted to provide a clear sense of what a typical worship service at St. Lydia’s looked like, and to describe the various liturgical components and events which happen during worship at the church. A major theme of this doctoral thesis is the tension between religious individualism and religious institutions, especially with regards to Christianity. I have therefore attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which worship in this particular religious institution is structured to maximize the formation of congregational community. We have seen a range of ways in which the pastor at the church consciously employs different organizational and liturgical techniques to create a strong church community and strong congregant engagement.

Beyond being a descriptive account of the worship service, this chapter has also touched on some major themes and discourses which make up the culture of the congregation. The formation of congregational community has been shown to be a central part of the congregation, with the worship service being structured around notions of participation and inclusion. The way in which congregants are greeted and enrolled into the various jobs in preparation for the worship service is one way in which notions of participation and inclusion appear prominently in the culture of the congregation. A further way in which participation and inclusion appear as important discourses and practices within the congregation is through a flattening out of hierarchies between the congregational leadership and the lay congregants. We have seen examples of this
throughout this chapter. Congregants take on leadership roles in worship and have a degree of autonomy in the way in which they carry out those roles. Congregants give communion to each other, rather than being given communion by someone in a position of religious authority (indeed, a congregant gives communion to the Presider of the worship service, a direct reversal of organizational hierarchies). Congregants are also encouraged to share their own perspectives and experiences as an integral part of the worship service. We have seen that when the congregation worships and are not sitting down they stand together in a circle, rather than in rows. A circle is a formation which, again, serves to flatten out hierarchies of authority by placing all the congregants, and those leading the worship service, in an equal and non-differentiated physical position in relation to one another.

In addition to the participation and engagement of congregants, the description in this chapter has also illustrated the high degree of intimacy and interaction which takes place during the worship service, and which is intentionally cultivated through the structure of the worship service itself. Again, gathering in a circle is relevant here, with the congregants singing while facing each other, rather than facing out and away from each other. Moments of emotional intimacy occur during the sermon sharing and praying sections of the meal, where congregants are encouraged to share personal stories or anecdotes about their lives. The meal itself, with congregants seated together in small groups at candle-lit tables, is a physically intimate setting, facilitating conversation and a range of social interactions. There is also physical and emotional intimacy in the way in which communion is given, with congregants giving each other communion in a ritual that is in a sense both public and private; public in that it is a ritual that is engaged in communally, but private and personal in the sense that the act of taking communion
happens in the context of an interaction between two lay people, with a piece of bread being
given by one congregant to another, accompanied by the words “This is my Body”. Physical
intimacy can also be seen in the way in which congregants remain in close proximity to one
another throughout the service, and the way in which congregants hold hands during prayers and
the prayer song, and remain holding hands for several minutes in silence and prayer. Many of
these themes of intimacy, participation, and inclusion will be explored further over the course of
the next few chapters. To begin to explore some of these ideas in more detail I would like to turn
now in the next chapter to a discussion of what is perhaps the most central feature of the culture
of the congregation, the emphasis placed on community and food at St. Lydia’s.
Chapter 8 – Community and Food

This chapter explores a central aspect of the culture of St. Lydia’s, the topics of community and food, and their interrelationship. The creation of a strong religious community is of course a primary goal of most churches and religious institutions. Churchgoers themselves often report that they value being part of a church community (Ammerman 2005: 51-68). The idea of community and its importance within Christianity is often expressed through the term koinonia or ‘fellowship’ within Christian discourse. According to Robert Wuthnow (1993: 33-36) koinonia refers to the community of believers who support each other in their faith, the relationship between believers and their neighborhood, as well as an ethic of service to each other, and to the surrounding community. Therefore, churches potentially function, Wuthnow argues, as communities of support (relationships with each other), communities of residence (relationships with place), and communities of service (relationships of care and concern).

However, as I explored at some length in Part One of this dissertation, churches face the challenge of how to foster strong community and strong community engagement, particularly in the context of cultural trends towards individualism and voluntarism. In addition, there are, Wuthnow argues, other competing sources of community and meaning besides religion in modern society. In order to fully realize the potential of church-as-community, and to actually create successful religious communities, churches will have to tackle this challenge in creative ways. This issue becomes particularly important also in the context of arguments explored previously concerning the close relationship between Christian identity and congregations.

This chapter explores how St. Lydia’s tackles the challenge of creating a community of support, to use Wuthnow’s term, through a central practice of the culture of the congregation; the
communal meal during the worship service. Food appears as part of the culture of many religious congregations, and communal meals are a common way in which congregations gather together as a group. Ammerman’s (2005) large study of congregations in the United States summarized the place of food in congregational life in the following way:

One out of six [congregations] (17%) reported gathering around food at least once a month. In the South, the number is one in four, as congregations carry on traditions of potlucks and covered dish and carry-in events. In some places congregations have transformed their eating together into elaborate coffee hours or catered dinners, but in all kinds of ways congregations acknowledge the role of food in the work of community building (Sack 2000). A congregation’s own sense of mission shapes this activity as well. Local congregations that say community building is one of their primary goals are half-again as likely to eat together as are congregations where that is a less central priority. Sharing food is thus both a widespread practice, and, for some, an intentionally targeted practice. (p.59)

Here Ammerman cites Daniel Sack’s (2000) *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture*, a book which examines the relationship between food and Protestant religious practice, theology and politics. Sack argues Protestant “eating practices reflect their understanding of ritual, community, hospitality and justice. While food often gets taken for granted in the church, it has important multiple meanings” (p.7). Part of what I want to do in this chapter is to uncover some of these multiple meanings within the culture of St. Lydia’s.

It is significant that Ammerman’s data suggest religious congregations which focus on community building tend also to focus on the activity eating together; the two phenomena are linked across the culture of religious congregations generally. Unlike most other congregations, eating together is the central activity around which the worship service is structured at St. Lydia’s, rather than it being a supplementary or peripheral activity. Given that congregations which focus on community also tend to eat together often, we would expect community and community building to feature strongly in the culture of St. Lydia’s, and it is perhaps no surprise,
therefore, that this is indeed the case. Extending this hypothesis further, given the frequency and regularity of the communal congregational meal at St. Lydia’s, we might also expect that congregants at the church experience a strong sense of community, perhaps more of a sense of community than they experience in other church environments.

In this chapter we will meet some of the congregants and staff at St. Lydia’s, and examine how ideas about community are defined, embodied, and played out at the church in the context of the communal meal. In general, the data show that the congregation and its congregants clearly perceive there to be a strong and intimate religious community at St. Lydia’s. Congregants also highly value their membership of the community at the church and often report feeling a strong sense of belonging there. The value of the church community for congregants appears to be heightened in some cases by the context of New York City itself, which some congregants perceive to be a harsh, impersonal, and challenging urban environment in which to live. As we will see, the communal meal is viewed by many in the congregation as assisting the formation of religious community, at both a practical and theological level. Practically, the meal brings congregants into physical proximity and interaction with each other in unique and intimate ways, and in many cases congregants report that this enhances their interpersonal relationships with other congregants and strengthens their sense of belonging and community. At a discursive and theological level, the meal is also perceived by the congregation to embody a variety of Christian values and ethics, beyond it being a Eucharistic meal. Some congregants, however, express feelings of ambivalence towards the degree to which the communal meal facilitates meaningful social interaction, and the degree to which they feel close to other congregants on an interpersonal level. This suggests that the church community, and particularly the communal
meal, is a more abundant source of social capital for some congregants than it is for others. Some congregants also report feelings of connection to the community at the church as whole, while simultaneously expressing feelings of disconnection to other congregants on an interpersonal level. This to some extent problematizes the degree to which notions of ‘community’ and notions of ‘social capital’ can be seen to be synonymous.

‘Dinner church’ as a religious community

To begin with I would like to look at some of the ways in which pastor Scott and Rachel Pollack (cofounder and community coordinator of the church) talked about the church they planted, and highlight some of the key themes and ideas in their narratives regarding how they understand community and food in the context of their work. Doing this provides us with a sense of attitudes towards food and community from the perspective of the church at the organizational or institutional level. I interviewed pastor Scott three times during the course of my research. In our conversations about the origins of St. Lydia’s the pastor frequently made explicit connections between food, community, religiosity, and New York City:

I think it’s the most basic human thing you can do, to eat together. And when I first moved here I would have people over for dinner and it would seem to astonish them that there was home-cooked food in front of them. This is New York, you know. So I think in New York it’s particularly salient because we don’t cook together very often, and our apartments are often too small, or we live far away, and it just doesn’t happen very often. So to have a place where that happens as a practice I think is cool. But also, yeah, it just kind of taps into some basic thing in humanity, and it’s what Jesus did. Jesus ate with people all the time, especially in the gospel of Luke. Every half-sentence it’s like ‘And he was standing up from dinner’, or ‘He was sitting down to dinner and he said…’ and like ‘Over dinner he said…’ He eats with people constantly. And also breaks boundaries when he does that. Like he eats with the wrong people, and he eats with people who aren’t Jewish, and it’s this whole big thing about the kosher laws. So what he’s doing in that is breaking down the hierarchical structures gradually… My sense about it is that it’s possible that people need a meal but also people need community, the community is just as important as food sometimes. Maybe not just as important, but it’s a basic human need. So there’s some places that are really good at feeding people with food, and I think that we’re going to do that. But the more important piece of what we’re going to do is feeding people with community
and connection and somebody who knows your name and says ‘Hey, how was your week?’.
(Pastor Emily Scott)

St. Lydia’s is conceptualized by Scott here as a church that fulfils people’s fundamental “human needs”, which she identifies as a need for food and a need for community. In addition, citing the example of Jesus in the gospels, Scott sees the meal as a potential site through which social boundaries and hierarchies can be challenged and broken down. The context of living in New York City also features strongly in her narrative, particularly the “lack of home-cooked food” and the restricted living spaces which New Yorkers typically endure is also mentioned. Similar themes were touched upon in another interview I conducted with pastor Scott when she spoke again about her experience of moving to New York City and the origins of St. Lydia’s:

…what was happening during that time period is that I was doing this thing of like just trying to make friends and meet people. And it was during that process that I kept meeting all these people that were like ‘I would like to go to a church’. And so that was kind of the spark for thinking, at some point I felt like ‘Well, what would a church for the people I’m meeting look like?’ And I don’t remember sort of how the vision came together, but it seemed like it just sort of fell down from the sky. Like it wasn’t something… it just kind of happened. And, like, it felt very external in a certain way, and I started drawing pictures of churches on napkins, and stuff like that. Yeah, it kind of overtook me in a certain way. Not to make it overly dramatic or something, but it just felt like the vision arrived completely intact. And it was like food, because people don’t have kitchens here, every time I give someone a home-cooked meal they freak out about it. The sense of community. And I think a big part of the vision was, like, can we create a church where people don’t feel like they have to be careful not to swear, the kind of pious formal thing. I wanted to create a church that felt like it was connected to real people. So that was a huge part of it.
(Pastor Emily Scott)

In addition to fulfilling “basic human needs” of food and community, Scott here identifies a perceived need for a particular kind of church amongst her peers, and a desire to create a church that was not overly “pious” or “formal”; “a church that felt like it connected to real people”, she says. The idea of informality is a recurrent theme in much of the interview data with the congregation, and is often referred in the context of discussing the meal as an informal activity, or as an everyday activity, not an activity normally found during a worship service at a church.
The relationship between food and community within the culture of the congregation is often articulated in terms of work and participation in work at the church. The communal preparation of the meal and the communal cleaning up after the meal is in many ways just as important to the culture of the congregation, and the formation of community there, as eating the meal itself. As we saw in the previous chapter, the idea of “working together, sharing the meal, telling our stories” is pastor Scott’s tagline for the church. It is a phrase which appears on the front of the church’s worship script and other documents, and is provides St. Lydia’s with a central organizational and theological direction. Communal work is therefore clearly and intentionally prioritized by pastor Scott as a guiding tenant of the church. In this sense, work is framed within the culture of the congregation as a spiritual practice. The centrality of work and its relationship with the food and community was evident in my conversations with the pastor. For Scott, the act of “working together” to prepare the communal meal functions to create a sense of engagement and congregational community:

"The working together piece is a big part of it… to be honest a lot of St. Lydia’s is built around what I was looking for in a church. I feel like kind of my whole life I’ve been, I don’t know, loving church and also craving something that was structured a little bit differently. So an experience like going to church and then going to coffee hour and just hanging around with my little cup, just feeling super-awkward (laughs)… the working together kind of eliminates the awkwardness in some ways. It’s always going to be awkward. But you have something to do at least. And if you’re standing around someone can approach you and say ‘Do you need a job?’ or whatever. You can elect in to the dishwashing if you feel like you just need something to latch onto… It kind of makes people feel like they’ve accomplished something. I mean, people have accomplished something. It doesn’t make them feel that way. They literally have (laughs). And then it kind of draws them together because they have done this thing together. And then I think it teaches them that this is a place where we build stuff, and we make stuff, and we get things done, not a place where we kind of like sit around being passive. (Pastor Emily Scott)"

The work involved in preparing and cleaning up the meal provides a shared activity which “eliminates the awkwardness”, as Scott puts it, of social interaction between strangers.
Congregants are brought together in mutual cooperation and engagement; Scott says the work “kind of draws them together because they have done this thing together”. There is very much an intentionality and awareness behind Scott’s organization of the meal, and also behind having the congregants participate in the preparation and clean-up work, an intentionality and awareness that this activity inevitably facilitates social interaction and community. However, the community Scott envisages is not necessarily always one of harmony. Interactions around the dinner table may be difficult, and that difficulty is framed by Scott as an opportunity for spiritual development, an opportunity to practice Christian ethical values of care, concern and toleration. Scott touched on this subject in our conversations, reflecting on a paper she wrote in divinity school:

I remember the thesis of the paper was basically that when you’re sitting around a table with people you’re really forced to deal with a lot of shit that you’re not forced to deal with when you’re just sitting in a pew and then you leave at the end. So like, you know, if you’ve had a fight with someone, there they are sitting next to you and it’s awkward and you have to figure out what to do about it. So it kind of forces the idea of the body of Christ, as like a more challenging context. And in fact just a few weeks ago I was having a conversation with someone around similar issues with, like, dealing with someone in the congregation. So it’s harder to ignore stuff (laughs), in terms of who we are as a fellowship and as a community. (Pastor Emily Scott)

The body of Christ is a metaphor for the Christian Church as a whole, referring to the notion that each Christian is a member of the larger ‘body’, part of the Church. It is a term commonly used amongst Christians in this way, and is derived from the Last Supper, when Jesus told the disciples that the bread he gave them to eat was his body. Much like the term koinonia or “fellowship” (which Scott also uses here), the Church as the ‘body of Christ’ is another illustration of the way in which the idea of community is prominently articulated within Christian faith, taking us back to arguments explored in Chapter 2 concerning the inherent and inescapable communal and institutional nature of Christianity, regardless of how ‘individualized’ a particular form of the faith may be. Scott’s interpretation of the body of Christ here, as
embodied in the communal meal at St. Lydia’s, is of a group which is inclusive of everyone, and of many kinds of social relationships, be they close, caring, benign, confusing, or even threatening in some way. Sitting down with strangers to eat “kind of forces the idea of the body of Christ, as like a more challenging context” Scott says, challenging in the sense that difficult social interactions cannot be ignored, they have to be negotiated in some way, or embraced and accepted.

Similar theological and ethical dimensions of the communal meal also appeared prominently in the way in which the cofounder and community coordinator of the church, Rachel Pollack, talked about the meal. Particularly prominent in Pollack’s narrative was the idea of the meal as a site for breaking down social hierarchies, a place for encountering ‘the other’:

I do believe that it’s important to be in relationship with people that you wouldn’t ordinarily choose as friends. I mean, that’s one of the things that keeps me coming back [to St. Lydia’s]. It reminds me that even though people that I pass on the street aren’t normally the people that I would invite inside my house for dinner I’m still related to them and I’m still responsible for them on some level, and that they’re responsible for me. It’s easy to forget that… Jesus when he was ministering to people and forming communities he was doing it around the Seder table, you know, the Sabbath table. In a lot of ways for me a big part of why [St. Lydia’s] resonated was the relationship to my ancestors and my forebears and their relationship to the Sabbath table and the Seder. I mean, that’s the way it started, with him breaking bread with the disciples and with the people that he met and with people who were different from him. And I think there’s nothing more human than eating a meal. And doing that, sharing that, with people that you wouldn’t ordinarily do that with, is a radical way to do whatever people are ostensively doing in church whenever they gather, which is gathering a community that isn’t dictated by taste or fashion or preference. Like a radical openness. And a meal is the most kind of human thing that we do that way, more than singing, or praying, or reading books, or whatever. (Rachel Pollak)

Like pastor Scott, here Pollack touches on themes of eating as being in some way fundamental to being “human”, as well as the importance of food in the Biblical accounts of Jesus’s life and ministry. Noticeable in Pollack’s narrative also are ideas comparable to those identified by
Wuthnow as central in the Christian idea of fellowship; the notion of being in mutual relationship with each other and with the wider community, and particularly with ‘the other’, or as Pollack puts it, “people that you wouldn’t ordinarily choose as friends”. Pollack explicitly makes the connection between the meal and community, implying that ideally churches are “gathering a community that isn’t dictated by taste or fashion or preference”, and that the meal is an opportunity to do exactly this, an opportunity for “radical openness”. Taken together, then, Scott and Pollack’s narratives indicate that eating together, and the dinner table itself, are seen as metaphors for Christian fellowship and ethics, for the Church body as a whole; the dinner table is a site where the ideals of cooperation, egalitarianism, hospitality, mutual care and concern are potentially played out, embodied, and enacted. Additionally, the dinner table is seen as a site where difficult or unexpected social interactions take place, social interactions which encourage congregants to cross social boundaries and develop the notion of the Church as an all-inclusive institution from which no-one is excluded.\footnote{It is worth noting that the degree to which these ethical ideals were realized at the church is of course debatable. Indeed, Scott and the congregants recognized the problematic nature of putting this ethical ideal into practice, often acknowledging that St. Lydia’s was in fact relatively homogenous in terms of race and social class, for example.}

**“Work to be done”: Congregant perceptions of the meal and community**

Having discussed the ways in which the pastor and the cofounder of the church make the conceptual links between food, community, and religiosity, I would now like to move on to discuss how congregants talk about these issues in relation to their experiences at the church. For the most part, congregants I interviewed perceived St. Lydia’s to be a strong and intimate religious community. Congregants also saw the community at the church as an important source
social capital, and of spiritual and emotional support. Many congregants echoed Scott and Pollack’s sentiments concerning the theological and metaphorical significance of a communal meal. In particular, the preparatory and cleaning work involved in the meal at the church often featured prominently in congregant narratives about community at St. Lydia’s. However, some congregants also expressed a degree of ambivalence about their experience of community at the church, and reported a somewhat counterintuitive combination of simultaneously feeling part of the community at the church, but disconnected from individuals at the level of personal interaction.

Monica\textsuperscript{36}, a twenty-eight year old actress and waitress, had attended worship services St. Lydia’s for three years. She had grown up in Vermont, and “had been raised with what felt like pretty liberal spiritual traditions”, with a mixture of Judaism and Lutheranism on her father’s side and a “kind of loose Protestantism” on her mother’s side. Monica did not remember attending church with her family in the first few years of her life, until around the age of six or seven, when her parents started to regularly attend a Unitarian Universalist church. In her late teens Monica’s parents developed a strong interest in Zen Buddhism, and began to regularly attend a Buddhist temple, which Monica also occasionally attended. Monica began going to St. Lydia’s in 2011 when the church was holding worship services at Trinity Lower East Side, in Manhattan. She described her first visit to St. Lydia’s as “sort of like warm water… it was just very easy to get

\textsuperscript{36} In the case of congregants, pseudonyms are used throughout the dissertation to preserve the anonymity of interviewees.
When I asked her why that was the case the first things she talked about were food and the communal meal as an activity:

…everyone in a circle, the singing, opening, the promise of eating and food felt very welcoming to me. And the distraction of food, in a positive way, that there’s like work to be done before, there’s work to be done during, and there’s work to be done after, you know, that we’re not... like, the blankets aren’t just ripped from us and we’re just like ‘awwww’ you know, in front of like a practice. But that it’s more based around comfortable recognizable things that I love. I love... I was raised to have dinners together with my family. We always did that. I was raised around everyone having a chore and helping out. So it’s really comfortable for me. I think most people are raised in some way like that. So that felt comfortable to me. (Monica)

For Monica the “work to be done” during the worship service provides a buffer, helping to make the experience of worship more “comfortable” and “recognizable” than it perhaps would have been otherwise. This is reminiscent of pastor Scott’s remark that work “eliminates the awkwardness” between strangers. It is also noticeable that Monica compares the meal at St. Lydia’s to family dinners, which is a comparison that recurred many times in my other interviews with congregants. Monica alluded to this family-like atmosphere again a little later in the interview. She talked about having been away from home, and directly referenced pastor Scott’s theology concerning the dinner table as a site for ethical Christian practice:

…when its night time and you get to eat dinner, and you’re with a group of people, there’s something very home-like about it. And I was missing home, I had been away from home for a long time, and then I was away again, and I was like ‘I need some feeling of comfort’. Also the comfort in knowing it’s going to be there. We do need to eat regularly we don’t just do it once (laughs) we need to do it over and over, it’s like life maintenance, body maintenance. And also, Emily’s [pastor Scott] mentioned this just outwardly, and I feel this, it’s such a living kind of metaphor, the table, that there’s room at the table for everyone, that there’s food enough for everyone, deserving food, having others look out for you, offering you food. And she’s mentioned, and I really believe this, that its human need, you know. And I think a lot of times I’m afraid, not just in church but in other social settings, I’m afraid of showing that I need something, and I think at St. Lydia’s its really upfront, it’s like ‘Yeah, we need to eat so we’re going to eat during church, we’re going to base it around that’. (Monica)

Here the dinner table is seen as a site not only for inclusivity, potentially challenging social hierarchies and boundaries, but also as a site for practicing hospitality, care, and vulnerability.
Monica says that she values the church as a space where she is not “afraid of showing that I need something”, and the act of communally eating a meal, the physical need to eat, and the act of giving and receiving food, all encourage that state of vulnerability for Monica. It is clear that Monica very much appears to value the communal meal at the church because it functions in this way, both in terms of what the work involved brings to the experience, and in terms of the ethical dimensions of the meal.

For Brian, a thirty-two year old editor of a Christian magazine, and long-time congregant at St. Lydia’s, the meal, and particularly the “work to be done”, was very much a means through which he was able to enter into and engage with the church community. The importance of community was explicit in Brian’s narrative concerning attending churches in general. Brian’s told me he has attended churches all his life, “for as long as I remember”. He grew up in Texas, and his father was an Episcopal priest who attended seminary when Brian was five years old. At University Brian continued to attend church, becoming involved in the Canterbury Episcopal Student Association and Campus Crusade for Christ. Over time Brian found he began to disagree with conservative theology of the Campus Crusade for Christ, particularly over issues concerning homosexuality. Brian’s church attendance remained relatively constant over the years, and he told me that “since college I’ve just gotten completely more and more liberal, continually more liberal. I mean I’m kind of on the edge of agnostic”. Brian explained that the community at St. Lydia’s is something which attracts him to the church, and is a major motivation for him to attend the worship service there. He sees the communal meal during the worship service as allowing him to make friends and form close relationships with other congregants:
...I think one of the things I’m looking for in church, probably more than, or as much as, the aspect of encountering God, or whatever, is the community. And so I really like that people notice you [at St. Lydia’s], because I’m looking to connect to people. That’s one of the main reasons I think I go to church. And I really like the dinner aspect because it kind of plugs you in to having to cook, or clean up… and because there’s a chance to sit and talk without having… where you’re like… because it’s at a table it’s sort of more intimate than being in a group, at coffee hour or something… it makes for a long evening, so St. Lydia’s is sort of a commitment in a way that other churches might not be. Like you go for an hour and then you go home. Maybe that’s why it appeals to me, is because I was looking for a community and a commitment. I was wanting to plug myself into a church. And so I wasn’t really looking to explore my faith so much as connect. I really like the dinner aspect of it, I think it’s what makes it so easy to connect to other people. Just because you’re sitting around a table, and you kind of have to talk to each other, or it’s really awkward if you don’t. You can’t just leave, or you can’t not talk to people. So it sort of forces you to make conversation in a way that’s not… it doesn’t feel… I mean, it’s never felt too forced because you’re sitting there in the way you would at a dinner party. (Brian)

It is notable that Brian explicitly states he “was looking for a community and a commitment”, and he implies that religious or spiritual motivations were secondary to him in his decision to go to church. Like Monica, Brian expresses appreciation at being able to participate in the work activities involved in the preparation of the meal; this activity around the meal “plugs you in”, as he says, to what is happening at the church. For Brian, the conversation that happens during dinner is also an opportunity to meet and talk to others in a way that has “never felt too forced”.

Later on in our discussion Brian compared St. Lydia’s to the experiences he had had at Christian summer camp during college. Brian identified some similarities between camp and St. Lydia’s in terms of community building. He noted that singing in a small group without a hymnal or printed music and engaging in communal activities with congregants at St. Lydia’s had some similarities to his experiences of community activities at Christian summer camp. Though for Brian there were also important differences between the two experiences:

St. Lydia’s doesn’t feel like camp, but it has some of those aspects of creating an immediate community in a way camp and retreat weekends can, but it doesn’t feel as artificial or forced in the way camp can, at least afterward. Like, I come away feeling good. But it feels like a sustainable sort of community and relationship. In a way camp is different, not really sustainable… I mean if you go to a camp you’re playing sport, you’re doing things together right off the bat. Which I do think that’s a… doing things, like setting the table, and cooking the meal, and cleaning up, is a big part of what makes [St. Lydia’s] work, at least with me. Without that, if
we were to show up and the meal would be prepared and then you leave at the end, you know, I don’t know if it would work as well. It’s a little hard to imagine. (Brian)

For Brian, then, despite the fact that both St. Lydia’s and Christian summer camp place an emphasis on “doing things” together, he sees the community formed at St. Lydia’s as being, in a sense, a more authentic or, as he puts it, “sustainable”, form of religious community than community created in the temporary context of a Christian summer camp. Brian cites “doing things”, especially around the meal at St. Lydia’s, as a key way in which this close and sustainable community is formed, and without which the church community would not “work as well”, he says.

Other congregants echoed Brian’s sentiments regarding how important the community at St. Lydia’s was to them personally, and the effect the work which takes place around the meal had on their community involvement. For example, Lyndsey, a twenty-three year old reporter for a Christian publication, said that, like Brian, community was a primary motivating factor for her in seeking out a church, and in seeking out St. Lydia’s in particular. At the time of our interview Lyndsey had only been attending St. Lydia’s for two months. When I asked Lyndsey how she first found St. Lydia’s she talked explicitly about loneliness and about wanting to find a community to become a part of in New York City:

So one thing that I wanted to do better about for the new year is that… I realized last year… I lived with my friends’ grandparents the first year that I was here [in New York]. And I was relatively close to them and would hang out with them when I came back. But I’ve lived basically by subletting a room for the past six months or so. And I realized just how much I was eating dinner alone by myself. And I wasn’t very comfortable with the fact that I would come home and just kind of not interact with anyone. So I think I was looking for, from the best I can remember, I was looking for some place online that had dinner and maybe was a faith community or something like that. (Lyndsey)
Lyndsey was a lifelong Christian, and grew up in California, raised by Evangelical Christian parents, “My parents are the type of folks that lean conservative” she told me. She went on to attend an Anabaptist college, after which she began her career as a writer for Christian publications. I asked Lyndsey what her first impressions of St. Lydia’s and the meal at the church had been, and whether anything in particular had struck her as being different or unusual in comparison to her experiences of other churches:

…the part to me that is more unusual is the cleaning up afterwards, at least in a church environment. I’m part of a small-group in my other church right now, where we sit around and eat and talk about the Bible together, and no-one’s thinking its church. But I’ve had those experiences of being around a table and eating and chatting with people, you know, in church and situations. But rarely have I rolled up my sleeves with people in church settings and been like ‘We’re going to clean up’. Except for with people that I’ve actually built strong relationships with. You know, because then you’re doing teardown and cleanup, and you kind of have this different relationship than people that are just coming to an event. (Lyndsey)

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, communal meals are a part of the culture of many different kinds of religious congregations. It is perhaps therefore no surprise that the experience of food and eating communally “in church settings” was not new for Lyndsey. However, the kind of “work to be done” at St. Lydia’s clearly was something which particularly stood out for Lyndsey as being different from previous church experiences. Communally cleaning up after a meal is also not something Lyndsey says she would usually do, “Except for with people that I’ve actually built strong relationships with”. There is a sense in which the culture of St. Lydia’s institutionalizes the practices of eating together and working together, practices which usually only occur in the context of close friendships or family relationships. Like Brian, Lyndsey also appears to recognize that the work involved in the creation of the meal for the worship service creates a church experience that differs from other church experiences, in terms of the kinds of interactions and relationship building that can take place in that setting. For example, Brian
remarked that the church service would be different if “the meal would be prepared and then you leave at the end”. Similarly, Lyndsey remarked, “you kind of have this different relationship than people that are just coming to an event”.

During our interview Lyndsey went on to tell me that she felt she had been able to join the community at St. Lydia’s much more easily and much more quickly than compared to her other church experiences. Like Brian, she attributed this to the small size of the church and also to the fact that each congregant wears a nametag. In addition, again, the “work to be done”, came up. Both the preparations for the communal meal and the work involved in the worship service itself were further ways in which Lyndsey felt she had been able to easily enter into the community of the church:

…what keeps me coming back, and what encourages me to invite people too I would say, because I’ve invited three people, which is three more people than I’ve invited to my other church… I’d say one, like, little things, so, nametags. At my other church I now, as someone who’s attended there for about a year and a half, I now feel like I have a community. To establish that I had to join a small-group, I volunteer with junior hires on a Sunday, and I had to go to a decent amount of events, and kind of just like make conversation with people. So that’s a huge time investment to kind of feel like you actually can fit and belong to a space. Whereas in St. Lydia’s, one, which is always the strength of smaller numbers, people notice when you’re new. Which is always a great place. And then I just think the nametags are a great addition in terms of saying ‘We’re going to actually personally see who you are, and recognize you right away’.

I: That’s interesting, that you say you feel part of the community at St. Lydia’s. And in a larger church environment you haven’t felt that?

L: I mean within two months I don’t think I’ve felt nearly the same connection. You know, I just think about, three weeks in, four weeks in, Rachel [the church’s cofounder and community coordinator] was like ‘OK, do you want to cook? Do you want to participate?’ And you can interpret that however you wish. Some people might be like ‘That’s really intrusive, I’m not ready to do that kind of thing’. I found it helpful, because I’ve generally found that you have to give of yourself if you want to gain the community part in return, you know. So that’s one way. I’ve been able to cook, I’ve been able to be the Deacon. (Lyndsey)
Lyndsey almost uses the same language as Brian here in terms of the importance of being ‘recognized’ at church; “people notice you when you’re new”, Lyndsey says, and being noticed, rather than being ignored or going unnoticed, is something which she appears to value (in Brian’s words, St. Lydia’s is somewhere where “people notice you”). Lyndsey also frames her relationship with community in terms of tradeoffs, noting the “huge time investment” it has taken to feel a part of a community at her other church. In comparison, she feels it has taken much less time to feel part of the community at St. Lydia’s, and in large part she attributes this to the participatory nature of the culture of the congregation. Lyndsey frames her relationship with the community as being, in a sense, transactional; “you have to give of yourself if you want to gain the community part in return”, she says. She is therefore glad that the culture of St. Lydia’s provides her with opportunities through work to contribute to the life of the church.

Taken as a whole, the narratives of Monica, Brian, and Lyndsey, and of other congregants (see Box 1) in many ways confirm that the intentions and goals expressed by pastor Scott and her collaborator Rachel Pollack were realized at the church. The communal meal does indeed appear to help create and maintain a strong religious community, to the degree that the congregants that I interviewed often described the communal meal as providing an opportunity for them to work with other congregants, to interact socially with each another, and as providing an entry point into the life of the church and the community there. In particular, the work and cooperation which takes place around the communal meal is often cited by congregants as being particularly relevant, and is a key way in which Scott placed “working together” at the center of the culture of the congregation. We have also seen that the preparation of food, eating the meal, and cleaning up after the meal is seen as helping to create a comforting, welcoming, and ‘family-like’
Box 1 – Congregant Perceptions of ‘Dinner Church’ as Community

…any time you can get people to share a meal together you’re going to get something qualitatively different… the very fact of preparing the meal and then sharing it allows for tremendous community building and it’s that time too to say, to be able to ask someone ‘How are you? What’s going on in your life?’ You know, that sort of thing. It’s interesting, I don’t think I’ve ever been at St. Lydia’s when there haven’t been strangers at the table. (Daniella)

I feel like it’s so much easier to meet people and make friends and get to know the people here than any other church I’ve been at because every week you sit and talk with them over dinner and it could be a different person every week. And every other church that I’ve ever been a part of you have to kind of break into other people’s conversations, either beforehand or afterwards over coffee, and it’s just awkward. Whereas here it feels natural. And I also just think there’s something special and something spiritual about eating together, like, Jesus did it a lot, lots of things in the Old Testament and the New Testament and in Jewish culture today are all based around meals and I don’t think that’s a mistake or an accident. I think… you know, I think the meal part is really really special. (Hillary)

…I think the main differences that do attract me would be the simple fact that it revolves around a meal, and then because of the meal there are several things that just happen. Like, people work together and they wash dishes, or they cook food, and things happen… that kind of environment is much more like the kind of environment you would find in like your own home, or a friend’s home, that you normally don’t find at a church service that you would go to. Like it’s just impossible to fake that kind of interaction. You can’t force it to happen. It just happens when you stir a pot with someone, it happens when you have to wash dishes with someone and you get water all over you. And so it just like fosters a kind of environment that I find to be very conducive to relationship, and also spiritual growth, and also very personally comforting.

I: And during dinner you have to talk to people.

C: Yeah, and like eat in front of them, and stuff. And I know a lot of churches do things with food. I’ve been to a million churches that have said ‘We’re having a buffet afterward, come into the reception hall’ but it’s very easy to just kind of sneak away from that. And that’s fine, and a lot of people just need to sneak away from it and not do it.

I: But you can’t sneak away at St. Lydia’s.

C: No and that’s the point. Everything is like intertwined together. Like we eat together because we’re a family, and we break bread, and this is like the body, and this is what we’re going to do. And I like that a lot. (Clare)
community environment, which perhaps serves to enhance feelings of intimacy and closeness between congregants. However, there was noticeably less emphasis on the meal as a site for breaking down social boundaries in the narratives of congregants than in the narratives of the pastor and cofounder. Scott and Pollack tended to focus on this topic when discussing the meal. Whereas congregants tended to focus on the meal as simply facilitating social interaction, meeting new people, and making new friends. While the theological and ethical ideas around breaking and subverting social boundaries, welcoming the stranger, and so on, were not entirely absent in congregant narratives, they were far less prominent.

**Interactions around the dinner table: the limitations of an intimate setting**

While in many cases, as we have seen, the congregants I interviewed valued the communal meal and saw it as a source of social capital, some congregants expressed more ambivalent views towards the interactions which take place around the dinner table. I argued in the previous section that the culture of the congregation institutionalizes practices which usually occur in domestic or family contexts, or private relationships, thus potentially enhancing feelings of intimacy, connection, and community within the congregation. However, the data also suggest there may be limitations in the degree to which authentic and intimate social interactions can be effectively facilitated through institutionalized practices, and that different congregants experience the communal meal and the worship service in different ways. For example, Ben, a thirty-two year old architect, said that he enjoyed the communal meal as a way of meeting new people. Indeed, like many of the congregants I interviewed, making new friends was a primary motivation for him attending St. Lydia’s. However, Ben also had concerns about what was lost in making the decision to hold a worship service using this untraditional format. Ben was born in
China and was raised without much of a religious background while living in China. He and his family moved to the United States when Ben was a teenager. In the U.S. Ben told me he “was brought up in an Episcopal church. But I wasn’t very religious at that point. It wasn’t until college where I met a Korean friend who went to a Baptist church, but he was Presbyterian. So I started going to church with him, a Korean Baptist church. That’s how I became interested more in Christianity”. When I asked Ben about his thoughts on the meal at St. Lydia’s he told me he had experienced something similar at his church at UC Berkeley:

To me [the meal at St. Lydia’s] wasn’t that revolutionary. As I say, I used to go to that dinner service, they had a dinner. I’m familiar with that style. So it’s not the reason I go [to St. Lydia’s]. The reason I go there is mostly because I want to spend time with some people, you know, like friends. I really enjoyed going to brunches when I was in California. The church that served the student service, they also had Sunday service, so when I graduated from school I was going there on Sundays. And there were some pretty good friends there, so we’d go to Sunday and then we’d go to brunch every time. And I really enjoyed brunch, not because… I mean the food obviously is good, we usually had good food, but also just to have conversations that I really enjoy. So dinner for me is just a way of conducting conversations, you know. But it’s not the reason I go there. I don’t go there to eat. Usually food is secondary if you have good friends there. So St. Lydia’s is the reverse. So, you go there for food first, and then you make friends. But usually you go to church and then you have brunch, you have friends from church that you go to brunch with. But [at] St. Lydia’s you eat first, and then you make friends over… or maybe you become friends. It’s a little different from the brunch and the church service. So that may be a drawback because people are busy eating or they are focused on eating or cooking… That could be the case sometimes. But that’s the sacrifice you make when the format is based on dinner. There’s no way you can avoid that. The people who cook are only a few people. Most people go there before dinner starts… If you notice in a regular church service the service is actually very long, forty-five minutes, and then afterwards brunch, you know, that may be an hour and a half, two hours even. But there’s always a lot of time in the service where people are focused on the spiritual part. Whereas at St. Lydia’s… because the food is… there’s time to cook, there’s time to eat, and you have to leave before the allotted time is over. So there is less time to be spiritually available, in a way. There is a loss of that special time. (Ben)

Here we can see a number of similarities between Ben’s narrative and other congregant narratives. Ben has experienced communal meals in church settings before. Indeed, it appears as though Ben closely associates church with food generally, as in his narrative he talks about after-church brunches as being meaningful and compelling social occasions. It is clear that the social
and communal aspects of church in general is something which Ben very much values. The food itself at St. Lydia’s is not important, he says, “The reason I go there is mostly because I want to spend time with some people, you know, like friends”. However, Ben also to some extent appears to lament the social and participatory nature of the worship service. He compares St. Lydia’s to after-church brunches at other churches, where the boundaries between worshiping at church and socializing over food were more clearly defined, (Ben gives the example of a forty-five-minute church service followed by a two-hour brunch meal). For Ben the boundaries between church and socializing at St. Lydia’s are more porous, and so, as he puts it, “…there is less time to be spiritually available, in a way. There is a loss of that special time”. In an echo of Lyndsey’s remarks discussed earlier, Ben sees the worship service at St. Lydia’s as encouraging social relationships to form in a way that is “the reverse” from the norm; “usually you go to church and then you have brunch, you have friends from church that you go to brunch with. But [at] St. Lydia’s you eat first, and then you make friends…”. At dinner church friendships form over a meal in the church during the worship service, as opposed a having a meal with friends from church after the worship service. This is a further example of the way in which the culture of the congregation alters expectations concerning social interactions within a church setting through a reversal of normative public/private distinctions, and is reminiscent of Lyndsey’s comment that she does not usually clean up after a meal with a group of people, “Except for with people that I’ve actually built strong relationships with”. It suggests, again, that St. Lydia’s replicates environments and conditions which normally would be the domain of particular kinds of intimate social relationships (ie: family, private communal eating, established friendships), and in so doing, the church in fact encourages those types of social relationships to form within the context of congregational life.
Some congregants were ambivalent regarding the extent to which the communal meal was conducive to building strong and meaningful interpersonal relationships. One example of this was Bethany, a forty-one year old congregant at St. Lydia’s and worked for an NGO. At the time of our interview Bethany had been attending worship services at St. Lydia’s on a weekly basis for almost a year. Bethany also attended a Methodist church in Park Slope, Brooklyn, though her attendance at that church had become less frequent over time. Bethany had many positive reflections concerning St. Lydia’s, frequently describing the worship service as very “joyful”. However, despite having been a regular congregant for a considerable period, Bethany also expressed a feeling of disconnection from other congregants. Bethany attributed much of this feeling to having what she referred to as “superficial” conversations over dinner:

...at the beginning I felt a little bit isolated from the people. Well, isolated is a strong word, but I felt like it was hard to socially get to know people there. And I still feel this a little bit, like, you can have a lot of... I mean, I’ve been going to Park Slope Methodist since 2006. So I knew people there well.

I: Ten years...

B: Yeah, nine or ten. So I knew people there well. Whereas at St. Lydia’s a lot of times the conversation [during the meal] before the sermon can be kind of stilted or whatever. Or I remember times early on with the passing the peace, feeling like ‘Oh, I don’t really know any of these people’, or whatever. So that was a negative. But overall it was positive enough to...

I: Right. Do you think that that feeling was something to do with the fact that you were just new, or is it something to do with the culture of St. Lydia’s itself?

B: I think it’s some of both, because even tonight [at St. Lydia’s] I ended up sitting around a lot of people who were new. You know, you can end up having kind of surface level conversations. And I feel like even if there’s a table of six or seven people, but there’s one person who’s new, you always want to make them feel welcome. So it kind of makes the conversation more superficial in a way. I mean there’s a rare occasion when I’ll have an in-depth conversation with someone I meet for the first time. But usually it’s more like... there are definitely people who I’m starting to feel a stronger connection to. I think going on the last retreat helped a lot. Robert [another congregant at St. Lydia’s] and I used to go to Park Slope United Methodist together. So, I mean, I’ve known him for going on ten years, so that made a difference. Yeah, I feel like definitely it’s shifting. (Bethany)
Here we can see Bethany reflecting on, as she puts it, the “surface level conversations” that happen at the dinner table during the worship service, and a feeling of disconnection from congregants, despite frequently interacting with them in this intimate and open setting. Bethany says that this might be attributable to the fact that she has not been attending St. Lydia’s for very long in comparison to her other church, and so she might not have been able to form close friendships yet. But to some extent Bethany also attributes this lingering feeling of disconnection to the format and style of the dinner itself; newcomers are often sitting in amongst regular congregants during the meal, limiting the degree to which conversational intimacy between regular congregants is appropriate or possible at the dinner table. Bethany expanded on this idea a little later in our conversation, again comparing St. Lydia’s to her other church, mentioning the arbitrary nature of the seating arrangements at the communal meal:

…at some other churches, like at Park Slope United Methodist, I met this one woman, we volunteered at a homeless shelter together. And typically when I would go there I would sit near her and we would chat for ten minutes before the service. So then I had a good sense of what was happening in her life. She told me some problems with her husband’s job, or whatever. Whereas at St. Lydia’s maybe I would sit next to her one week, and then the next week I wouldn’t, kind of… I mean, you could make the time to talk to people before or after. But it’s hard to make a comparison because I’ve been going there for such a short time. So I don’t know. I mean it’s definitely more noticeable when people don’t come to St. Lydia’s for a while and that’s nice because it’s so small. So I think that’s helpful. (Bethany)

Bethany’s comment concerning the size of St. Lydia’s, and that “it’s definitely more noticeable when people don’t come”, is another example of the recurrent mention of “being noticed” which we saw earlier in Brian and Lyndsey’s narratives. However, Brian and Lyndsey also expressed similar kinds of ambivalence to Bethany regarding feeling disconnected from other congregants. Lyndsey, for example, like Bethany, remarked on the superficiality of interactions around the dinner table:
...I think there could be a little bit better framing of the conversation sometimes. Just the talking in general. Sometimes I think that people have good conversations, sometimes I think that everyone... it’s like sticking people together who are just kind of all over the place. I mean, do I want assigned seating? No. Sometimes I’m like ‘Are we just going to open up for any kind of conversation? And even to just try and intentionally get to know each other a little bit better. Sometimes I think that people stay in shallow conversations because they don’t know the right questions of people to ask them. For instance, I love sports a lot and I can get really excited about that. And yesterday [at St. Lydia’s] I was sitting next to Henry and I had no idea he liked sports, but I found out he also liked sports. So then we had this great ten-minute conversation about our lives as sports fans. And I was really excited about that because I thought that we both got really excited about the conversation, you know. But I mean, I’ve talked to Henry several times when I didn’t even know he cared about this stuff before. And it’s so fun when you see what people are actually interested in and you can follow up with stuff that they actually want to talk about. Because otherwise I’m just like ‘Where are you living in New York? How long have you been in this neighborhood in Brooklyn? How long have you lived here?’ (Lyndsey)

In Brian’s case, he did not mention “surface level conversations” or the meal specifically. Brian instead attributed his feelings of interpersonal disconnection to a sense that he did not fit in with the younger demographic at the church. Brian also mentioned the transience of the population of New York City, and the consequent transient nature of the congregation:

At St. Lydia’s I feel very connected to the community as a whole, but maybe not quite as connected to individuals. I’ve been thinking about this some lately actually. It’s partially I think that now that my career is sort of on its way somewhat, and I’m getting married, I’m a little bit at a different place in life than a lot of other people at St. Lydia’s. I mean there’s plenty who are in different places. But I think a lot of people are sort of in their twenties, early on in their careers and stuff. Not that I’m that far along. So there’s a little bit of a gap there I’ve noticed sometimes. And some of the people I did click with have left, just because New York, people move away a lot… it’s definitely like immediately you sort of fit into the community. Which was my feeling. I had a place as soon as I walked in the door. Maybe partially because it was new, and is still pretty new, and it wanted to grow and needs more people. So, I mean, I think this is true even at little tiny traditional churches, is they really, in a way that maybe a big church isn’t always, is they really see that you’re there and they’re kind of desperate for you to stick around, because they’re little and they want to grow. St. Lydia’s is desperate in not quite the same way. Like a little shrinking church is kind of on the opposite… like in the sense of like noticing people are here, St. Lydia’s is going up and little churches are going down. But there’s this attitude towards you that they sort of share, I think, which I appreciate. (Brian)

In addition to Brian’s feeling of disconnection from individual congregants, here we see the familiar themes in Brian’s narrative concerning his desire for community and how to a large extent he perceives St. Lydia’s to fulfill that desire; “it’s definitely like immediately you sort of
fit into the community. Which was my feeling. I had a place as soon as I walked in the door”, he says. The small size of St. Lydia’s is mentioned again, as well as “being noticed”, as positive factors in terms of feeling part of a church community. Brian also attributes the welcoming and hospitable culture of the congregation in part to a need the church has for new members and to grow. However, like Lyndsey and Bethany there is a sense in Brian’s narrative of not quite connecting with other congregants in terms of meaningful personal interaction. Brian states, “I feel very connected to the community as a whole, but maybe not quite as connected to individuals”. Although Brian perceives the community at the church to be strong, and he values the community and his sense of belonging and inclusion there, he remains disconnected from other congregants in some fundamental way.

Conclusions

In Part One of this dissertation I argued that in many respects the congregation is where the tensions between religious individualism and religious institutions are played out. In addition, I have argued that Christian identity is very much tied to religious congregations, and therefore the strength and vitality of Christian identities is very much dependent upon strong congregational community. In this chapter I have looked at how discourses about community show up within the culture of St. Lydia’s, particularly in relation to the central practice within the congregation, the communal meal during worship.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Robert Putnam (2000) cites religious congregations as “arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America” (p.66). Social capital being, in
Putnam’s terms, “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.19). Putnam argues that social capital can be beneficial for individuals and for societies in a range of different ways. At the level of the individuals being connected with others it provides more opportunities for employment, friendship, emotional support, and so on. At the community or society level, increased social connectivity creates a social context in which mutual recognition, trustworthiness, and reciprocity are normative (p.19-20). Putnam’s data show, not only that churches are a major source of social capital, but also that participation in religious institutions is a major predictor of other kinds of engagement in social life, including civic engagement, membership of clubs and organizations, volunteering and philanthropy (p.66-67). In this chapter I have been particularly interested in what in Putnam’s terms we might think of as ‘bonding social capital’. That is, social capital which manifests itself internally within a group, linking members of a group together within an organization, often through particular markers of identity, such as nationality, ethnicity, or in this case, religion and religious activity. Putnam contrasts bonding social capital (internal) with bridging social capital, that is, links and networks between groups (external).

The findings of this chapter suggest several conclusions in relation to social capital and the ways in which religious communities are created and experienced by their members. The findings also provide an example of how this particular church attempts to foster and maintain a strong religious community, and how it creatively tackles the inherent tension between individualism and community through the practice of a communal dinner. In general, the findings support the thesis that the idea of community is central to church life and is often a highly valued and meaningful aspect of church life for churchgoers. In this particular case, the communal meal
plays an important role in the creation of community at the church, involving work, participation, cooperation and informal social interaction, all of which heighten the degree to which social capital is generated within the congregation. Congregants report positive feelings of belonging and inclusion at the church, and often attribute this directly to the communal meal. However, the data also reveal that the notion of community in the context of church life needs to be interrogated a little. Some congregant’s report feelings of belonging and community, while simultaneously feeling disconnected from other congregants as individuals on a personal level. The feeling of connection to the institution may be strong, while simultaneously the feeling of connection to other congregants may be weak; implying that the church may be more a source of social capital for some than it is others. To some extent the congregation succeeds in institutionalizing conditions conducive to the generation of bonding social capital, particularly by simulating (whether intentionally or unintentionally) conditions in which bonding social capital is generated in intimate private spheres of social life (such as the family, for example). However, ambivalent feelings of connectedness/disconnectedness amongst some congregants suggests that this success is limited. It also perhaps suggests a distinction needs to be drawn between community and belonging on the one hand, and close interpersonal relationships on the other; one does not necessarily equate to the other in all cases.

For pastor Scott and Rachel Pollak, the intention of the communal meal is very much centered around ideas about building community through working together and eating together. Congregant narratives suggest these intentions are to a large extent fulfilled within the culture of the congregation; the meal is seen by many congregants as providing an opportunity for social interaction, and social connection, and as a way in which they can enter into the congregational
community (although, as pointed out, it may be problematic to assume that ‘social capital’ and ‘community’ are always synonymous with one another). Scott and Pollak’s narratives concerning the communal meal also emphasized particular theological and ethical ideas related to the activity. This included ideas of openness, hospitality, cooperation, welcoming the stranger and ‘the other’, and subverting normative social hierarchies and expectations. It is noticeable that these theological and ethical ideas were more prevalent in Scott and Pollak’s narratives than they were in congregant narratives. Congregants tended to emphasize the social aspects of the experience of the meal, rather than issues of social inequality, welcoming the stranger, and so on. This difference in emphasis is perhaps to be expected, possibly attributable to the different concerns and immediate preoccupations of religious professionals in comparison to lay people. Though it may also be an indication of the strong degree to which the social aspects of church matter to lay congregants, and in many cases appear to matter over and above any spiritual or religious concerns.

If *koinonia* or ‘fellowship’ within Christian discourse refers to a church as a community of support, as Wuthnow termed it, it is clear that the meal at St. Lydia’s plays a key role in the attempt to foster that kind of community at the church. The meal provides a site for intimate social interaction, and a site where Christian ethics are embodied. Although some congregants may feel a sense of interpersonal disconnection, many congregants see the communal preparation and sharing of a meal as a source of social capital and a way in which the community at the church is strengthened and enhanced. To this degree, the meal assists St. Lydia’s in realizing the potential of church-as-community. However, there are other practices and activities at St. Lydia’s, particularly concerning worship and liturgy, which are explicitly intended to build
social capital and congregational community. It is to these aspects of the worship service at the church that I will now turn in the following chapters.
Chapter 9 – Songs and Music

The previous chapter examined the communal meal in the congregation as an intentional ritual practice with a variety of different meanings associated with it. We saw how it was underpinned by particular theological and ethical ideas, beyond it being a Eucharistic meal, and that congregants valued the meal as a source of social capital, associating it with notions of community, family, and belonging. In this chapter I examine another important aspect of the culture of the congregation - the music which happens throughout the worship service. Looking at the attitudes towards the use, style, and approach to music in congregational life provides a further lens through which to understand a religious congregation and the religiosity of the congregants. I am particularly interested in the innovative form and style of music-making in this particular congregation, and what music-making contributes sociologically in terms of forming congregational community, and in terms of the formation of individual and congregational religious identities. According to Ammerman (1998), music is an essential element in religious ritual and “ritual music is a deeply sensual experience that often touches people in ways words cannot… Singing and chanting call worshipers to enact and relive – together – the faith they are recounting in song” (p.85). If this is the case, what does the form and style of music-making in the congregation of St. Lydia’s tell us about congregational and individual religiosities? I explore this question looking at the ways in which the congregants and congregational leadership talk about the role of music in the life of their church and in their religious lives more generally. As in the last chapter, my central guiding question is what is meaningful to congregants in terms of music at church? What is the intention of the pastor and her collaborators in terms of the musical style and approach, and to what degree are these intentions realized within the culture of the congregation?
During my interviews with congregants I often asked them to reflect on the music at the church. This was a way of encouraging interviewees to talk about how they experienced the worship service, their preferences concerning music at church more generally, and the reasons for those preferences. Music also played an integral role in the liturgy at the church, with more or less the entire service being sung by the Presider and the congregation. It therefore appeared to me to be a very important subject for discussion when I interviewed congregants. The sociological relationship between the use of music in communal rituals and formation of community was also very much of interest to me. For example, Robert Bellah (2011: 127-131) in *Religions and Human Evolution* explored the close links between the development of ritual, music, and language, suggesting that in the course of human evolution the use of sound in ritual perhaps predated, and developed separately from, complex language, acting as a basis for social solidarity in early human societies\(^37\). This Durkheimian line of inquiry raises the question of the degree to which communal music-making in a church setting might contribute to the formation of social bonds or strong religious community.

**Hospitality, accessibility and vulnerability**

As we have seen already in this thesis, the culture of St. Lydia’s places strong emphasis on the relationship between music and community formation. In Chapter 6 I discussed the origin of the liturgical music at St. Lydia’s, noting that it is a particular style of paperless music, a style and approach to church music developed by the organization Music That Makes Community (MMC). Pastor Scott was a founder of MMC alongside Reverend Donald Shell and Reverend

Rick Fabian, pastors at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. We saw that this style of music, featured a song leader who teaches songs to the congregation orally using call and response techniques and series of specific hand-gestures, with minimal musical accompaniment. This paperless music at the church differs from a congregation singing with a hymnal or other text and being accompanied by piano or organ, and is explicitly underpinned by a theology of “Generosity, Forgiveness, Creativity and engaged freedom, Collaboration, Compassion, Love of God and one another”\textsuperscript{38}. We also saw themes of solidarity, risk taking, vulnerability, and openness running through the Core Values expressed by MMC. It is notable that many of these theological ideas were also prominent in the discussion in the previous chapter in relation to the communal meal. For this reason, these ideas can be said very much to form the theological basis of the congregation (though, as I noted, congregants were more inclined to discuss the communal meal in terms of it being a social event than they were to discuss its theological implications).

In considering the role of music at the church, I was interested in congregant attitudes towards religious music, and the degree to which the perceptions and experiences regarding religious music differed within the congregation. I wondered what the music at church might contribute to the experience of worship for congregants, whether congregants considered music as contributing to their faith or beliefs as Christians in any way, and how the experience of singing paperless music might differ for congregants in comparison with singing in other church environments. If theological themes of community, vulnerability, collaboration, and so on, underpin the musical approach from an organizational or institutional perspective, I wanted to

\textsuperscript{38} Music That Makes Community website, retrieved 1/16/2016 from http://www.musicthatmakescommunity.org
know how congregants themselves actually experience and understand the practice of music-making in the congregation of St. Lydia’s.

One of the first congregants I interviewed for my research was Sam, a fifty-one-year-old professional musician and writer who often takes a lead role in arranging and rehearsing the music at St. Lydia’s. Sam often plays percussion during the worship services and had very much been involved in St. Lydia’s and the music at the church from the earliest days of the congregation. Sam had also been employed by All Saints Company (an offshoot organization of St. Gregory’s of Nyssa) and was regularly involved in Music That Makes Community. In our interview Sam talked about the kinds of music used at St. Lydia’s, and mentioned some of the criteria that determine the music choices; “We have various principles for choosing music… It has to have simple melodies. It’s easily taught. But we try and choose interesting melodies. We don’t want it to sound like campfire songs. Which a lot of churches do and it’s just blah [sic]. It’s important to have an aesthetic vision that means something, because people want that. And then the lyrical content, obviously we don’t want a lot of male images of God, or war images, or whatever. And we try and include music from various traditions”. The kinds of lyrical content preferred are an indication of the progressive and feminist theology of St. Lydia’s which I discuss in more detail later in the thesis. There is also a clear emphasis on inclusivity and hospitality in terms of the music having to have “simple melodies” and be “easily taught”. Sam talked in more detail about some of these underlying theological and ethical ideas in relation to the music when I asked him what attracted him to St. Lydia’s as a church:

…I would say it’s a place whose intention is, number one, to be inclusive as possible and to really bring acts of hospitality into all levels of the service. No matter what is happening there is some element of hospitality that is built into what is going on. Whether it’s setting up the room, the way
the music is led, so that people who have never sung it before can jump right in and sing, the way the communion is... it’s just, it’s for everybody, there’s no sort of threshold, ‘Are you baptized or not? Are you a believer or not?’ Plenty of atheists show up at St. Lydia’s and have communion. They’re part of it. I’m a big believer in that. We always address the newcomer, even if the newcomer isn’t there. We give each other the instructions. So say it’s a gathering of five people, we still follow the script, and say ‘Now we’re going to do this’ even though everybody knows it, we still say it out loud because we’re including the person that might show up at any moment, and we’re also inscribing into our mind that we always do that. So that’s a really big thing, being really inclusive, being including of people who are not really steeped in church culture, or religious culture of any sort. (Sam)

We can see many themes that are now familiar to us from the previous chapters, including ideas about the congregation as a welcoming and open community, a church that is, as Sam puts it, “for everybody”, regardless of belief. The term “hospitality” is used again here, a term which we have seen frequently before, particularly as a major theme emerging in the last chapter concerning the communal meal. If the table for the communal meal is framed by pastor Scott and others in the congregation as a place of inclusivity and welcoming the stranger, we can see here how this ethic of hospitality is also extended into the practice of liturgical music at the church. In the extract above Sam remarks that “No matter what is happening there is some element of hospitality that is built into what is going on. Whether it’s setting up the room, the way the music is led, so that people who have never sung it before can jump right in and sing...”, suggesting that the ideal is that the worship service is accessible for anyone to be able to participate in, rather than being in some way alienating or difficult to understand and to participate in, even for those “who are not really steeped in church culture, or religious culture of any sort”. Sam also mentions here the practice of the Song Leader and Deacon reading the instructions from the worship service, even when there are no new congregants in attendance. The intention here was for the congregation to always maintain a welcoming stance towards newcomers, by always running the worship service anew, in the same way, each and every time, with full instructions
for everybody, regardless of the amount of time the attendees had been congregants. In this way, the theory was, that the congregation never became a ‘closed group’, in other words, a group with a particular religious ritual practice that only regular attenders were aware of, or knew the sequence of. The group always remained an ‘open group’, in this sense. As with much of this kind of intentional openness within the culture of the congregation, it is of course debatable whether the ideal of an ‘open group’ was actually successful in reality. However, nevertheless, it is worth noting here that this was an ideal within the culture of the congregation, an ideal which had a theological premise.

In my interviews with pastor Scott she discussed the music at St. Lydia’s in terms of ideas of hospitality as well, and also in terms of accepting imperfection, allowing mistakes to be made, and an ethic of interdependent cooperation:

…Instead of looking at a piece of paper we’re looking at each other. And what you’re modelling is ‘We’re relying on this person to teach us something and we’re going to learn how to do it, and be equipped’. It’s like an exchange rather than a studying kind of thing. St. Lydia’s is geared towards, in some way, people that don’t have any church experience. Some of us have tons of it, but I wanted to be as open as possible to people that don’t. So if they can walk in the door and just engage someone who’s teaching them a song, as opposed to trying to read a piece of music. Sometimes it works better than others. And also I think, this is hard for me sometimes, but the whole idea is that we’re getting somewhere together rather than creating a perfect worship service, you know. So the process of getting there, and of learning to lead, is more important than ‘That was perfect!’ you know. And sometimes that’s hard for me because I can be a perfectionist, and I was trained as a musician, and it’s a growing edge for me, I guess you can say. But I’m committed to the principle. Sometimes it’s harder in practice (laughs). So, it’s all from this perspective of welcoming. (Pastor Emily Scott)

Like Sam, pastor Scott mentions that the music should be accessible to “people that don’t have any church experience” or formal musical training. In the previous chapter we saw how Scott
talked about the dinner table as a site where difficult social interactions take place, interactions that necessitate reflection and negotiation, and in so doing, contribute to a particular understanding of the Christian Church and its meaning. For example, pastor Scott remarked that sitting next to a particular person may be difficult, “it’s awkward and you have to figure out what to do about it. So it kind of forces the idea of the body of Christ, as like a more challenging context”. We can see here how the pastor talks about the musical approach at St. Lydia’s in a similar way, to the degree that the practice of making music as a congregation is seen as involving challenging social interactions, and the acceptance of difficulty, struggle, and imperfection. Many similar themes and ideas were also expressed by the community coordinator of St. Lydia’s, Rachel Pollak, who, after leaving her position at St. Lydia’s in 2014, would in fact go on to be the Assistant Director of Music That Makes Community. In our interview Pollak talked about the founding of Music That Makes Community, mentioning that St Gregory of Nyssa wanted to develop a musical approach that, among other things, would allow congregants to have their hands free to hold candles. In addition, there were, Pollak explained, theological ideas underpinning the musical approach, especially revolving around the notion of accessibility. For example, with regards to singing, Pollak remarked, “You think you can’t do it, but everyone can do it if you just open your mouth, you know. And that’s the main reason that we do it. In that it invites everyone to participate”. I asked Pollak how important she thought music was at St. Lydia’s, and I mentioned that the name Music That Makes Community is interesting in and of itself. In response Pollak talked about the effect she saw music as having in the worship service, and she made reference to similar theological and ethical ideas as those mentioned by pastor Scott and Sam the musician:

I think that singing brings you into your body. It makes it feel like an experience rather than something that’s happening in your head. It takes you out of that thinking, talking, conceptual
part of your mind and into the experiencing, feeling, breathing, eating, part of your body… It takes people out of their heads and lets them be part of the group, and be part of the gathered, the present moment that’s happening in the gathering, and it helps people be vulnerable in front of each other, and offer that part of themselves to each other, and take risks, be open to taking risks, and that trains us for taking risks in other parts of our lives. And I think it has a physiological good effect on your body. Singing, it’s good to use that part of your body and create those kinds of vibrations, and all of that. I think it’s physically good for you. And you use different muscles in your face that make you look up more and use your eyebrows and it keeps us from being hunched over and being stuck in our minds. (Rachel Pollak)

Singing using the paperless musical approach is seen very much as a bodily experience here, and there is a distinction made between it being an experiential rather than intellectual musical approach; “It takes you out of that thinking, talking, conceptual part of your mind and into the experiencing, feeling, breathing, eating, part of your body”, Pollak says. We can also notice that Pollak talks about the music-making in the congregation in a way that makes explicit reference to the intentional cultivation of religious community; “It takes people out of their heads and lets them be part of the group, and be part of the gathered, the present moment that’s happening in the gathering”. We saw in the previous chapter a theme of vulnerability with regards to the communal meal, (particularly in Monica’s narrative). Here we see Pollak using the term “vulnerability” explicitly in the context of music in the congregation. This particular style of congregational singing is viewed as, in a sense, letting one’s guard down. Vulnerability is seen as arising in part because the distraction of a text to read has been taken away. Instead, congregants are visually focused on the each other, the room, and the events taking place in worship, as well as the sound of the other congregants singing.

There is, then, a high degree of emotional intimacy that is generated in this liturgical setting. This emotional intimacy arises in part from the paperless musical approach itself, in combination
with the fact that congregational singing at St. Lydia’s usually takes place with the congregants standing in a circle, and that the congregation at each worship service is usually a small group of less than forty people (often much less than that). Pollak’s reflection on the character of this emotional intimacy especially illustrates the way in which the musical approach is seen as involving emotional risk and vulnerability. Pollak says congregants “offer that part of themselves to each other, and take risks, be open to taking risks, and that trains us for taking risks in other parts of our lives”. Being “vulnerable in front of each other” and emotional “risk taking” is often articulated in the congregation around the process of song leading itself, with lay congregants being asked to volunteer to take on this key role in the worship service. The process of leading the congregation in song is framed as taking a risk, in the sense of it being a challenging task on a practical level (particularly for those who are new to the role), and in the sense that the song leader sings each part of the song alone, demonstrating each line to the congregants in turn, thus involving a heightened degree of emotional vulnerability. Ideas concerning imperfection and trust also arise here in the narratives surrounding making music at the church; in order for someone to be willing to take risks they have to feel they are in an environment in which it is safe to do so, where they will not be judged harshly and where mistakes are tolerated and even accepted as a part of the activity; the liturgical setting is very much framed as that safe, trusting, and experimental environment. As Scott’s narrative above illustrated; “the process of getting there, and of learning to lead, is more important than ‘That was perfect!’”.

In addition to an emphasis on vulnerability Pollak’s narrative in part reveals something about how the congregation sees the relationship between the church and the secular world. There is a language used here, and explicitly in pastor Scott’s narratives also, concerning the idea of
“modelling”. In the extract above pastor Scott talks about “modelling” a particular ethical way of being through the practice of worship; “Instead of looking at a piece of paper we’re looking at each other. And what you’re modelling is ‘We’re relying on this person to teach us something and we’re going to learn how to do it, and be equipped’”. Similarly, Pollak talks about vulnerability and risk-taking in worship which “trains us for taking risks in other parts of our lives”. The process of modelling, then, is seen as happening on a series of levels. In a very practical sense the Song Leader is modelling the song for the congregation during worship, in terms of beginning each song and illustrating how the song is sung line by line. The behaviors, activities, and interactions which take place during the worship service, including the process of music making, are themselves also seen as ‘models’; ways of being, forms of ethical conduct, and ways of emotionally relating to other people, which then, in turn, it is hoped, form the basis of life outside of church. There is a sense in which worship and liturgical life is seen as a setting in which congregants learn particular theological and ethical ideas, and ways of being, learning these ideas through actually practicing and embodying them in a physical way, through singing, and eating, and so on. Having practiced and embodied those ways of being in church worship, they can then be transposed from the ‘ritual world’ in church to the ‘secular world’ outside of the church. The world of ritual, then, is a world in its own right, separate in some sense from the ‘real world’; a world where particular behaviors and ethics are played out as a rehearsal or training, as it were, for use in the ‘real world’.

39 cf: Bellah (2011) on ritual and play as separate ‘worlds’, separate from daily reality (p.1-11, p.74-92). Pastor Scott has also been quoted elsewhere in this thesis concerning worship as a place in which ideal ethics and behaviors are modelled and embodied; “I just feel really strongly that whatever it is that we’re telling people is supposed to be happening in faith or in life we have to actually literally do it in our liturgies… you don’t teach people by telling them stuff, you teach people by doing things”.

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Positive attitudes towards music amongst congregants

The congregants I interviewed displayed a range of different attitudes towards the music at St. Lydia’s. Several congregants expressed positive attitudes towards the style of music at the church. Looking at Box 2 we can see that music at church in general was often cited as something that is important to congregants in their religious lives. We can also see that when asked to compare the music at St. Lydia’s with other churches some interviewees talked favorably about the intimacy and the interdependency involved in the paperless style of music in comparison to other church environments. For example, one congregant remarks that some churches “just seem like they’re just sitting back slowly singing hymns and kind of droning on. This just feels very alive” (Bethany). A variety of favorable attitudes towards the paperless approach to music specifically can be seen, with congregants appearing to value this unconventional approach to church singing, “I really enjoy the sharing of responsibility for the leading and conducting worship” (Clare), one congregant remarked, while another congregant stated “I like that St. Lydia’s explains things. There’s those hand gestures. Like, ‘I’m going to sing now, you’re going to sing now’. And other churches don’t… even as a lifelong believer I sometimes go [to churches] and I’ll be like ‘I don’t know what’s happening’. Especially if it’s a different denomination.” (Fiona). It is clear, then, that many congregant narratives show music at church is important to them as churchgoers, and in some cases the music at St. Lydia’s is cited as a primary attraction for them in terms of their attitudes towards the congregation. Many of these positive perceptions and attitudes indicate that the paperless music approach appears to fulfil its intended function as stated by Scott and Pollak, producing an accessible and engaging liturgical setting, encouraging participation and intimacy during worship.
Box 2 – Positive Congregant Attitudes Towards Music

…I really enjoy, as someone who also finds music very significant, I really enjoy the sharing of responsibility for the leading and conducting worship. And also that it’s just us, we’re not dependent on a keyboard or whatever. We just make it ourselves. (Clare)

I: What about the worship service itself? How did it compare to other churches?

B: Well I mean it’s just very different. It’s so small, and you know, like I mentioned… I keep mentioning I really liked the musical aspect of it.

I: What was it about the music that you like?

B: It was just very intimate, in a way. It feels very joyful. Like, at some other churches, I mean, I guess some churches have gospel or whatever that feels joyful as well. But some of them just seem like they’re just sitting back slowly singing hymns and kind of droning on. This just feels very alive. (Bethany)

…I like that St. Lydia’s explains things. There’s those hand gestures. Like, ‘I’m going to sing now, you’re going to sing now’. And other churches don’t. In a lot of churches if it’s bold you’re supposed to say it.

I: On the projector…

F: Yeah, or even just the program. If it’s bold you’re supposed to say it. Or if there’s this symbol you’re supposed to stand up, or whatever. And like, you might not know that if you’re just somebody off the street, everybody standing just, like, sitting here. So you’re like ‘why is everyone standing and sitting, and I’m just like sitting here?’

I: So that’s significant then for you? Congregants are directed and instructed in specific ways.

F: Yeah, and except for Mar Mari Assyrian Church of the East in Yonkers, that church even tells you more explicitly what’s happening. They just have a projector on the wall saying ‘This is why we’re saying this right now’. Which is awesome, because I feel like even as a lifelong believer I sometimes go [to churches] and I’ll be like ‘I don’t know what’s happening’. Especially if it’s a different denomination. (Fiona)

…Yeah. But I really love singing. It’s one of my favorite things to do. I spent a whole year teaching and learning singing and dancing and stuff, and so anything that involves a good sing where I can, like, know the tunes and sing harmonies and all of that, I love. What frustrates me is if I’m in a church where the songs aren’t really set up for congregational singing or it’s more like a performance. Or it’s out of the key that I can sing in, or I don’t know the tune, or I don’t know the words. All of that frustrates me. So I guess probably, I love it when we’re coming to the end of season and everyone knows the songs well at St. Lydia’s and you can harmonize. But I think all of the music stuff really appeals me because I just love singing with other people and so I get the opportunity to sing in harmony with people twice a week [at St. Lydia’s], which is great. (Hillary)
“You don’t get that same kind of like soul force”: Ambivalent and negative attitudes towards music amongst congregants

When the subject of the music at St. Lydia’s came up in my interviews with congregants some interviewees had reservations, or a degree of ambivalence, regarding the music at the church. This was often because it was an approach to liturgical music that they had not experienced before, or because it was not their preferred style of music for worship. For example, in one case, Mandy, a forty-year old freelance writer, who had been a congregant at St. Lydia’s for about a year, told me that the music style at the church was initially a little jarring, but that she had become accustomed to it over time:

…I have to say, I wasn’t wild about [the music] at the beginning. I now like it, but it took some getting used to.
I: Why?
M: I think because I liked the music at the church where I grew up. That was the only thing. Or the best thing. They had the piano, or organ, usually piano, and the hymnal and it was just familiar hymns. I mean, fine, but it was hard for me to do. Yeah, so I think it was just that it was different, different music.
I: So you didn’t like it at first, but you kind of…
M: …got used to it. Yeah. I like it now. (Mandy)

In two cases congregants talked about a lack of emotion in the music at St. Lydia’s, after having previously attended charismatic churches where they felt the singing was much more energetic and compelling in a variety of ways. Ben, the thirty-two year old Chinese-American architect who we met in the last chapter, talked with some regret about the music at St. Lydia’s being “non-emotional” in comparison to his experience of Baptist worship:

I: And what about the music at St. Lydia’s? You said that you’re a fan of music in general.
B: Right, but I don’t really… I consider the Christian music, the contemporary Christian music to me is different from traditional music. Traditional music is very sullen and very controlled, and cool, very, what do you call it? Non-emotional, I would say. Maybe a little bit of emotion, but it’s
more sullen, it’s very sober… OK, you can say there’s emotion, but it’s limited by the style of the song. So if the song is a very old traditional song its different emotions. But of course St. Lydia’s is not a Baptist church, it’s a different way of doing music. But you know, it’s cool. The music is there. But for me it’s not the same as the power that can be generated from contemporary music. Because it’s much more intense. I mean, the contemporary Christian music is very, you know, like the songs people sing in the camp songs, Christian camp songs, these songs can be very strong emotion because they’re written by modern people. (Ben)

Ben appears somewhat ambivalent about the musical approach at St. Lydia’s, distinguishing between the “traditional” music of St. Lydia’s and the “contemporary” music of a Baptist church and Christian camp songs, which he sees as differing in terms of emotional power and intensity. However, in general music at church was important to Ben. Indeed, Ben mentioned that his experience of music in a Baptist church in college was formative in terms of him becoming a Christian; “… I sort of became converted through music. The Baptist church has really great contemporary worship music which I really enjoyed, being able to feel that power.”

A similar view concerning the “power” of music at a Baptist church was expressed by another congregant I interviewed, Joe, a thirty-four year old writer and journalist, who had attended St. Lydia’s for four years. Like Ben, Joe compared the music at St. Lydia’s with music he had experienced at charismatic and Baptist churches, and appeared to find charismatic worship music more emotionally compelling. The way in which Joe talked about his experiences of music at church also revealed something about his attitudes and experiences of church and Christianity more generally, and gave some indication about what attracted him to St. Lydia’s as a congregation. An extended extract from my interview with Joe can be found in Box 3. In the extract we can see Joe describe music at charismatic churches as “Bringing out a lot more
Box 3 – Joe’s Attitudes Towards Church Music

I: What about the singing? How does the music compare? I mean, do you enjoy the music a St. Lydia’s?

J: To a degree. It’s not nearly as challenging as it could be.

I: Oh really, what do you mean by that?

J: Meaning that the singing that I’ve done, especially in the Vineyard [A charismatic evangelical church], the Vineyard church songs were some of the most… you would go into a state. You slightly go into a state with the songs in St. Lydia’s. Maybe a little bit. A meditative state. But you could get to a point in the songs at the Vineyard where you’d be crying from how deeply you got into them. From, you know… the songs were just these kind of … I don’t know how to describe them… they were those kinds of songs that they do a lot in the more charismatic churches where it’s meant to be… you don’t even need to have the notes, you just hear the guitar chords a few times and you just have the lyrics in front of you and you can get it… And those kind of songs, there were times where even those could feel like the lyrics were a bit over simplistic, but you could get it to a point of near, you know, hands up in the air [gestures upwards with his hands, closing his eyes]. You know, that’s not something that happens at St. Lydia’s.

I: Well, no it doesn’t. So you mean challenging in a way…

J: Bringing out a lot more emotion, like the singing at St. Lydia’s is like ‘Alright, now we’ll have this side do this, and we’ll have that side do that, yes, here we go. And now we’ll have tenors over here, basses over here, sopranos over here, altos over here, very nice’. Whereas I’m talking about people, you know, crying, crying, and lifting, to the point of like, [sings] ‘And I could sing out Your love forever, I could sing out Your love forever’ and just like, you know, like raising their hands, and like crying. And you come to a point with that kind of thing when you’re fucking overwhelmed. And the best advice that I ever got on that kind of singing, and that kind of worship, I felt like I was being suffocated, like it was just too much. And my pastor, Bill, he said ‘You don’t have to lift your hands, you don’t have to cry, or think that that means that those people are more faithful than you because they’re there. That’s just their method of connecting with it. You sing with it how you want to sing with it, don’t worry about the expressions, the outward expressions of faith. Just sing the words and see what happens’. And unfortunately with St. Lydia’s when I sing the words usually very little happens. I don’t find myself almost crying ever. I don’t find myself ever having that moment of like, you know, giving up to it, in that sense. Although sometimes with the songs right before the prayer, like I Will Guide Thee, or the All Shall Be Well, the songs that we do right before we begin prayers for the people, that part of it sometimes I will come to a point of greater depth and focus on it.

I: Does the paperless music, does that bring anything to the experience for you? There’s no hymnal.

J: Right, yeah. I mean the songs are not as powerful, and they’re not… I mean, we don’t even really speak of… How can I put it? It feels very lite, and not as… Actually, Riverside [an interdenominational church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan] has the same exact kind of songs, and I found it… I’m
more used to a Baptist feel… we’re not holding hands… well, we hold hands at some points but. I mean just go to Riverside to a Wednesday night service and it’s really a Baptist kind of a feel. Where like, you know… what is it now? Oh, what’s the words, God, what’s the song? [sings] I feel like going on, I feel like going on, Lords trials come on every hand, I feel like going on. And you do it when you holding hands and you go round in a circle, and it’s like ‘Yeah!’ You don’t get that same kind of like soul force [sic], like you get in some of those places.

I: But that hasn’t stopped you going from St. Lydia’s?

J: Oh God no. No, that’s something that I like. But that isn’t an essential. The personal part of it… I always come out of there, as I used to at Transmission [an Emergent church on Upper West Side of Manhattan], feeling like I know these people better, in some ways I might even know myself better, and I have been reminded… let’s see… I’ve been given a place to connect to God, and I’ve been connected to God through this place.

I: And those three things are the things that have kept you coming back.

J: Yeah. Knowing God, connecting with myself, connecting with others. It is a grounding for me. That’s what people have said a lot of times, it feels like I’m coming back home. It’s that recharge that you get before I go back out into the rest of week. It doesn’t always challenge you. But it gives you that sense of a grounding. (Joe)

emotion”. Joe says that “…unfortunately with St. Lydia’s when I sing the words usually very little happens. I don’t find myself almost crying ever. I don’t find myself ever having that moment of like, you know, giving up to it, in that sense”. For Joe, St. Lydia’s can be a slightly staid and reserved liturgical setting, perhaps typically so for a mainline Protestant church in comparison to a charismatic church. Joe’s enthusiasm for worship music in a charismatic church service was clear to me when I interviewed him. As can be seen from the transcript, Joe burst into song at times as he reflected on these transcendent worship experiences. It was clear to me that Joe valued this kind of music and worship, the feeling of “giving up to it”, or as he also put it, “you come to a point with that kind of thing when you’re fucking overwhelmed”. Joe says the music at St. Lydia’s does not produce the same kind of worship experience, in terms of its emotional impact; he says, “You don’t get that same kind of like soul force [sic], like you get in some of those places”. Joe uses the word “challenging” twice, referring in part to the music at St.
Lydia’s not being emotionally challenging, but also implying the church is, as a result, less spiritually challenging than other church settings, “It doesn’t always challenge you”, he says. However, it is also clear from Joe’s narrative that while to some extent he may lament the more reserved musical style at St. Lydia’s, he nevertheless finds the worship service at the church to be a very fulfilling experience as a churchgoer and as a Christian. An emotional experience through music, Joe says, “isn’t an essential”. Instead, the value and meaning of church for Joe is church as a place which facilitates “Knowing God, connecting with myself, connecting with others”. St. Lydia’s appears to provide a worship service and church experience that very much fulfils those criteria for Joe. He describes St Lydia’s as being a “grounding” for him, “like I’m coming back home” (a further example, incidentally, of congregants comparing the church to home and family which we explored in the last chapter). Though Joe does not feel emotionally or spiritually challenged by the music during the worship service in the same way as he does at a charismatic church, “this sense of a grounding”, and feeling connected to God, connected to himself, and to other congregants, is what is meaningful and valuable to Joe about church, and about St. Lydia’s in particular. It is perhaps noteworthy that Joe mentions the songs the congregation sings during prayer as being the most emotionally charged musical moments during the service.

When I interviewed Julia Stroud, who, as discussed in Chapter 6, replaced Rachel Pollak as community coordinator at St. Lydia’s in 2014, I asked her to reflect on the way in which the worship service at St. Lydia’s is structured around a communal meal and around paperless music, and how this might affect the congregation as a whole. For Stroud, “its benefits are that you really get to know people quickly”. However, Stroud also remarked that having a strong
focus on music and singing may mean the congregation is “self-selecting”, in the sense that those who are not comfortable with singing or with the intimate musical setting might be intimidated or discouraged from attending; the congregation, Stroud noted, perhaps tends to attract and retain those who are confident enough, and have enough ability, to sing in this particular way:

…It makes music very accessible, it makes music very central. I think that’s slightly self-selecting a little bit. I think people might come and be like ‘Oh wow, I don’t want to do any of that singing’, then they don’t come back. But I think that any church is going to be self-selecting in some way. So I think that the way that the paperless music works is really beautiful and amazing, and not really happening elsewhere. Or happens in a way that is not really very organic to a community. Whereas this is very organic to what St. Lydia’s is.

I: But you think it might put people off?

J: Oh, yeah. I had friends come to hear me preach who were like ‘I will never come again’.

I: Because of the singing?

J: Yeah.

I: But the point of it is that it’s supposed to be accessible?

J: Right, but I think for some people it’s like ‘Oh, I’m standing in this very small circle with this person singing at me. I don’t even know what I’m saying. And I don’t sing’… [my friends] feel very comfortable not singing at All Saints [an Episcopal Church in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where Stroud works as Program Minister]. There’s no problem. It’s in a pew… at All Saints ‘OK, hymn number five hundred and forty-two’, everyone gets out the hymnal. You can not sing. Who gives a shit? Or you could sing. But in the end the result is that the music doesn’t sound… isn’t alive in the way that it is at St. Lydia’s. Everyone’s just singing acapellas, it’s like a miracle every week.

(Julia Stroud)

Stroud’s anecdote about her friends attending St. Lydia’s and feeling alienated by the musical style of the congregation is interesting for a number of reasons. It is an indication that an intimate and interactive approach to liturgical music may in fact in some cases have the counterintuitive effect of pushing people away, rather than bringing them closer together in congregational community. Stroud’s friends appear to have felt more comfortable singing (or having the option of not singing) in a more normative church setting, than singing at St. Lydia’s. In a sense, then,
the intimate setting brings with it an obligation to participate, and a social cost to not participating; choosing not to participate, or being unable to participate, violates the norms of the culture of this particular congregation, a congregational culture very much centered around ideas about participation, mutual cooperation, taking part, and so on. The intention of Scott as pastor of St. Lydia’s is to create a congregational culture that is open and accepting. As we have seen, in many ways Scott has indeed succeeded in this goal. However non-participation and non-engagement, or the casual participation and the casual engagement of congregants, is perhaps something that the culture of the congregation struggles to accommodate. Ultimately, as Stroud notes, the musical style at St. Lydia’s may mean that the congregation is “self-selecting”, in that those who feel uncomfortable with the musical style may simply not return. Stroud suggests that “any church is going to be self-selecting in some way”, and this observation is likely to be true, to the extent that each congregation has particular cultural, ethical, racial, and denominational characteristics, and a variety of other characteristics, which will either appeal to, or repel, particular kinds of worshippers, thus leading to a degree to homogenization within the culture of a congregation. This issue was raised by Penny Edgell Becker (1999: 177-189) in Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life in which she noted that self-selection is one of the ways in which the culture of a congregation is reproduced over time. She writes, for example, that “there is a certain amount of self-selection on an individual level, particularly in the area of commitment style. Norms of intimacy are both readily apparent and seem to be salient for people choosing to join congregations” (p.189). As we have seen in this chapter, the style and approach to music-making at St. Lydia’s is one prominent facet of the congregational norms of intimacy, to use Becker’s term, within the culture of the congregation. It is therefore perhaps one factor which influences potential congregants to select in or out of the congregation.
However, this is a difficult proposition to test empirically, as my interviewee sample is drawn from active congregants at the church, and so, by definition, my study does not include those who self-selected out of the congregation, for whatever reason.

**Conclusions**

Taken as a whole the findings of this chapter contribute further to our understanding of the congregation and its worship practices. We have seen how music-making as a congregational practice is discursively framed within the culture of the congregation in a way that is consistent with the theological and ethical values espoused in relation to other aspects of the congregational culture, with an emphasis on community, hospitality, vulnerability, and acceptance. These are, in a sense, desirable outcomes on the part of the congregational leadership. That these themes have shown up implicitly and explicitly throughout my exploration of the origins of the congregation, its worship, the communal meal, and the music, is a clear indication of the prominence which these themes have in the culture of the congregation. With regards to the music, we have seen in this chapter how the form the music-making takes is explicitly articulated by the pastor and co-founder as creating a musical setting for interpersonal vulnerability, engagement, risk taking, co-leadership, and so on. In this sense religious worship itself is seen as a practice which involves emotional and personal risk on a number of different levels.

Looking closely at the various ways in which congregants talk about their attitudes and perceptions of the music at the church provided a way of exploring the religiosity of congregants more generally, and what they may or may not find valuable and meaningful about attending
church. Joe’s narrative, for example, focused on the emotional power of music at charismatic church services and how this affected him. However, the musical style and approach of a particular church was much less important to him than other more fundamental questions about being “connected” with God, with others, and with himself. In addition, this close examination of congregant narratives concerning religious music, combined with congregant narratives in the last chapter concerning the communal meal, reveals something about characteristics of the congregation as a whole. One striking pattern to emerge is that the congregants are extremely experienced churchgoers, most being cradle-Christians of one kind or another. For example, in this chapter we saw that as congregants were asked to reflect on the music at the church they often compared it to a wide range of experiences they had had at other worship services. Although pastor Scott and Sam the musician both talked about wanting the music to be accessible for those with little or no church experience, based on my interviews with congregants, it is clear that the majority of congregants at the church have extensive life-long and varied church experiences. This observation helps to add further to our picture of the culture of the congregation as a whole, and is perhaps another indication of the way in which the rhetoric of the congregational leadership is sometimes at odds with the reality of the life of the congregation itself. Finally, the exploration of the relationship between music and the congregation has also raised issues concerning cultural capital, and the degree to which congregational cultures may be exclusionary or alienating for those who lack particular kinds of cultural capital, such as, in this case, an ability to sing, or familiarity and ease with a particular style or setting for religious worship. Again, despite ideas of hospitality, accessibility and community underpinning the musical approach at the church, the cultivation of emotional intimacy within a liturgical setting or worship style may counterintuitively function to exclude rather than to include.
Chapter 10 – Institutional Statements of Faith and Belief

In the last chapter we looked at liturgical music in the congregation, both in terms of it being an integral part of the culture of the church and its worship practices, and in terms of how and why music matters in the religious lives of the congregants. In this chapter we turn to the topic of religious identity of the congregation as an organization or institution, examining official statements of faith made by St. Lydia’s as a church. By institutional statements of faith and belief I mean statements concerning Christianity and its meanings that are made at the congregational and denominational level, or statements that are sanctioned and promoted by those religious institutions. This contrasts with what we might think of as individual statements of faith and belief made by congregants. Doing this expands our understanding of the culture of the congregation further by uncovering the kind Christian discourses that circulate within the church. It also allows us to locate St. Lydia’s within broader movements in Christianity and its denomination.

As well as distinguishing between institutional and individual religious identities and discourses, it is useful to distinguish between implicit and explicit identities and discourses. Much of the material in preceding chapters has already explored different aspects of the culture of the congregation. For example, we have seen how ideas concerning community, participation, and inclusivity are central to the congregation and its theology. These ideas comprise the implicit theology of the congregation (Ammerman 1998:100). In other words, the religious ideas, values, and beliefs that are embodied within congregational liturgical practices. As we have seen, some of the religious discourses are more than just implicit, they are also explicitly articulated by the congregational leadership, congregants, and by organizations closely associated with the
congregation, such as Music Makes Community. In this chapter we look more closely at some of these explicit aspects of the religious culture of the congregation, exploring in particular the official public statements of faith and belief made by St. Lydia’s as an institution, and the wider institutions of which it is a part. What are the official statements of faith made in congregational literature, for example? How does St. Lydia’s itself describe its particular type of Christianity to would-be congregants? What aspects of God, Jesus, or Christianity more broadly, are emphasized at the institutional level? What aspects are left out or downplayed?

Five sources of data in particular will be discussed; 1) the literature and statements of belief of the progressive Christian movement in the United States (the movement with which the congregation affiliates itself); 2) my data from interviewing pastor Scott, and fieldwork within the congregation; 3) the official statements of faith made by the congregation as an institution; 4) sermons and talks given at the church; and 5) the official statements of faith made by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the denomination of which the congregation is a part). The findings of this chapter suggest that a range of different Christian discourses are in circulation within the congregation, discourses from these many and varied institutional sources. There is both complementarity and continuity, as well as contradiction and discontinuity between the different kinds of institutional statements of faith and belief, suggesting, among other things, a weak relationship between the religious identity of the congregation and its denomination.
Self-identifying as a progressive Christian congregation

St. Lydia’s self-identifies as a progressive Christian congregation. Furthermore, the official statements of faith made by the congregation are consistent with this particular religious movement. In many cases, congregants themselves also self-identify as liberal Christians, and display beliefs and attitudes that can classified as being consistent with the progressive Christian movement (individual congregant narratives of faith and belief will be explored in detail in the next chapter). At one level, then, sociologically what we see in St. Lydia’s is an example of progressive Christianity within the contemporary religious landscape of the United States. St. Lydia’s is one unique expression of the progressive Christian movement, one way in which progressive Christian values and ideas are expressed in congregational form. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss in detail the theological or political content of Christianity, progressive or otherwise. I am not a theologian, and this thesis is not a critical analysis of progressive Christianity per se. It is a sociological study of the culture of a particular religious congregation. An exploration of progressive Christianity can only be brief and partial here, intended to highlight salient features of the movement. As St. Lydia’s self-identifies as a progressive Christian congregation it is important to get a sense of the religious content of this movement, and a sense of its terms and points of reference.

What does the term ‘Progressive Christianity’ mean? How does St. Lydia’s as a Christian institution interpret and convey that particular religious position? As we saw in Chapter 3 on religious congregations, Mark Chaves (2004) made the distinction between theologically liberal and conservative congregations, defining the former as “religion that places spiritual value on reformist engagement with the state and society” and the latter as “religion in which the primary
spiritual goal is salvation for the individual through religious and moral discipline” (p.27). This may be a good starting point, to the extent that ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ can be considered as synonymous. Before looking at how pastor Scott herself defines ‘Progressive Christianity’, we can briefly turn to David M. Felton and Jeff Procter-Murphy’s (2012) Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity, a book which, as the title suggests, provides an overview and exploration of the theology of the movement. Drawing on the work of liberal theologians Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong, amongst others, Felton and Procter-Murphy characterize Christianity as an evolving “journey”; a journey of questions, ambiguity, and exploration about who or what God is, about the Bible, about Jesus’ life, and so on. Thus the title Living the Questions refers to the idea that “It’s in living the questions that we find direction in life” (p.8). Felton and Procter-Murphy explicitly contrast this with interpretations of Christianity which characterize faith as a destination to be reached, or a particular status to be attained, involving belief in definitive religious truths and close adherence to prescriptive and proscriptive rules.

For progressive Christians the life and death of Christ provides a series of narratives through which they can better understand how to live a moral life, and how to better understand themselves, and events and experiences in their own lives (p. 50, p.116-125). Again, this contrasts with more conservative interpretations of Christianity which emphasize the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of original sin, the significance of the crucifixion in absolving sin, the Bible as the literal word of God, the existence of heaven and hell, and the Rapture; “To say you ascribe, without question, to a dogmatic set of beliefs that were developed and set in stone by someone else is easy” say Felton and Procter-Murphy, “The bigger challenge is to follow the story that is always evolving, one in which the ending is not yet written” (p.7). Progressive
Christianity is also characterized by a contextualized, non-literal, and metaphorical interpretation of the Bible, which recognizes, and tries to wrestle with, the historicity and inconsistencies of the text (p.11-70). Perhaps the most striking aspect of progressive Christianity is the relativistic (arguably nihilistic) epistemological orientation, deemphasizing the importance of absolute religious truths in favor of individualistic interpretations and experiences of the divine, and notions of ‘the unknowable’, and ‘the mystery of faith’. This epistemology emphasizes the importance of doubt and questioning, and inconsistency itself, as being vehicles through which Christians can form a deeper relationship with God; “Perhaps real ‘faith’ involves seeing ambiguity not as an enemy, but as a vital part of the journey” (p.7, also see p.16-19, p.20-21, p.220-228). Finally, it is worth noting that progressive Christianity emphasizes social justice issues, with particular emphasis on the example set by Jesus in the gospels as helping the sick and the poor, standing up against corruption, and so on (p.165-174).

To add further to this brief synopsis of progressive Christianity we can look at progressivechristianity.org, a website and non-profit organization (previously called The Center for Progressive Christianity) dedicated to providing information and resources about and for the movement. The website lists ‘The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity’, as follows:

By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who…

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;

2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;

3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
• Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
• Believers and agnostics,
• Women and men,
• Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
• Those of all classes and abilities;

4. Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;

5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;

6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;

7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;

8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.\(^{40}\)

A number of the statements here match those found of Felton and Procter-Murphy. The first statement “that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life”, is a statement which differs from more normative or conservative Christian statements, such as, a belief in Holy Trinity, that Jesus died for the atonement of sin, belief in the resurrection and the ascension, and so on. The second statement; “the teachings of Jesus provide \textit{but one of many ways} to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw \textit{from diverse sources of wisdom} in our spiritual journey” (emphasis added), potentially expands the possibilities for religious practice and belief beyond those associated with Christianity itself. Among the other major themes of note include inclusivity, kindness, community, love, justice, and environmentalism. The prominence of the idea of inclusive community is noteworthy given its prominence in the discussion of St. Lydia’s in previous chapters. As we have seen, the creation of an inclusive community is a central idea in

\(^{40}\) Progressive Christianity website, retrieved 1/16/17 from https://progressivechristianity.org/the-8-points/
the culture of the congregation. It holds an equally prominent place in this eight-point list of the tenants of progressive Christianity. There are no barriers to entry here regarding levels of belief or non-belief, types of gender identity, types of sexual identity, or different “classes and abilities”; progressive Christianity encourages a church “community that is inclusive of ALL people”.

Like many congregations, St. Lydia’s states its theological and denominational orientation on its own website, explaining to would-be visitors the kind of Christianity that is practiced at the church. The congregation explicitly self-identifies as a progressive Christian congregation on its homepage; “St. Lydia's is a church where life is lived out around the table. A progressive, LGBTQ-affirming congregation in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, we are working together to dispel isolation, reconnect neighbors, and subvert the status quo. You are welcome here”41. It is notable that “LGBTQ-affirming” is explicitly mentioned, and also that community and “where life is lived out around the table” is a key theme, a theme which we have seen throughout many aspects of the culture of the congregation. The intention to “subvert the status quo” is also noteworthy, a provocative statement, the implication and meaning of which is not immediately apparent. However, as we have seen, for Scott, an ethic of radical Christian inclusivity is subversive, in the sense that it seeks to break down barriers and boundaries that are often part of everyday (secular) life. In my interviews with Scott the pastor talked about New York City as being a difficult urban environment in which to live, characterized by loneliness and a lack of community. In this context, then, the culture of St. Lydia’s is perceived as

41 St. Lydia’s website, retrieved 2/1/17 from http://stlydias.org/
‘subverting the status quo’ to the extent that its culture of inclusivity runs counter to values of the city and broader culture in which it is located.

The religious identity of the congregation is elaborated more in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of the website. These five items are of particular relevance:

What does it mean that you're "progressive?"

It means that we approach the bible both spiritually and intellectually, we embrace sexuality and all sexual orientations, and we affirm the spiritual journeys of those of other faiths.

Are you Christian?

Yes. We're a group of people who tell the story of Christ's dying and rising, and through it, uncover the daily dyings [sic] and risings that comprise our lives. We’re affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (a progressive Lutheran denomination) and supported by the Episcopal Church as well.

I’m not sure what I believe. Can I come?

Absolutely! You’ll be in good company. At St. Lydia’s, we place practice before belief. It’s the practice of eating, praying, and singing together that moves us deeper into faith. Instead of trying to figure out what we believe, we’re trying to live what we practice.

I am gay, bi, trans, straight, queer or something in between.

And we are glad! We are a progressive, gay-friendly and queer-affirming Church, and we hope that you will bring your whole self to worship.

Is St. Lydia’s an Emergent Church?

Probably! “Emergent Church” is a label that has been used to refer to Christians who are rethinking Christianity in the context of Postmodernism. St. Lydia’s fits into the Emergent Church movement, but also differs from many churches in the movement. Like many emergent churches, St. Lydia’s is structured to function more like a grassroots community than an institution or an organization. Many emergent churches look to ancient models of church to inform their worship; we have done the same.\footnote{St. Lydia’s website, Frequently Asked Questions, retrieved 2/1/17 from http://stlydias.org/faq/}

Although these statements of faith and belief are far from comprehensive or detailed as such, there are a number of key ideas here that are noteworthy. That these are not precise, detailed, and
overly prescriptive statements of faith is in itself and indication of a more liberal approach to Christianity. Inclusivity is the dominant theme here, an accepting and welcoming stance towards people of different kinds of faith, belief, and sexuality. Progressive Christianity is defined primarily in terms of this inclusivity, as well as meaning “we approach the bible both spiritually and intellectually”. Christianity is defined as “people who tell the story of Christ's dying and rising, and through it, uncover the daily dyings [sic] and risings that comprise our lives”. The church’s denominational affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is also mentioned. An idea of “practice before belief” is expressed, downplaying the importance of belief in favor of “eating, praying, and singing together that moves us deeper into faith. Instead of trying to figure out what we believe, we’re trying to live what we practice.”.

St. Lydia’s also recognizes itself as having affinity with the emergent church movement, a nascent liberal renewal movement within Christianity, particularly associated with the work of Brian McLaren and Rob Bell (Gibbs and Bolger 2005, Carson 2005, Bielo 2011). The statement here describes emergent Christianity as “rethinking Christianity in the context of Postmodernism”, though this statement is not expanded upon, and there is ambivalence in the degree to which in St. Lydia’s aligns itself with the movement, with a note that the church “differs from many churches in the movement”. In many ways the emergent Christian movement is one prominent iteration of the progressive Christian movement itself, and there is a considerable overlap between the two in terms of theology, politics, worship practices, and so on. For example, as we have seen, both movements invoke the ideas of concerning the postmodern or postmodernism. In the case of emergent Christianity, postmodernity is invoked as the new cultural context in which Christianity now finds itself. In the case of Progressive Christianity, a
postmodern epistemology is embraced, emphasizing relativism and contradiction, a skepticism towards religious ‘truth’, and advocating for a pastiche of sources of the sacred.

As I have noted, many aspects of the culture of the congregation discussed in previous chapters broadly fit within the themes and theology of progressive Christianity. During one of my interviews with pastor Scott I mentioned the topic of progressive Christianity and the prominence of the term on the church’s website. I asked Scott to talk a little about what it means:

I: How would you define that term? Is it a problematic term in some ways? Or is it an important term to have out there?

E: I don’t know. Like, a religious sociologist or someone who studies American religion would be in a better position to talk about that than me. I used it to indicate a grouping of beliefs, such as we’re gay affirming, we are not against abortion, we think its fine that you’re having sex outside of your marriage. So I would say that ‘progressive’ is probably a term that’s come into use to define what we’re doing here, and what other people are doing all around the country, against fundamentalism. So, theologically I don’t really know if it has much grounding. But I do think that there is a stronger progressive movement… that’s being reborn from the mainline traditions right now… the progressive church is finding a voice in a way that the fundamentalists have had, and conservatives have had for a long time, but we’re finding a unified voice that goes across all these denominations and racial and ethnic lines. This is, really… I think there’s something happening with that…

I: That’s interesting. The term ‘progressive’ defines what you’re not, in a sense…

E: Yeah, and it tends to line up with political beliefs more than theological ones.

I: Right, liberal politics…

E: Yeah but I think there’s also, there’s probably… I mean, you could probably go across the board and look at some theological understandings that line up with what it means to be progressive too.

Our conversation at this point veered off into different territory, back towards the subject of religious community. At the time I did not think to delve any deeper with the pastor on the subject of progressive Christianity as such. However, this brief exchange tells us something
about the pastor’s viewpoint. Scott does not discuss the theology of progressive Christianity and appears hesitant to do so. Instead Scott emphasizes the politics of progressive Christianity as giving the movement its identity, and suggests how a liberal political stance is part of the identity of St. Lydia’s as a congregation. For Scott the term ‘progressive’ is most useful as a way of indicating where the congregation as an institution sits on the political compass. Scott seems less certain with, or perhaps less content with, what the term ‘progressive’ implies theologically, or whether progressive Christian politics and liberal Christian theology “line up” (though she acknowledges that they might). As I note in my response to the pastor in our conversation, the term ‘progressive’ appears to signify what the congregation is against, as much, or perhaps more than, what the congregation stands for; it signifies a rejection of the conservative politics of religious right. For example, Scott remarks, “I would say that ‘progressive’ is probably a term that’s come into use to define what we’re doing here, and what other people are doing all around the country, against fundamentalism”. Progressive politics were a salient aspect of the culture of the congregation in a range of different ways. The church placed a strong emphasis on left-wing politics and social justice. Scott’s sermons, for example, regularly touched on racism, poverty, gentrification, gun violence, and sexism. The congregation also organized a number of initiatives around social justice and progressive political issues, with congregants regularly involved in the annual gay Pride parade in New York City, for example. The congregation also organized a so-called ‘social justice show-up team’, comprised of a group of congregants who regularly attended neighborhood meetings on affordable housing and similar issues. It is clear, then, that to this degree the congregation very much fits with the politics of progressive Christianity.

Despite pastor Scott’s hesitancy in recognizing an affinity between progressive politics and
progressive theology, the religious culture of St. Lydia’s appeared to me very much to advance a progressive or liberal theological perspective, particularly in relation to the issue of gender identity. Feminist theology was a very explicit feature of the culture of the congregation. This included an emphasis on equality between the sexes, a critique of Christian perspectives which advocate gender inequality, an emphasis on the role and contribution of women in religious life, an exploration of the gendered nature of God, and the possibility of God as female or as gender neutral. To provide an example of the prominence of feminist theology at St. Lydia’s we can look at the ‘This is my Body’ series of sermons and events which took place at the church over a seven-week period during September and October 2015. This series was advertised using the tagline ‘Identity, Faith, Sexuality, Gender, Queerness’, and included sermons and events concerning a range of issues in relation to these themes. Beyond indicating the subject matter of the series the title ‘This is my Body’ is multivalent, and especially significant within the culture of this particular congregation. They are the words spoken by Jesus to the disciples at the Last Supper while passing them bread to eat. As we saw in our exploration of the worship service at St. Lydia’s in Chapter 7, these words are also spoken by each congregant during worship, as the loaf of bread is passed around by the congregation and eaten during communion.

One sermon of note during the ‘This is my Body’ series was by Julia Stroud, who relaced Rachel Pollak as community coordinator, titled ‘How I Learned to Love Jesus (Through His Vagina)’. In my time as a participant observer at the congregation the worship services where Stroud gave this sermon were perhaps the most well-attended services I experienced at the church. Approximately fifty people attended each of the Sunday and Monday services when Stroud preached, some of whom were not regular congregants at the church and were attending
especially to hear this particular sermon. The popularity of this sermon was no-doubt due to the extremely controversial title, which St. Lydia’s had advertised, as it did all its sermons and events, through social media. This sermon was based on Stroud’s 2014 thesis for her MDiv at Union Theological Seminary. The thesis, titled ‘The Fifth Wound of Christ: A Trans_feminist Theology of the Eucharist’, argues that the characteristics of the fifth wound of Christ, as described in John 19:31-40, resemble the characteristics of the vagina and womb. Noting firstly that a fourteenth century depiction of the fifth wound “bore a striking resemblance to a vulva” (p.5), Stroud notes that the fifth wound has often been seen as the “birthplace of the church” (p.6), and then goes on to discuss a variety of characteristics of the wound, as described in the gospel. The wound is made in Christ’s body after he has died, and it is described as letting out blood and water. These substances are associated with menstruation and childbirth. They are also theologically significant substances, associated with the Christian sacraments (baptismal water and the blood of Christ in the Eucharist). Stroud argues that reimagining the fifth wound of Christ as a vagina and womb feminizes Jesus, disrupting his male body, and patriarchal and heteronormative discourses within Christianity. It can therefore potentially function symbolically within Christianity as a site for the emancipation and liberation of those who have been traditionally marginalized or ostracized by the church, not only women, but minorities of all kinds. For Stroud, these marginalized groups can be included through this new theology of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

As a second example of the feminist theology in the culture of the congregation, the ‘This is my Body’ series culminated in a talk by well-known feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible who spoke on the Adam and Eve story. The talk was also very well-attended by the congregation. It
was based on Trible’s 1973 paper ‘Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread’, in which she argues for a reinterpretation of the story of Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden. Trible questions the dominant patriarchal interpretation of the story in which Adam is superior to Eve, an interpretation which encourages the view that men are superior to women in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the Church. Instead Trible argues there is a degree of gender equality between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and that a patriarchal reading of the story overstates the dominance of Adam over Eve. For example, though Adam is created before Eve, and Eve is created from the rib of Adam, Trible interprets this as meaning that Adam in fact has no gender until Eve is created because gender as a distinctive category cannot exist prior to the creation of Eve. The gender distinction can only exist when Eve is present.

This brief summary of Julia Stroud’s sermon and Phyllis Trible’s talk, and the ‘This is my Body’ series as a whole, gives an indication of the kinds of religious ideas sanctioned and promoted by St. Lydia’s as a religious institution, as well as the kinds of religious discourses in circulation within the culture of the congregation. In particular, it gives an indication of the ways in which liberal politics and feminist theology manifest themselves within the congregation, and illustrates the substantive content of the arguments and perspectives involved.

**Statements of denominational congregational identity**

On March 13th 2016 St. Lydia’s was incorporated into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Until that point St. Lydia’s had been a “mission development” of the ELCA, (not, in fact, a congregation at all in the formal sense). Incorporation meant St. Lydia’s formally
joined the ELCA, becoming a church in the Metropolitan Synod of New York. The official incorporation of St. Lydia’s is an interesting and important moment in the church’s history, a moment which marked the culmination of the work of pastor Scott and the congregation over the years in successfully planting the church. More specifically, it marked the culmination of the four-year incorporation process during which time St. Lydia’s moved from being a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community (SAWC) under mission development status with the ELCA, to being a full congregation within the denomination. All congregants were invited to attend the incorporation meeting, and I signed up to attend. The meeting was an interesting event for many different reasons. However, in the context of this chapter, the meeting to incorporate is especially relevant because it was one of the rare occasions where formal statements of faith were explicitly articulated, reviewed and acknowledged by the congregation as a whole. Here is an extract from field notes I took on the meeting, describing some of the things I observed:

...The meeting was due to start at 2pm, and I arrived at the church at 1pm. I expected there to be nobody there. Instead what I found was a room full of people and much quiet activity. A few children were milling about. A couple of people on their laptops, sitting at one of the tables. General quiet talking and chatter filled the room. One or two people were coloring in pictures at one of the tables. In fact, when I walked in I thought I had stumbled into the Waffle Church service, the children’s service that takes place at St. Lydia’s on Sunday mornings. I knew that Waffle Church had been scheduled to happen that morning, and knew it involved children’s activities like coloring books and so on. For a moment I felt out of place and unsure about what was going on. Kelly, Tom’s wife, was sitting on the benches at the front of the room by the window. I sat down next to her and asked quietly when the meeting was due to start, and whether all this activity was still part of the Waffle Church service. Kelly explained that Waffle Church had just finished. The meeting would start in about an hour, during which time people would just hang around... The room was very still and quiet during the next hour, as people just waited for the meeting to begin, absorbed in their own activities, on laptops, coloring, reading. More congregants began to arrive gradually. Andrea was busy making chocolate chip cookies for the meeting, the smell of baking and coffee coming from the kitchen at the back of the room.

As 2pm rolled around pastor Scott asked everyone to move their chairs in place to get ready for the meeting. We all arranged ourselves in a big circle around the three large oval tables in the center of the room. A few more people gradually started to arrive and sit down. I noticed that a number of printed sheets had been put out on the side cabinet; copies of the meeting agenda, and
other relevant documents. As more and more people arrived pastor Scott asked for more chairs to be placed out so that there were enough seats for everyone. The pastor made an announcement that there weren’t enough printouts for everyone, but asked people to pull up the documents on their mobile devices. The documents for the meeting had been sent out to everyone via email a few days earlier. I commented to Louise sitting next to me that I hoped I would get a paper copy of the documents because I hadn’t had a chance to print them out beforehand. From what I could tell nobody else had printed them out either. I noticed a somewhat heavyset African-American man stride confidently into the room, wearing black clerical clothes and collar. Ironically, it somehow seemed a little jarring to see a person at the church dressed in official clerical clothing. Pastor Scott never wore formal clerical clothes. I would soon find out that this man was Reverend Lamont Wells from the Metropolitan New York Synod, and he would be chairing the Community Meeting that day, presiding over the incorporation procedure that was to unfold over the next couple of hours. Reverend Well’s arrival and formal clerical presence suddenly gave an air of formality and officialdom to the room. Something important was clearly about to happen.

The meeting began soon after Reverend Well arrived. The room felt quite full, with lots of people seated in a large circle around the room, and Reverend Wells, pastor Scott, and Don and John (members of the church Leadership Team), all sitting together on one side of the circle. I was to later find out that twenty-seven people were in attendance at the meeting in total. Pastor Scott gave a brief welcome to everyone, and then asked Diane to lead a song, which on the meeting agenda was listed as ‘Gathering Song’, just as it is on the worship script. Just as in worship, Diane began leading the group in song. Diane sang through the lines of the song first, and then everyone joined in singing together as a group. The song was “Arise shine for your light has come”. The words of the song were “Arise shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you”, and that was sung by everyone, and repeated several times, “Arise shine for your light has come/And the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you/Arise shine for your light has come/And the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you/Arise shine for your light has come/And the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you/Arise shine for your light has come/And the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you”. As everybody was singing I noticed Reverend Wells looking over the meeting agenda and the various documents in front of him, scribbling things in the margins, and asking Don, the chair of the St. Lydia’s Leadership Team (sitting next to him), a couple of brief questions.

The singing felt very very familiar, we had sung the song many times before during worship services. It almost felt like a worship service all of a sudden. Although this was different. It was the middle of the day, and daylight outside, not the dinner church service in the evenings. And we were seated in a large circle, with our meeting agendas, bits of paper, notebooks and pens. When the song came to an end pastor Scott said a brief prayer, and then Ian, a member of the church Leadership Team, gave a short speech, welcoming everyone to the meeting and talking about its purpose; to finalize the incorporation process. John reflected about his time at St. Lydia’s. He had come to St. Lydia’s as an intern while in divinity school, and had seen the “dreams of the community”, as he put it, develop over time, and how wonderful it was, he said, to see “what God is doing becoming substantial among us”. He introduced Reverend Lamont Wells, who was going “to take us through the process of becoming a member of the ELCA”.

It was then pastor Scott’s turn to speak, listed on the agenda as ‘Scripture and Reflection’. The pastor talked about the scripture passage which was printed at the top of the agenda document, Acts 2: 43-47. Pastor Scott described the passage as “a definition of a church”. As often happened
during worship services, the pastor requested that the passage be read aloud and that congregants offer brief reflections on the passage. The pastor asked for the passage to be read three times, by three different people. Three people volunteered, and each read the passage in turn:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2: 43-47).

As usually happened whenever a scripture passage was read at St. Lydia’s, after the reading pastor Scott said “Please share a word or phrase that struck you in the text”. In response, a number of different people uttered different words or phrases, picking out a couple of words here and there. Pastor Scott then talked briefly about St. Lydia’s and how this meeting marked an important stage in this “soon to be congregation”. Drawing on the first line in scripture passage, “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles” the pastor asked for reflections on when people had felt awe during their time at St. Lydia’s. A number of people shared very brief reflections. One reflection that particularly stood out to me was a congregant who said he had been at a point in his life when he had stopped going to church altogether, and that coming to St. Lydia’s had made him enjoy going to church again. Another congregant reminisced about attending St. Lydia’s in the very early years of the church, when “there were only twelve people in a living room”, and how he never expected or dreamed that St. Lydia’s would become what it had. Pastor Scott talked briefly again, reflecting on her time as pastor at St. Lydia’s. At one point, pointing with her finger to the scripture passage on the meeting agenda, saying “bread, and generosity, and praise, the sense of goodwill, and God adding to our number. These are the things that matter”.

The next item on the meeting agenda was listed as Jeff speaking on the topic of “How did we get to this point”. Referring to handwritten notes he had scribbled on a piece of paper, Jeff talked through a brief history of St. Lydia’s, particularly emphasizing its close relationship with the ELCA. Jeff reflected on how St. Lydia’s had been dependent on the support of ELCA, the Metropolitan of New York Synod, and Reverend Wells for a long time, “We wouldn’t be in this space if it wasn’t for the support of ELCA and Pastor Wells”, he said. Since becoming a mission development with the ELCA, Jeff said, the denomination had provided 50% of St. Lydia’s operating budget. In 2012 the congregation wrote and adopted the Rule of Life, which was a series of rules and procedures outlining how the congregation was going to operate and how it would be governed. The Rule of Life set out congregational rules for things like community meetings, and the Leadership Table, and the process of incorporation itself. In 2014, Jeff said, St. Lydia’s moved into the space at 304 Bond Street in Gowanus, Brooklyn. A move which, he emphasized, wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the ELCA and Reverend Wells. In 2016, Jeff said, St. Lydia’s underwent its three-year comprehensive review with the ELCA, which assessed the strength and health of the congregation, and it was at that review that it was decided that St. Lydia’s should incorporate as a church of the ELCA.

It was then Don’s turn on the agenda to talk about “Constitution and the Rule of Life”, as it was listed. Don talked about the Rule of Life of St. Lydia’s and how it would now become secondary to the Constitution of the ELCA. The Rule of Life becomes the bylaws of the church, the official
constitution of the ELCA becomes the main governing document of St. Lydia’s. Don talked about how the Rule of Life had been developed in 2011-12, and how it had been developed with this particular situation in mind, that is, to allow for a smooth transition of incorporation into the ELCA to take place. He explained that the Rule of Life on its own is no longer enough and that the ELCA required a formal constitution. The constitution document had been sent out via email a few days earlier to all those who had signed up for the meeting (along with the agenda, and the other documents). Though, there were no hard copies of this constitution being circulated at the meeting itself, and few of the meeting attendees seemed to have a copy to hand to refer to. The Constitution document was a very long and detailed eleven-page document written in, for want of a better phrase, church legalese. The document contained comprehensive sections on ‘Confession of Faith’, ‘Nature of the Church’, ‘Statement of Purpose’, ‘Powers of the Congregation’, and a number of other sections.

Don and Reverend Wells talked in general terms about some of the provisions in the ELCA constitution and some of the things that incorporation into the ELCA would provide. Mentioning, amongst other things, that it would allow congregants to choose the pastor of St. Lydia’s, and to employ a new pastor if necessary… Ian asked if anyone had any questions. Simone asked if there was anything in the constitution which prohibits transgender people from attending the church. To which Don replied that there was nothing in the constitution that prohibits it, or indeed mentions it.

“Anything that is not prohibited is allowed” said John, in response to Simone.

“Whoa! You just blew my mind!”, pastor Scott exclaimed with a smile, in response to John, and everyone in the room laughed…

(Fieldnotes 3/13/16)

Somewhere between fieldnotes and the minutes of a meeting, these reflections provide a direct insight into the moments when St. Lydia’s officially became a church. We can see the ways in which formal bureaucratic institutional procedures are preceded by, and intermingled with, religious practices usually associated with worship. Congregants are included as part of the process of decision making, and given opportunity to reflect on what St. Lydia’s means to them, and to ask questions or to air grievances. However, there is also a suggestion in my reflections that not all the congregants had copies of the relevant necessary documents, and therefore there is a sense in which they were somewhat removed from the bureaucratic and technical details of the event. In part what these reflections also describe is a handing over of power, in which the
governing administrative document of St. Lydia’s changes from The Rule of Life, a document authored by the church and its congregants, to a formal constitutional document, authored by the church, its congregants, and the denomination.

The rest of the meeting, led by Reverend Wells, was taken up with discussion and voting on eight resolutions in relation to the formal incorporation of the congregation, and congregants then signed the church charter. The resolutions included the adoption of the new constitution, the incorporation of St. Lydia’s, joining the ELCA, rules for voting in members of the Leadership Team of the congregation, and the formal election of Emily Scott as pastor of St. Lydia’s. In terms of the subject matter of this chapter – the institutional statements of faith and belief of the church - what is perhaps most noteworthy about this community meeting to incorporate the church was that the congregation formally acknowledged and adopted the constitution of the ELCA, the second clause of which was the Lutheran Confession of Faith. This clause was the standard Confession of Faith of Lutheranism, as follows:

Chapter 2.
CONFESSION OF FAITH
2.01. This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2.02. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.
a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
b. The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.
2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.
2.04. This church accepts the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church.

2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

2.06. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.

2.07. This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scripture and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God’s mission in the world.

(p. 19, ‘Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’, November 2016. ELCA)\textsuperscript{43}

Unsurprisingly, the Confession of Faith published by the ELCA and included in the constitution of ELCA congregations is detailed, specific, and prescriptive in terms of the Lutheran beliefs, creeds, and theological interpretations that should be adhered to. There is, then, contrast, and some discontinuity, between the statements of faith and belief of progressive Christianity, of the congregation, and of the denomination. Progressive Christianity has a nuanced and detailed theology, as I discussed above. However, its focus is on a much more individualized, metaphorical, and relativistic interpretation of Christian doctrine, where doubt and questioning are emphasized, and indeed encouraged, over definitive truth claims, such as the ones quoted here in the ELCA Confession of Faith. The institutional statements of faith and belief we have looked at by the congregation are relatively loose and brief, concerning acceptance and inclusivity, and ‘subverting the status quo’. In addition, the brief survey of examples of feminist

\textsuperscript{43} See also ‘Guide for the use of the Model Constitution for Congregations’, October 2011, and ‘Policy on Criteria for Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities’, April 2003, ELCA publications which detail the constitutional and governance procedures for new congregations in relation to the process incorporation and SAWC status. The 2011 on congregational constitutions notes that statements 1 through 7 shown here in the Confession of Faith are “required provisions” (p.2) in the Model Constitution for Congregations.
theology within the congregation showed a radical reappraisal of many of the basic tenants of Christianity, particularly in relation to gender. All of these different Christian narratives coexist together within the culture of the congregation, a religious culture which has one foot firmly placed firmly placed in progressive Christian identity, and one foot firmly placed in a denominational identity.

Conclusions

This chapter has continued the exploration of the religious culture of St. Lydia’s by examining a variety of different kinds of institutional statements of faith and belief associated with the congregation of St. Lydia’s; statements made by the congregation, by the progressive Christian movement, by those of preachers and speakers within the congregation, and by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, all of which serve to shape the culture of the congregation as a whole. The contrasts and discontinuities between these statements have been noted, and provide an indication of the ways in which multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory religious narratives coexist within congregations.

One conclusion to be drawn from this chapter is that there are a variety of different institutional religious discourses and ideas circulating within the culture of a congregation at any one time. Religious movements, congregational leaders, and denominations, each contribute institutional statements of faith and belief, each of which, in different ways, shape the religiosity and the religious culture of the congregation as a whole. The discontinuities between congregational and denominational statements of faith perhaps confirm the idea that denominational identity is often
of secondary importance to congregational identity, being much less prominent within the
culture of a congregation itself. There is nothing explicitly Lutheran in the statements of faith
and belief at the congregational level. Yet at the denominational level, the statements of faith in
the constitution of the ELCA are very clearly and explicitly Lutheran. It is likely that
discontinuities of this kind are not exclusively a feature of St. Lydia’s, but are common amongst
many different kinds of religious congregations. However, that the emphasis of the
congregational statements of faith are so different from the denominational statements of faith is
certainly suggestive of a weak denominational identity within the congregation at an institutional
level. This would appear to confirm the arguments explored in the opening sections of this
dissertation concerning the declining importance of denominational identity within mainline
Protestantism in the United States. It suggests further that congregations are local institutions
which, despite having ties to broader denominational institutions, have a religious culture which
is primarily derived from the specificities of place, pastoral style, and the religiosities of the
congregants themselves. To explore this issue in further detail I will now turn to the final chapter
of this dissertation, to look in more detail at the religious narratives of congregants at the church,
and examine some of the ways in which they talk about their religious lives and religious beliefs.
Chapter 11 - Congregant Narratives

Following on from the theme of the previous chapter I would like to continue to explore the topics of denominational identity and progressive Christianity. Whereas the previous chapter examined official institutional religious perspective this chapter examines individual attitudes and religious views of congregants at St. Lydia’s. Two topics will be explored; congregant attitudes towards religious denominations, and congregant attitudes towards homosexuality. Although this by no means gives a complete picture of the religious identity of congregants, and denominations and homosexuality might at first glance appear to be separate and unrelated topics, exploring congregant attitudes in this way nevertheless provides a good indication of the kinds of religious and political discourses that are in circulation within the culture of the congregation. In addition, the data in fact show that congregant attitudes towards denominations were sometimes shaped by their own sexual identity, and their attitudes towards homosexuality, indicating the ways in which the two topics may be interrelated. The chapter is split into two parts; the first concerning congregant attitudes towards denominations, and the second concerning congregant attitudes towards homosexuality. In addition to exploring a range of different congregant attitudes I focus on three congregant narratives in detail; Mandy and Fiona (regarding denominational identity), and Hillary (regarding attitudes towards homosexuality).

Open-ended interviewing and narratives of religious identity

As I discussed in Chapter 5 on methodology, I used a semi-structured approach to conduct congregant interviews. My interviews with congregants therefore often covered a wide-range of topics. Although I used an interview schedule with a pre-planned series of questions based on
my research interests, I tried as much as possible to ask open-ended and general questions to open the conversational space, allowing congregants to talk about St. Lydia’s and their religious lives in ways that were natural for them, and to talk about topics that mattered to them. This approach to interviewing has its risks, not least the possibility that the interview might veer off-topic. However, the benefit of open-ended interviewing is of course that the interviewee is not pushed in one direction or another by the interviewer, and in this way the interviewer is able to understand more accurately what is meaningful to the interviewee about the topic at hand.

Denominations and denominational affiliation were topics that I frequently touched on with my interviewees, as the topics were part of my core research interests. Interviewees appeared to have weak denominational affiliations. Although interviewees would often self-identify using denominational labels (usually when discussing their childhood, i.e.: “I was brought Episcopalian”, “I was raised in the Baptist church”), the importance of this denominational identity in relation to the church attendance was often implicitly or explicitly downplayed.

Congregant attitudes towards homosexuality, on the other hand, was not a research interest of mine, and was not a topic I raised with my interviewees. However, surprisingly, it was a recurrent topic in the narratives of many of my interviewees and their reflections on their religious lives and church attendance. This marked the topic out as being meaningful and important in terms of the religious lives of my interviewees, and the culture of the congregation as a whole. In particular, the acceptance of homosexuality within Christian culture was an important issue for many of my interviewees, and one which profoundly shaped their religious lives.
Attitudes towards Denominations

The topic of religious denominations arose in a variety of different contexts during my interviews with congregants. Congregants would often talk about the denomination in which they were raised, or the denomination of the churches they attended during their childhood. At other times the subject of religious denominations came up in the context discussing St. Lydia’s itself and worshipping at the church. I also sometimes asked congregants directly about their denominational preferences and the reasons for those preferences. As has been noted in previous chapters, most of the congregants at St. Lydia’s were what I would call religious experts; life-long Christians and churchgoers, often involved in churches or in Christian organizations in a professional capacity, whether they were working for a church, writing for Christian media, or studying at theological college with the intention of being ordained. Some congregants had parents and family members who were, or had been, ordained clergy themselves. Several congregants that I met were attending more than one church on a weekly basis. It was common for congregants to self-identify as Episcopalian (a denomination that is in full-communion with the Evangelical Church in America). It was also common for congregants to display a wide range of experience and knowledge of other denominations and types of churches. We have seen examples of this throughout this thesis.

Interviewees tended to express a combination of affinity and ambivalence towards denominations and denominational affiliation. Although none of my interviewees identified as Lutheran or chose St. Lydia’s specifically on the basis if it being an ELCA congregation, two of my interviewees expressed affinity the Episcopal and Lutheran church (See Box 4). For most
Box 4 – Affinity with the Episcopal and Lutheran Church

…I wasn’t looking or interested in the Emerging Church when I came to St. Lydia’s. I mean, I’ve always been interested in religion and different types of religion…

I: So that certainly was nothing to do with your…

B: No I was not looking… I mean, I was looking for… I was hoping St. Bart’s would be my church because I wanted… I love the Episcopal church and I love the Episcopal liturgy, and it’s what I know. And I still think of myself as Episcopalian even though I go to a Lutheran church now.

I: So that fits with St. Lydia’s in a sense.

B: Yeah, it’s still connected I think, yeah. But yeah, what spoke to me was not so much that [St. Lydia’s] was different, it was just that I connected immediately. It was more about connecting than it was about sort of ‘I’m looking for something different’. I really like the Episcopal church. And, I mean, the service I went to all the time in Huston was a real… other than the music, it was a regular Episcopal service. And so I really loved it. If I had found that I probably would have gone there. (Brian)

So I go back to the Episcopal and Lutheran church. The Lutheran church is my own choice after the Episcopal church because I didn’t like the British snobiness, I feel they are very snobby. They’re like very standoffish, not standoffish, but kind of aloof people. They are very smart, like scholarly, well-learned, educated. Emotionally I wasn’t connected with them.

I: So it the Lutheran…

B: Warmer, it’s just less… maybe the Scandinavian, the Northern European… the energy, you know. The energy I really can enjoy quite a lot. (Ben)
interviewees, however, the denominational identity of St. Lydia’s appeared to play little or no role in their decision to worship at the church. Choice of church at which to worship was driven by individual and pragmatic concerns, rather than having anything to do with the denominational affiliation. For example, Box 5 displays extracts from my interview with Bethany, a congregant that we first met in Chapter 8. It shows three different occasions during our interview where the issue of denominational affiliation came up directly during our discussion; “I feel just connected to mainline Protestant denominations”, Bethany says, remarking that mainline denominations are “kind of interchangeable”. Although Bethany has very strong connections with Lutheranism from her childhood she does not self-identify as Lutheran, she feels more affinity with Methodism than any other denomination; “the one that I’m most familiar with is the Methodist church because I grew up in that one”. It is noteworthy in the context of this chapter that Bethany talks about the liberal stance the ELCA takes on homosexuality as being something she likes about the denomination and St. Lydia’s, and that it is this issue that is important to Bethany when choosing a church.

*Mandy’s narrative: “If there’s like a framework, and I can get into it, and it’s helpful to me, and there’s great community, then I probably will be okay with that too”*

Mandy was a 40-year-old freelance writer who had been a congregant at St. Lydia’s for a little over a year at the time of our interview. Mandy was very involved in the congregation, and often attended worship services at St. Lydia’s more than once a week, frequently volunteering for roles in the worship service, especially the role of Song Leader. Mandy also attended Bushwick Abbey on a weekly basis, another progressive Christian community in Brooklyn. Mandy told me that
Box 5 – Bethany and Denominationalism

I: And do you consider yourself Lutheran then?

B: No, I just consider myself to be a Protestant?

I: So you don’t feel particularly affiliated… I mean, you said your father was a Lutheran minister.

B: Yeah. I mean, I never went to… I think [St. Lydia’s] is the first Lutheran church that I’ve been to. I mean, not ever in my life. I was christened in a Lutheran church growing up. And my parents actually met while my father was doing his student ministry in a Lutheran church. But then I didn’t grow up near that one. So, growing up I went to a Methodist church then I went to a Quaker meeting, Presbyterian, my last church was Methodist. So, yeah, I feel just connected to mainline Protestant denominations.

I: That’s interesting. So in all of those denominations you’ve never felt like ‘Oh this denomination is for me’.

B: Right. I mean, the one that I’m most familiar with is the Methodist church because I grew up in that one. But I have a lot of issues with they’re getting more conservative politically around issues of sexuality and things like that. But no I don’t… even with the Methodists I know more about it, but I don’t feel a particular affiliation with them.

I: Does it matter to you that St. Lydia’s is a Lutheran church?

B: No, not really. I mean, I like the fact that the Lutheran’s seem like a more progressive denomination. But it’s not a big factor for me.

I: So on what basis then are you choosing a church? If we had to list some of the criteria. Denomination isn’t one?

B: I mean, it’s not nothing. But…

I: But as long as it’s mainline Protestant…

B: Yeah, they’re kind of interchangeable.

… I mean, I don’t know a ton about the theology [at St. Lydia’s]. I guess a couple of things that stuck me is in general, like, being someone who identifies as gay, there are a lot of so-called Emergent churches that I would be hesitant to go to. I wouldn’t even check them out because I would assume that they would be homophobic. So I like the fact that St. Lydia’s has that right out there on the website and everything. And the ELCA is a pretty good denomination in terms of that, better certainly than the Methodists.
she was born in Colorado, where she attended a Church of the Brethren congregation with her family, “which is an Anabaptist congregation that’s kind of Menoniteish [sic]… That was my mother’s denomination. That’s what she was. My dad was not really anything. Yeah, I don’t know if he was raised in any religion. But he started going to church when he met my mom.” Mandy’s parents separated when she was two years old. Her mom, who “was very involved in the church”, got remarried to a church pastor a few years later. Mandy, her mom, and stepdad “moved to Kansas, where my stepdad was a Chaplin at a college, at a Brethren college for a year”. As she got older Mandy continued to attend a variety of different churches, but attended less frequently during high school and college. Over time Mandy stopped attending Church of the Brethren congregations, however when I asked Mandy how she currently identifies as a Christian she expressed a close affinity with the denomination of her birth, “I would say that I grew up in the Church of the Brethren, although nobody knows what that is. Some people do. Most people do not. But I identify with that tradition, in that I grew up in a pacifist tradition, not very patriotic, you know, it’s not a very big thing for us. So that definitely influenced me growing up”.

After college Mandy got married and (in part, she said, because her husband was a firm atheist) her church attendance remained an irregular, but still constant, feature of her life. The couple had two children and moved to New York in 2007, where Mandy started going to a First Unitarian church. Then some of Mandy’s friends invited her to attend a more conservative non-denominational church. It was during this period that Mandy and her husband were going through a divorce, and Mandy remarked that she “was just hungry for some community” partly because of the troubles she was having in her personal life. The friends with whom Mandy had
been attending the non-denominational conservative church left New York City, and because of this, Mandy stopped attending that church also, “Then I went back to the Unitarian church a little bit. But that wasn’t working for me either. Everyone was... I don’t know it was just like... middle-aged, older than me. It was just like it just wasn’t... not me. And I went to a Presbyterian church a couple of times. Yeah, I kind of shopped around. And then it was actually my friend Gloria who emailed me about St. Lydia’s, and said ‘I’ve heard of this thing, you should check it out’. When I asked Mandy about whether the denomination of St. Lydia’s mattered to her she said, “Sometimes I even forget. I can’t remember what denomination [St. Lydia’s] is. It doesn’t matter to me... and I don’t know anything about their position on things politically, or all the business”. Mandy reinforced her lack of interest in denominations by joking that she had considered becoming Jewish, because her current boyfriend was Jewish. Although, she made this statement in a tongue-in-cheek way, the way in which she talked about denominations and her church attendance nevertheless revealed what was of value to her about attending church:

Is denomination not something you think about?

M: No. Not really. And even I told my boyfriend, who’s Jewish, I said, ‘If it was important to you I would probably consider converting’. I don’t know if I really would or not. Maybe. If there’s like a framework, and I can get into it, and it’s helpful to me, and there’s great community, then I probably will be okay with that too. That sounds terrible. That’s like a terrible Christian… (laughs) ‘I can be Jewish too, fine!’ (laughs). Jesus was Jewish. I always tell my boyfriend, ‘You and Jesus, my two favorite Jews!’... What’s important to me is I guess the fact that the community feels authentic, do you know what I mean? Like, people are being honest with each other and they can be... if people have questions, doubts, that that’s fine, it’s a safe place for people to voice that, and nobody’s attacking anybody else’s belief system or lifestyle, which I do feel at St. Lydia’s, because I do think that there are people at St. Lydia’s who are every... atheist, Jewish, everything, and it’s all fine. And yet, when we’re all there, it is a little weird to me that we all take communion, we all say ‘This is my body’. That’s pretty Jesusy [sic] (laughs). We all come together from these different traditions, we’re all going to agree that... its almost we’re all going to pretend that we all believe in Jesus, do you know what I mean? (laughs) (Mandy)
Like Bethany, Mandy’s decision to worship at St. Lydia’s is driven by local and individual pragmatic concerns, rather than concerns with denomination identity. As can be seen here, Mandy’s primary concern was to be a part of an inclusive community that “feels authentic”. Although she was clearly half-joking about converting to Judaism, Mandy appeared to be serious when stating that, “If there’s like a framework, and I can get into it, and it’s helpful to me, and there’s great community, then I probably will be okay with that too”. Mandy overstates the degree of diversity and a lack of Christian identity within the congregation when she says “atheist, Jewish, everything, and it’s all fine” and “We all come together from these different traditions, we’re all going to agree that… its almost we’re all going to pretend that we all believe in Jesus”. As this thesis has shown, the Christian culture of the congregation and the Christian identities of the congregants is clear. However, the degree of inclusivity and freedom of belief within the congregation, although overstated by Mandy, is clearly something she recognizes and very much values.

During our interview Mandy often suggested that whether or not Christian stories and beliefs were actually true mattered very little to her. What mattered to Mandy much more were the messages of hope, mutual care, love, and community, that she saw as being a central part of the Christian message, and which played a central part in her own life as a resource of personal strength and resilience. A poignant example of this was when Mandy related a long story about how she had looked after her sister when she was very sick and dying of cancer. Mandy told me that her faith was something that she drew on at that time as a resource to help her care for sister before she passed away:

She just looked, honestly, like, monstrous. You know, she had lost so much weight, her skin was
just hanging off, and she was just like crusty and smelt bad, the whole house smelt terrible, and she was like moaning and she was not in bed. She kept getting up, and was like lurching around in this like restless… they call it terminal restlessness. Like, the last few days before you die… It was the closest I’ve ever been to somebody who’s actively dying. And anyway, that was probably a big moment of faith, or something.

I: Because you had that…

M: It like anchored me. And that I wasn’t scared, and I wasn’t… yeah, when I look back I feel like I wasn’t… there was something helping me through that. There was some other force that allowed me to be strong. And I don’t know if strong is the right word. But present in that moment and do those things for my sister, and I’m glad that I could do that. And if I hadn’t been all churched up (laughs) I don’t think I could have ever done that.

The way in which Mandy talked about her Christianity and her churchgoing was as if it was a valued resource of personal strength, a resource that she could draw on in difficult times in her life. Church for Mandy was fundamentally about community and a system of belief and practice that could help her through the difficult times in her life. It had little to do with denominational identity or even the truth or otherwise of religious beliefs or doctrines.

Fiona’s narrative: “My favorite cuisine might not contain my absolute favorite food”

One of the most striking examples of a congregant who displayed high levels of religious expertise and experience, and frequent and varied church attendance, was Fiona, a thirty-year old transgender woman who had been a congregant at St. Lydia’s for three and a half years. Fiona attended St. Lydia’s more than once a week. She also attended two other progressive churches in Brooklyn; Parables (also a Lutheran church) and Not So Churchy (a Presbyterian church), attending these churches a little less frequently. In addition to illustrating the high level of church attendance and experience, an exploration of Fiona’s attitudes towards denominations provides an illustration of the way in which sexuality and denominational preferences were sometimes linked in the narratives of congregants.
Fiona grew up in Colorado where she and her family attended a Disciples of Christ church and a Vineyard church, “I have vague memories of attending a church in the city I was born in” Fiona told me, “my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, went to a Disciples of Christ church. So we went there. And then I guess at one point we also went to a Vineyard church, from what I’ve been told. So, but the first church I remember clearly is the Disciples of Christ church… I mean, I think that we went to that church because it was the church that my grandmother went to. My dad’s family was religious. I don’t know what church they went to when he was growing up. I mean, like I never… I don’t remember like thinking that much about denominations until I was in high school”. Fiona’s narrative concerning her church attendance was a long and involved story, involving frequent attendance at a wide variety of churches of different denominational types. This varied church attendance was the result of friends inviting Fiona or her family to different churches or religious gatherings. Periods of varied church attendance were punctuated by short periods of non-attendance when Fiona’s family moved house, when her parents got divorced, when churches changed pastor or closed, when Fiona switched schools, or when she became disillusioned or dissatisfied with the church for some reason.

During her early childhood years Fiona would occasionally attend Baptist churches with a friend. When she was ten years of age Fiona’s parents got divorced and she began attending what she described as a conservative Lutheran church, “I don’t know if it was Missouri Synod Lutheran or if it’s just the people were more conservative back home”, she reflected. Fiona attended a church called Crossroads during high school, as well as a house church in the local area (the denomination of which she did not mention). However, after a scandal involving the pastor there and subsequent internal infighting in the church, Fiona stopped attending Crossroads, “I was just
like, I can’t deal with this. It’s too fractured. I basically sort of lost trust in what was happening there”. At this point Fiona talked about attending Presbyterian churches, as well as attending another church (again, the denomination of which she did not mention), and the topic of homosexuality began to emerge in her narrative:

F: So after that I ceased going for a while, and I had… the guy who led one of my house groups that I went to had a friend who led a similar thing in a different church. A Presbyterian church that a friend of mine went to. So I started going to that. You know, it was cool, it was fun. And then I had another friend who was having sort of like a crisis of faith, like ‘I don’t know what I believe’, or whatever. So he would always talk to me about, ‘Why do you believe? What about this?’, and all these things, you know. And so he’s like, “Well, will you go to the Sunday morning church with me?” So I went with him to the Sunday morning church a few times. But then one of the sermons that was preached by the head pastor was about homosexuality in a way that did not jive with me. And it was about how it’s okay kind of hold discriminatory views against gay people as long as you’re nice to them. I was like, ‘No, I feel like I can’t jive with that’ … So I stepped away from that church, and then at some point I started going to my university and they had like a student church. But it was like a big deal. It was done by a local, also Presbyterian, church. And they had a student ministry for what would now be like a hundred and twenty years. And so my roommate was like, ‘Hey, do you want to go to this?’ and I was like ‘Sure’. So I started to going there. It was called the Annex, and I was like really plugged into that, and I ended up working there. If you’ve been to a church where they like project the lyrics, I ended up doing that projection stuff. And then I ended up doing a little bit of that for the Sunday morning service.

I: So it sounds like Presbyterianism was what you were…

F: There was something I liked about it. I didn’t like their views on homosexuality…

Fiona graduated from college in 2011, and moved to New York City in 2012 where she explored different churches around the city, looking for one that she liked. At the time Fiona had not come-out as gay or begun the process of transitioning from a man to a woman. I asked Fiona what her criteria at the time was for choosing a church in New York, “I looked at a handful of them”, Fiona told me, “there’s a website called gaychurch.org and they give you the list of open and affirming churches. And I’ve been to the one in Williamsburg in the bar⁴⁴. And I went to a

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⁴⁴ Here Fiona is referring to the church in a bar, Revolution, which initially sparked my interest in innovative religious congregation.
Taizé, which is a French, sort of musical service at a church, I think a Methodist church in Park Slope, its right by Prospect Park, I think. And they meet on Wednesday nights, or every other Wednesday, or something”. I asked Fiona directly whether denomination had mattered to her while she was exploring places to worship in the city. Fiona said the church’s position on homosexuality was more important to her at the time than denomination, “because I knew that I’d eventually have to go through a coming-out process, and I didn’t want to be kicked out, or whatever”. St. Lydia’s was one of the churches that Fiona found on the gaychurch.org website. Fiona discovered Parables and Not So Churchy through this website also. I remarked to Fiona that Presbyterianism appeared to be the denominational thread running through her life as a churchgoer, and I asked if she considered herself to be Presbyterian. Fiona was non-committal in response to my probing about her denominational preferences. She disliked, or felt removed from, some of the more conservative aspects of Presbyterianism, but nevertheless did feel a strong affinity with the denomination:

…they operate like a family who are sick of but love their family members. You know, like, sometimes I go home and I talk to my family, my actual family. A lot of people have disdain for their family. I don’t have that much disdain. But, I mean, I understand a lot of them are very conservative, and they don’t understand gender issues, and they have families, and own houses, and stuff like that. But I go home and I talk to them and they like formulate sentences the way I do, and they accentuate words the way I do, and they find the things funny that I do, and things like that. And Presbyterianism feels like that… Yeah, so for a while I did identify as Presbyterian… see part of me is I guess hesitant because I like all my churches individually and they are different denominations, but they are also not representative of their denominations… But if you said like, ‘What is your favorite cuisine?’ My favorite cuisine might not contain my absolute favorite food. Or if you said, ‘What’s your favorite restaurant, or whatever…

I: Right, so there are other reasons other than food to go to a restaurant.

F: Yeah. So the denomination I guess is not that important to me in that sense. But if the question is literally which denomination do I like, I like Presbyterian as a denomination. I think that there are two different levels of it. One, like, the idea of how a denomination is in that it’s a group that believes something. I like the Presbyterian denomination, and not because of what they believe, but just because how they happened to have operated.
Fiona talked especially about Presbyterianism in relation to the issue of homosexuality and the ordination of gay priests. She saw Presbyterianism being “forward in their failures”, as she put it; slow to change on the issue, but nevertheless willing to recognize their own inertia, and willing to sanction gay ordination eventually. What was most interesting about the way in which Fiona talked about denominations was her use of the family and food as analogies in the extract quoted above, indicating two ways in which she related to the religious denominations. Presbyterianism is like a family, Fiona says, sometimes there may be differences of opinion and disagreements, but they “formulate sentences the way I do, and they process things the way I do, and they accentuate words the way I do, and they find the things funny that I do, and things like that”. There is, then, a connection with the denomination which transcends belief or other formal considerations, a feeling of natural affinity borne out of familiarity and socialization within a religious culture. With regards to choosing a church or preferring one denomination over another, Fiona remarks “part of me is I guess hesitant because I like all my churches individually and they are different denominations”, and notes that “My favorite cuisine might not contain my absolute favorite food”. For Fiona, there does not have to be a seamless synergy between her own religious perspectives, the perspectives of the church in which she worships, and those of the denomination with which the church is affiliated. Although Fiona appears to feel a strong affinity for a denomination, that affinity does not necessarily determine her choice of which church to attend. Other more local and pragmatic issues are of greater importance, particularly, in Fiona’s case, whether the church takes a liberal view on homosexuality and gender identity. In addition, disagreeing with a denomination over specific religious beliefs does not preclude Fiona from recognizing and expressing the strong affinity with it.
Fiona’s narrative illustrates a combination of affinity and ambivalence towards denominations, an attitude which, as I have illustrated, was common amongst many of my interviewees. Fiona displays other traits and features which were also common amongst my interviewees, such as a high degree of religious knowledge and church experience, and experience in ‘church shopping’; attending multiple different kinds of churches, either simultaneously or separately, to find a church that they liked. Finally, the example of Fiona provides an indication of the way in which attitudes towards homosexuality often played an important role in the religious lives of congregants. It is to this topic that I will now turn.

**Attitudes towards Homosexuality**

This more than any other issue appeared as a common recurring topic of conversation and comment amongst my interviewees and, perhaps more than any other issue, provides an illustrative litmus test of the degree to which the congregation as a group of worshippers (as opposed to the church as an institution) can be categorized as progressive Christians. Indeed, in my conversations with congregants (and in observing the congregation in general), it seemed that the term ‘progressive’ was more or less used as a synonym for ‘gay-friendly’, with its other political or cultural meanings being less prominent or less immediately present. This could be seen, for example, from my interview pastor Scott, and from the extract from the St. Lydia’s website, explored in the previous chapter. We saw there how sexuality was mentioned immediately in answer to the question “What does it mean that you’re progressive?” There was an absence of other issues normally associated with progressive politics, such as concerns about poverty, inequality, racism, and so on. This is of course not to say that concern about these issues
was absent from the culture of the congregation and its theology. The close synonymy of ‘progressive’ and ‘gay-friendly’ within the culture of the congregation may very well be due to the need for churches like St. Lydia’s to clearly differentiate themselves from their more conservative Christian cousins, and to make it clear to would-be visitors where they stand on this particular issue, given that the issue of homosexuality has been such a contentious one within Christian culture.

As I interviewed more and more congregants I detected an emerging pattern concerning the issue of homosexuality. In several cases my interviewees self-identified as gay, and interviewees commonly expressed liberal attitudes concerning gender and sexuality. In more than one case the progressive stance of St. Lydia’s concerning sexuality was shown to be a determining factor in congregants choosing to worship in the congregation. There were also several cases in which congregants talked about shifting away from conservative Christian beliefs and attitudes over the course of their lives towards a more liberal perspective, and that shift was in large part a result of a growing disagreement or unease with conservative Christian attitudes towards homosexuality. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, the topics of gender and sexuality were not specific research interests of mine, and I did not directly raise the topics with my interviewees (other than in relation to asking about attitudes towards pastor Scott as a female pastor and about the use of female pronouns for God). However, the issue of sexuality arose again and again in congregant narratives in response to my asking about their religious lives, their religious background, and their church attendance.
During the course of each interview I usually encouraged congregants to reflect on St. Lydia’s and their church attendance more generally. Some of my interviewees talked about being gay and struggling to fit in in conservative church cultures. Some interviewees talked about becoming generally more liberal in their religious perspectives over time, having grown up in a conservative religious tradition, or in a church environment which held traditional conservative Christian values and beliefs. When interviewees talked about shifting away from conservative Christianity their narratives most often concerned issues relating to Christian perspectives on sexuality. Whether they themselves were gay or not, disagreement with conservative Christian doctrine on sexuality was commonplace (See Box 6).

For some of my interviewees the rejection of conservative Christian attitudes towards sexuality were pivotal moments in their religious lives, precipitating a shift away from conservative Christianity, and sometimes a rethinking of the meaning of Christianity as a whole. We have already seen one example of this. In Chapter 8 we saw how Brian grew up in a strongly religious family, and his father was an Episcopal priest. In college Brian was involved with Canterbury Episcopal Student Association and Campus Crusade for Christ (a notably conservative organization). In our interview Brian talked about shifting away from conservative Christian values over time, and how the issue of homosexuality was particularly pivotal in this regard:

In college I went to the Canterbury Episcopal Student Association. Also for a while Campus Crusade for Christ, until I stopped after a while because I disagreed with them about a lot of things. I really liked in college… they were very warm, and my theology was a little more conservative at that time. And my dad, was at least, sort of on the right side of the Episcopal church, so still pretty moderate really. But he believed that homosexuality was a sin, for example. And then in college my beliefs changed for lots of reasons. My brother came out, as well as three of my closest friends, all within a year or so. And so it really made me rethink a lot of things. That was the thing that eventually spurred me to leave the Campus Crusade for Christ. But I was involved in Canterbury the entire time also, and went to church regularly. (Brian)
Box 6 – Liberal Attitudes Towards homosexuality

I remember in college knowing my own sort of queered sensibilities and things, like, wondering… and feminist sensibilities, just being like ‘I feel like I’m the only person of faith and believes these things’. You know, and then I come [to New York] and find communities of people like me… it’s like I didn’t feel conflict, it’s just that nobody else was like me. So I was like ‘Alright’. I think that it was interesting to learn, and it definitely did not come at once. I sort of realized that pastors don’t necessarily know everything, and they don’t all believe the same thing. (Fiona)

I: What about the theology at St. Lydia’s, does anything strike you about that?

B: I mean, I don’t know a ton about the theology there. I guess a couple of things that stuck me is in general, like, being someone who identifies as gay there are a lot of so-called Emergent churches that I would be hesitant to go to. I wouldn’t even check them out because I would assume that they would be homophobic. So I like the fact that St. Lydia’s has that right out there on the website and everything. And the ELCA is a pretty good denomination in terms of that, better certainly than the Methodists.

I: Has it been very important to you find a church that was accepting of all sexualities?

B: Oh yeah, absolutely.

I: That’s seems important to you.

B: Yeah, I wouldn’t even… I mean, like I said, the Methodist denomination is not accepting, but in terms of the church, I wouldn’t even consider that. Like I accidentally went to a not-gay friendly church when I was living in Boston and walked out in the middle of the sermon.

I: Why?

B: The minister was preaching about it. I was staying in a gay friendly neighborhood. So I just assumed that the church there would be gay friendly. But yeah I guess… I don’t know if they were… the church, I guess… the denomination, the church of Scotland must have been debating something about gay marriage. So he was preaching about it. I mean I didn’t make a stink. But I just got up and left.

(Bethany)

…in Mozambique, because you can’t walk ten feet without running into church after church after church. People go to all different ones. In one family you can have Muslims, and Christians, Baptists blah blah blah blah, in one family. So that’s kind of amazing. But at the same time I felt like if I said anything about, for instance, a thing that stepped out of line gender-wise, or sexuality-wise, or whatever, if I said something that exposed myself as being outside of whatever the canon was then I would be thrown out. And it’s not that that was ever confirmed but it was a fear. With St. Lydia’s I feel appreciated for who I am. I feel like… And then mentioning things like transgender rights, things like that that can just make a huge difference. Feeling like ‘Oh I’m in a church where different gender identities, different sexuality identities, different physical whatever, you know, those things are really welcome’. So that made me feel really welcome. And it made me feel proud to be in a church, like, I don’t want to be in just a middle-class white pile of people talking about life. I want to be with a group of… it made me feel like people were taking risks talking about themselves… (Monica)
I remember being like thirteen and we got a new rector… maybe twelve, and we got a new rector at St. David’s, and he’s like this young kind of like cool guy, and he’s still there. And he preached a sermon about his brother who died of AIDS. And it was about reconciliation, about forgiveness. And he was saying something like ‘God forgives everyone, and I know that God has forgiven my brother’. And I was like, “Exqueeze [sic] me! God’s forgiven your brother for what?’ And I was twelve years old, and I went to this guy’s office, this forty-year-old man whose brother died of AIDS, and I was like ‘What do you think God had to forgive your brother for?’… He was so nice to me. And I remember he said ‘Well, God has to forgive everyone’, and I remember being like very unsatisfied with that answer. I was like ‘OK, that doesn’t sit right with me’. But I was also like, I knew this guy wasn’t evil. And I knew there was something there that was compelling and interesting to me, that was unsatisfied by that exchange. And I knew that there was something unspoken about what sexuality was allowed and what wasn’t.

I: But it wasn’t articulated…

J: Exactly. But it was very unarticulated. So that’s always been a huge part of my theology. That’s it’s not a sin to be gay. And that human sexuality is a gift from God.

I: Right. And that was kind of an early alert to that issue.

J: Right, exactly. (Julia Stroud, St. Lydia’s Community Coordinator)

Brian says his “beliefs changed for a lot of reasons” during college, but mentions traditional Christian attitudes towards sexuality as being particularly pivotal in this regard. It was striking to me how similar this was to some of my other interviewees stories about their religious lives. Despite the fact that I myself never raised the topic, disagreement on church doctrine concerning homosexuality, leading to an eventual rethinking of conservative Christian values, became something of a recurrent motif in congregant narratives. Interviewees sometimes conveyed a sense of having felt uneasy in church when they were younger, knowing that they were gay, or feeling a sense that conservative Christian doctrines were wrong in some way, but not quite knowing whether or how to articulate those feelings.

For the remainder of this chapter I would like to focus in on the narrative of Hillary, who was an intern at St. Lydia’s at the time this research was conducted. Of all my interviewees, the
discussion of Christian attitudes towards sexuality and the difficulties involved in struggling with conservative Christian perspectives in this regard, featured most prominently in Hillary’s narrative about her religious life. Her narrative is therefore illustrative not only of the liberal position on sexuality which is prevalent within the culture of the congregation, but also of the ways in which religious identities are formed and change over time and how those changes are articulated in retrospect.

*Hillary’s Narrative: “all the things that my church and my Christian upbringing had ever told me about the gay community was lies”*

Hillary was a thirty-seven year old British congregant at St. Lydia’s, for whom the issue of homosexuality and Christianity appeared to have played a major role in the formation of her Christian identity. The topic appeared prominently in her narrative about her religious life, more prominently in fact than any other of my other interviewees. It was clearly a very meaningful topic for her in terms of her life as a Christian. At the time of our interview Hillary had just finished studying at a theological college in the UK, with a view to eventually becoming ordained. She and her husband had recently moved to New York, and Hillary had been working at St. Lydia’s as an intern for several months to fulfill some of the final requirements for her course of study. Like Brian, in our conversation Hillary talked about growing increasingly uncomfortable with conservative religious attitudes towards homosexuality, causing her to rethink aspects of her faith and shift towards more liberal Christian attitudes. A close look at Hillary’s narrative concerning her religious life reveals twists and turns in church attendance and faith, and how she interprets those twists and turns in retrospect. In talking about her religious background Hillary told me “I was raised in Baptist churches, although neither of my
parents would call themselves a Baptist. That had just happened to be the churches that they were… that might not be true. My mom was raised as a Baptist. I don’t think she’d necessarily use that label now. Although they are still in a Baptist church”. As I did with all my interviewees, I asked Hillary to talk about her life as a Christian and her church attendance over the years. Hillary talked about attending Baptist churches with her parents during her childhood and her early teens. In her late-teenage years Hillary started to become interested in charismatic Christianity. She described her changing religiosity at that time in the following way:

I had quite a lot of conflict with my parents, those… I guess I was like seventeen, eighteen, then. And what changed that, I guess… I guess, I had this certain picture of what Christianity was. And I knew I believed it, and I knew I should be following it, but I wasn’t really feeling it at the time. And that was, I guess, the Evangelical, like, not massively conservative, but what in the UK would be, like, straight down the line Evangelical. It’s all about the Bible. Everything is about the Bible. And I’d never really been exposed to kind of the charismatic side of Christianity. And that changed when some various older people in my church started taking people, members of the youth, older youth, to these like Christian festivals, and celebrations, and big communal youth events like Soul Survivor… I went all to those and had experiences of the Holy Spirit, kind of for the first time, which completely revolutionized my faith. And all of a sudden I found this emotional element to it that had almost been totally missing before. And things that were relevant to the sort of musical culture that I was part of, and all that kind of stuff.

I: You mean it was more contemporary music?

H: Yeah. And it was all young people. And it was rock concert style, and festival style, and just fit in with the rest of life, I guess. And it was exciting. And I had like a massive crush on the bloke that sang the songs, and all of that kind of teenage stuff…(laughs) (Hillary)

It is notable that Hillary mentions charismatic Christianity as being compelling for her, much in the same way that we saw in the narratives of Ben and Joe in Chapter 9. The impact of Hillary’s encounter with charismatic Christianity is clear when she says she had “experiences of the Holy Spirit, kind of for the first time, which completely revolutionized my faith. And all of a sudden I found this emotional element to it that had almost been totally missing before”. For the next few years Hillary went to charismatic churches when she could. Though there were not many local
charismatic churches in her part of the UK that she could attend. Prior to enrolling in a university program Hillary enrolled in a yearlong discipleship training program at a large charismatic youth church. Hillary told me that the time she spent at this charismatic youth church was another especially important moment in her life as a Christian; “we did all sorts of charity work, but it also involved helping out the church and the youth services at festivals, and running youth clubs, and getting a whole load of theological training as well. So that was a huge formative kind of time for me. And I think that’s when I kind of claimed faith for myself, and was like, ‘No, this isn’t like my parent’s faith. I’m really into this’, and waving my arms in the air, and singing songs, and speaking tongues, and that kind of stuff”.

Like Brian, Hillary’s religious attitudes began shifting away from conservative Christianity over time, and like Brian, that shift happened for Hillary around the issue of homosexuality while she was attending university. Extracts from Hillary’s narrative concerning this can be seen in Boxes 7a, b, and c. Hillary began a degree in psychology and joined the Christian Union at her university. She soon became the Vice President of the Christian Union and began attending a local charismatic church; “I don’t think I’d go there if you paid me these days’ Hillary says about the charismatic church, “But even then I knew that there were things I disagreed with them on”, implying not only that Hillary’s religious attitudes had changed significantly since that time, but also that she began to feel uncomfortable with the conservative orientation of charismatic church she had been attending while at university. Issues concerning gender equality, sexuality, and adult baptism, were particular points of contention. Nevertheless, despite this she says, “you could kind of keep your head down, and just get what you wanted from it”.

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Box 7a – Hillary’s Narrative 1: Shifting Away from Conservative Christianity

I had a really good group, particularly in my first year, of non-Christian friends, who were on my corridor, who I lived with in the halls of residence. And then very quickly discovered the Christian Union and made a lot of lovely friends there as well. And by half way through of my first year I was asked to become Vice President of the Christian Union. So then that became a whole big part of life. I did go to a church, but it was more, like, the Christian Union was more… Yeah, so the Christian Union was more… it was adamant that it wasn’t a church, but all the things that one would get from a church, like fellowship and all the rest of it, was through there. And the church we’d just go to on Sunday morning, and occasional student events. And there were a whole bunch of churches that we did a tour of the first term one week, to see what we liked. And I picked the big lively charismatic student church, because that was what I was into at the time. I don’t think I’d go there if you paid me these days. But even then I knew that there were things I disagreed with them on. So they didn’t allow women to speak, for instance. They were very… I don’t know if the word anti-gay is fair. But they were… they had very traditional views on gayness, and my views were just sort of starting to change then. And they also thought… they didn’t really like infant baptism. So if people had got baptized as a baby, which I had, they would put a lot of pressure on people to get re-baptized, which I managed to avoid because I kind of knew what I thought on that was ‘No, I’m not doing that’. But other people that I knew got persuaded into getting re-baptized.

I: So there was a little tension there?

H: Yeah. But it didn’t really matter because all we really did was go along on a Sunday morning to a service that had a thousand people in it. It was like a mega church kind of situation, or the British equivalent (laughs). And so it didn’t… you could kind of keep your head down, and just get what you wanted from it.

I: It sounds like the nature of your faith was changing through college. It sounds like you were perhaps becoming more liberal.

H: Yeah. I would have very very much not enjoyed that label at the time. But looking back… I don’t even really now know what I think of the term ‘liberal’. What was happening, I think, was that I went into university having come of the back of this gap year where I’d learnt a lot theological stuff. Like, I’d had some really intensive kind of… I mean, obviously it was low level… but, theological training for the first time. Where we’d really had to grapple with questions and issues. And also had a lot of experience doing things for a church and seeing amazing things happen. And so I kind of went in thinking I know all the answers. And so I’d be, on the behalf of the Christian Union, I’d be on all these panels that would be in a pub where they’d have a load of Christians, it was called ‘Grill a Christian’, and you could ask any question. And everyone was always like ‘Oh Hillary should do that, she knows all the answers!’ And I think very soon a lot of my answers started to get challenged. Not by other people, but for me as I’d learnt more about real life, I was like, ‘Well, actually this answer doesn’t fit what I’m experiencing’. And that was particularly the case with gay people.
As I listened to Hillary’s story and to the other stories congregants told me about shedding something of their religious conservativism during their college years I was always reminded of Robert Wuthnow’s (1988) *The Restructuring of American Religion* and his discussion of the liberalizing effect of higher education during 1960s, 70s, 80s. Wuthnow talks about the “education gap” (p.168) in the United States separating those with and without a college education; a college education being highly correlated with liberal views, religious or otherwise. Additionally, Wuthnow highlights education as potentially having a destabilizing effect on religious affiliation. For example, concerning the expansion of higher education in the 1960s, Wuthnow notes “One consequence of the rising levels of education among evangelicals was a tendency for some of the new breed [of politically left-leaning evangelicals] to abandon conservative denominations for more liberal denominations in which their social and political views gained more support” (p.189). Similarly, discussing polling in the 1980s, Wuthnow notes that “persons with college educations were about twice as likely to be religious liberals as they were to be religious conservatives… Of all the social background questions in the study, education was the factor that most clearly discriminated between religious liberals and religious conservatives” (p.168-9). A college education in Wuthnow’s classic study is very much shown to be a decisive factor in determining shifts away from religious conservativism.

Despite the fact that Hillary was from the UK, Wuthnow’s convincing arguments about the liberalizing effect of education in the US were enough for me to think to bring the subject up directly with Hillary in our conversation; “It sounds like the nature of your faith was changing through college. It sounds like you were perhaps becoming more liberal”, I remarked. Later, pushing the point further, asking, “Was it the education that you were receiving that impacted
Box 7b – Hillary’s Narrative 2: Shifting Away from Conservative Christianity

I: Was it the education that you were receiving that impacted you?

H: You mean studying psychology?

I: Psychology, or just being in an academic environment?

H: No, I don’t think it was that at all. I think I’d kind of always been in an academic environment because of my parents. So everything was always intellectual, and always rational, and always having answers and debating things, and all of that. What was different was that for the first time in my life a large proportion of my friends were gay, and I’d never really, I think I knew one gay person who wasn’t really out when I lived at home. And so I was realizing that all the things that my church and my Christian upbringing had ever told me about the gay community was lies. And, you know, I started going to gay clubs and having an amazing time, and being surrounded by really lovely supportive people, and seeing good gay relationships, and having my friends that were not Christians starting asking me about faith, and wanting to come along to the Christian Union and church, and having this awful moment where I took a friend to church with me and the people stood up and made an announcement about campaigning against homosexuality in schools or something, and I just wanted to die. And then another good friend of mine who was part of the Christian Union, worship leader, who I found out through mutual a friend, was gay, because he was also part of the Gay Association, and hadn’t really thought about the fact that that might get him outed at the Christian Union. The whole thing got quite messy. When I was in the leadership position there, it was not good. I did certain things then, because I thought that was what you had to do as a Christian leader, that I now look back on, and it was awful, totally the wrong things to do, really damaging to people. But that was the start for me of changing what I’d always assumed was the case… And I think for… that was 1998, and I think between then and maybe two, three years ago, I was in a place where I was like ‘I don’t know what I think about this’, and I’m OK not knowing. I know that… as in, is it right, is it wrong? Should there be gay marriage? Should gay people be ordained? Blah, blah, blah. All those kinds of issues. I was like, ‘I actually don’t know what I think anymore. But I’m OK in the not knowing, and I just know that God loves people, and that’s enough’. And it’s only really been in the last two to three years that I’ve come to a position on, ‘Yep. This is what I think, and why’ and for my theology college thing that I just finished in July I actually wrote my dissertation kind of trying to make a case for the church endorsing same sex gay relationships. And that was my crystalizing my basically twenty years of grappling with that issue that began then.
you?” However, as can be seen from the interview extracts, Hillary rejected both my use of the term ‘liberal’, and my somewhat secular-humanist assumption that studying for a degree in psychology might have resulted in a shift in her religious attitudes. Instead, Hillary talked about a sense that she had at the time that her life experiences were in some way not matching up with her long held Christian beliefs; “I think very soon a lot of my answers started to get challenged. Not by other people, but for me as I’d learnt more about real life, I was like, ‘Well, actually this answer doesn’t fit what I’m experiencing’. And that was particularly the case with gay people”. Experiences in “real life”, as Hillary puts it, encouraged her to reevaluate her religious ideas. In a similar way to Brian, the turning point for Hillary appears to have been when she started to encounter people who were gay and get to know them. In Brian’s case, his brother and friends’ coming-out encouraged a revaluation of conservative Christian attitudes towards homosexuality. In Hillary’s case, forming friendships with gay people and socializing with them had a similar effect.

There is a sense of a feeling of betrayal in Hillary’s story, or a sense of having been misled; “I was realizing that all the things that my church and my Christian upbringing had ever told me about the gay community was lies”. Hillary seems very certain in her conviction that the attitudes she had held previously concerning homosexuality were wrong. Although she does not go into detail, there is a clear sense of regret about having discriminated against gay people in some way while she was Vice President of the Christian Union at university; “I did certain things then, because I thought that was what you had to do as a Christian leader, that I now look back on, and it was awful, totally the wrong things to do, really damaging to people”. A realization that she had been “really damaging to people” in combination with experiences in her social life had left
Box 7c – Hillary’s Narrative 3: Shifting Away from Conservative Christianity

I: So how have things changed for you in your faith, if they have?

H: They definitely have. So, I think before I met David [my husband] all of my beliefs I think were probably similar to what they have been when I was a child and a teenager, but I was just… at the time I would have said maybe not living them out or something. So then when I met David who was like this nice Christian man who I thought I was always supposed to have I guess I kind of stepped back into church because now suddenly I fit, because you know, I had this nice Christian man, the way it was supposed to be, and so probably initially my beliefs hadn’t really changed. I just fit them better than I had before. Then since studying theology, a lot of the things I had maybe been feeling for a long time, my beliefs have caught up with them, maybe.

I: You mean your uncertainty, or some of the problems you had with the more conservative…

H: Yeah. I think I’ve just… I’ve started to discover whole new ways of having faith and thinking about God and the Bible, and ways that I find much more empowering, and freeing, and intuitive, that also make rational logical sense and fit the evidence, you know, the intellectual arguments that I was taught growing up. But yeah I very much feel looking back, particularly… not so much with what my parents believed, because they very much had a nuanced faith that was, you know, intellectually based. But very much the things that I was taught I guess in Sunday School and in youth groups and in evangelical church, the blacks and whites, and that this is the only way to look at things, and this is what the gospel means. I’m just realizing thats just not true. Like, that that’s one tiny part of what the whole of the Bible and the Gospel, and God and everything is about. So it’s almost been like an opening up of like “Oh my goodness, this ideas amazing, why didn’t I know this before” But also just putting layers underneath things that I’d already kind of thought through by myself.

I: So is this sort of theology basically coming from what we would call a progressive Christian perspective? What sort of theology are you talking about that has had this effect?

H: So the theology that I studied in London, they definitely wouldn’t call themselves progressive. That label, ‘progressive’ I’ve not really heard in England. I’ve only really heard that since I’ve come here. And, you know, a lot of the people who teach and who study at the college that I was at would have very different views from me on things like gay marriage, for instance. But the thing that I liked about that particular college was that they deliberately tried to have a broad spectrum of faith within one thing… what this college had tried to do was take an evangelical charismatic college and a high Anglican liberal Catholic college, and merge them into one. And obviously there’s teething problems with that. But my experience of it was amazing… I went along and met people for the first time in my life who were Christians, but didn’t call themselves evangelical. And so I’d sort of ask them, having been told by evangelicals my whole life, “Of course, other Christians aren’t really Christians, and they’re liberal, and they don’t believe in the Holy Spirit, and they don’t believe in miracles, and they don’t really believe in the Bible”. And so I’d ask people “Do you believe the Bible is the word of God?” And they’d be like “Of course”. “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?”, “Of course, we wouldn’t be Christians if we didn’t!”. And I was like, ‘nothing we believe is different. Why is there like this whole thing?’ So that was a start for me. And then I guess, coming here… yeah, I guess that’s…
Hillary in a place of doubt and uncertainty about how to reconcile the Christianity of her upbringing with her “real life”. It was a period of doubt and uncertainty concerning the issue of homosexuality that she said lasted twenty years, remarking that “it’s only really been in the last two to three years that I’ve come to a position on, ‘Yep. This is what I think, and why’”. The shift away from conservative attitudes towards homosexuality culminated in Hillary’s dissertation for her studies at theology college concerning the issue, which she says argues for “the church endorsing same sex gay relationships”.

Aside from wrestling over the issue of homosexuality, Hillary’s shift away from conservative Christianity appeared to have been influenced by her more recent experiences at theological college. Hillary talked about how the process of studying theology itself, as well as meeting different kinds of Christians at theological college, caused a reassessment of some of her beliefs and attitudes. Studying theology provided her with new perspectives on Christianity, perspectives which appear to have disconfirmed her previously held beliefs; “the things that I was taught I guess in Sunday School and in youth groups and in evangelical church, the blacks and whites, and that this is the only way to look at things, and this is what the gospel means. I’m just realizing that’s just not true.” Hillary’s narrative suggests she felt a sense of cognitive dissonance between the Christianity of her youth and the experiences in her life, a mismatch which had been troubling her for some time. Studying theology helped her to clarify and resolve
those issues in ways that were satisfying and fulfilling for her as a Christian. For example, she says that “a lot of the things I had maybe been feeling for a long time, my beliefs have caught up with them” and that studying theology had helped her by “putting layers underneath things that I’d already kind of thought through by myself”. Hillary is as ambivalent about the use of the term ‘progressive’ as she is about the term ‘liberal’. However, the impact of meeting Christians from a variety of different denominational and theological perspectives appears to have been profound for her. It showed Hillary that there was more than one way to legitimately claim and live out a Christian identity, “having been told by evangelicals my whole life, ‘Of course, other Christians aren’t really Christians…”.

On more than one occasion in the interview extract in Box 7c Hillary uses emancipatory language to describe her gradual shift away from conservative Christianity, using the word “freeing”, perhaps suggesting a feeling of having been trapped, and now feeling released; “I’ve started to discover whole new ways of having faith and thinking about God and the Bible, and ways that I find much more empowering, and freeing, and intuitive, that also make rational logical sense and fit the evidence, you know, the intellectual arguments that I was taught growing up”. The second time this kind of language is used is in relation to my mentioning St. Lydia’s. Concerning worshipping in the congregation, Hillary remarks that “a whole new world of progressive theology has been opened up to me that I didn’t really even know much about in the UK. Which I’ve just found really interesting, and really helpful, and really freeing”.

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Conclusions

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the culture of the congregation of St, Lydia’s by exploring congregant attitudes towards religious denominations and homosexuality, suggesting, in addition, some ways in which the two topics may be related to one another. Secondly, in examining the narratives of congregates the chapter provides further data on the culture of St. Lydia’s in general, and complements the findings of the previous chapter concerning progressive Christianity and St. Lydia’s as a progressive congregation.

In this chapter, rather than formal institutional statements of faith and belief, we have seen some of the ways in which progressive Christian ideas are expressed and articulated, particularly in relation to the issue of homosexuality. Homosexuality appears in the narratives of some congregants as a pivotal issue, not only influencing choice of church and denomination, but also sometimes resulting in a shift away from religious conservativism towards religious liberalism. Finally, this chapter has honed in on the narratives of two congregants in particular, Fiona and Hillary, and in so doing has illustrated the complexity and multifaceted nature of religious identities, and the ways in which religious identities are articulated, remembered and recalled within the narratives of individuals.
CONCLUSION

In this closing chapter I would like to discuss the main findings and implications of my research, and to suggest the potential contribution my research makes to sociological scholarship. The purpose of this doctoral research has been to conduct a qualitative case study of a religious congregation, and in so doing, to explore a range of sociological questions concerning religious congregations themselves and religious trends in the United States more broadly. In particular, the questions posed at the outset of the study concerned the culture of this particular religious congregation, as well as theoretical questions concerning the relationship between religious individualism and religious institutions, the meaning and value of religion and church attendance for churchgoers, and the declining importance of religious denominations.

There is a sense in which this dissertation is comprised of a series of interconnected sociological accounts or narratives which, taken together, provide a holistic account of my particular congregational case, and speak to a wide range of themes and debates in the sociology of religion. On the one hand the dissertation tells the story of a vibrant and dynamic religious community in the process of transition and change, a community which balances religious tradition and religious innovation. This same story is also an account of a successful church plant; the story of a religious community which eventually becomes an official congregation. Interwoven within and through these larger narratives are the narratives of the clergy and the congregants themselves, their own individual biographies and religious lives, their own religious faith, beliefs and attitudes. Together these many-layered accounts capture a particular religious community in a particular time and place, and capture something of the sociological significance of that religious community, and communities like it.
St. Lydia’s as both unique and exemplary

St. Lydia’s is a unique and unusual church, to the degree that its dinner church worship service is a unique and innovative approach to corporate worship. As I discussed in the methodology chapter, it was this characteristic of uniqueness which initially drew me to study the congregation at the outset. Unique and innovative congregations are key cases from a theoretical perspective, and as such, justify the use of a single-case study research design. At a basic level, then, a goal of my research was to describe the congregation in as much detail as I could, examining this unique religious culture.

While St. Lydia’s may be unique and innovative in some ways, in other ways the congregation is in fact very ordinary. I found that the congregation is in fact an exemplar of Christianity of a particular kind prevalent in the United States, and that its religious culture and the religious lives of the congregants exemplify many of the wider sociological debates and trends concerning the decline of denominational identity, rising religious individualism, church shopping, and the need many people feel for community. In this sense, St. Lydia’s provides a sociologically compelling example of the way in which progressive Christianity manifests itself congregationally in the United States. In addition, I have also suggested over the course of this thesis that St. Lydia’s is an example of a congregation in which the inherent tension between religious individualism and corporate worship is resolved. Christianity at the church is deeply grounded in Christian ethics and practices, for example, in terms of drawing on early Christian liturgical practices. However the culture of the congregation, being a progressive Christian congregation, also allows for, and indeed encourages and embraces, individualized religious belief and practice (or indeed, non-belief and non-practice).
In addition to embracing religious individualism as an aspect of its religious culture, the congregation of St. Lydia’s reduces the inherent tension between religious individualism and corporate worship by placing the notion of community and fellowship at the heart of the culture of the congregation. The idea of the church as an inclusive community, and of all the practices and theological discourses associated with that idea which go to make up the culture of the congregation, provide the main medium through which the congregation functions as a cohesive social group, regardless of differences in the extent or type of individual religious belief or practice. Indeed, the need and desire for community was cited by both the congregational leadership and the congregants themselves as being very important in relation to their church attendance. In one sense the formation of Christian identities at St. Lydia’s can be described as happening independently of religious institutions, in that denominational identity, especially, is not seen as being important to congregants. However, the high value placed on religious community illustrated the degree to which religious identities are tied closely to religious institutions at the local congregational level, in the sense that the meaning of value of Christianity itself appears to be derived from participation in religious congregational community. Christian fellowship and community, and in the case of St. Lydia’s, the cultivation of this through worship and the communal Eucharistic meal, brings congregants together into a cohesive and meaningful religious group, and indeed, is itself the reason for gathering in the first place. This is a recognizably Durkheimian finding.

Churches as a source of Christian identity

One key problem driving this research has been the problem raised by Robert Wuthnow (1993) in Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead. As I discussed
in Chapter 4, one of the challenges which Wuthnow sees Christianity facing is the challenge of religious individualism and the decoupling of religiosity from religious institutions. Churches have less potential impact on the formation of religious identity, they also have to compete with secular sources of community and meaning. This is a problem, it is suggested, not simply because of the impact it may have on church attendance and the engagement of churchgoers in the life of the churches they attend. At a more fundamental level, it matters especially for Christianity in particular, Wuthnow argues, because the formation of Christian identity itself is intimately tied to churches as religious institutions; in their official and exclusive institutional capacity to confer an ascribed Christian identity (though baptism, for example), as well as their functioning as communities of memory and religious narrative, and communities of shared religious identity and practice. Weak congregational communities threaten to jeopardize the viability of Christian identities, and the transferability of Christian identities across the generations. Research on congregations, such as this doctoral dissertation, is therefore of use to pastors and other religious professionals seeking to understand more about the formation of strong congregational communities, and the meaning and value which churches have for those who come to churches to worship.

The congregation of St. Lydia’s provides an interesting case in this regard. We have seen the practices and discourses at the church through which strong religious community is self-consciously cultivated. In this church in particular, the communal Eucharistic meal and the worship service which takes place around that meal, is in many ways the central practice in this regard. Ethical values of inclusivity and hospitality are prominent within the culture of the congregation, and appear both explicitly and implicitly in many different ways throughout the
congregation and its worship practices. Although the findings of this study suggest some degree of ambivalence in the extent to which congregants related to St. Lydia’s as a religious community, many congregants felt part of the community at the church and cited membership of community as being highly important to them in their churchgoing in general. To this extent, St. Lydia’s can be seen as a helpful model for ways in which to build strong congregational community. Indeed, in many ways a concern with community, both at the institutional and individual level, appeared to override all other concerns.

This then raises the question of what kind of Christian identities are being formed within and through the congregation of St. Lydia’s, particularly given Wuthnow’s argument about the importance of churches as conferrers of Christian identity. As we have seen, St. Lydia’s is a progressive Christian congregation which places emphasis on liberal political and theological discourses. Theologically St. Lydia’s is aligned with the progressive Christian notion of Christianity as interpretive, exploratory, and open-ended; ‘a journey rather than a destination’, as it were, with an emphasis on asking questions rather than finding answers, and on “living the questions”. The culture of the congregation at St. Lydia’s very much embodies, articulates, and transmits this progressive Christian theology in a variety of different ways, through both the form and content of worship, through preaching, sermons and events, and through congregational literature and written material. This strong progressive Christian congregational identity, combined the strong cultivation of congregational community, suggests that St. Lydia’s is successful in its function as a congregation, if we agree with Wuthnow that the primary function of a religious congregation is as a source of Christian identity.
This dissertation has also explored the question of denominationalism, and how denominational identity is related to the religious identities of congregations and individuals. The most important recent study of Lutheran congregations in the United States is Stephen Ellingson’s (2007) *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, in which he explores similar questions to mine concerning denominations, religious tradition, congregational cultures, and religious change. However, Ellingson looked at the way in which Lutheran congregations altered or abandoned traditional Lutheranism over time, and how they adopted other practices associated with Evangelicalism, mega-churches, and seeker-sensitive churches. Ellingson argues that “evangelicalism and nondenominationalism are colonizing mainline Protestantism” which has “decentered the Lutheran tradition. This in turn weakens the ability of these Lutheran, and other, congregations to serve as communities of memory” (p.178). To a large extent the findings of my study lend support to many of Ellingson’s conclusions, in that I found many of the same patterns, particular with regards to a lack of Lutheran identity, both at the individual and at the congregational level. However, rather than looking at how a Lutheran congregation changed over time, my study looked at a how religious community eventually became a Lutheran congregation and adopted a denominational identity. Ellingson’s findings concerned congregations which, as he puts it, are “in search of new traditions to graft onto Lutheranism” (p.190), my findings concern a reverse situation; St. Lydia’s is an innovative liberal Protestant religious community which grafted on Lutheranism as its denominational identity, a denominational identity which was very much of secondary importance in comparison to other concerns.
It appears there is a mutually beneficial relationship between congregations and denominations, regardless of the degree to which congregations may deviate from the historic denominational tradition of which they are a part. On the one hand, innovative and experimental religious communities like St. Lydia's need denominational financial support in order to expand and grow. On the other hand, denominations, particularly those that are losing churches and memberships, need a new influx of successful congregations, and are therefore willing to support innovative approaches to worship that appear to have the potential for success. However, while it may bolster denominational numbers and add congregational success stories, it is questionable, based on the evidence from this study, as to whether it contributes to the continuing longevity of the historic denominational traditions. Ironically, denominational support for innovative congregations may in fact dilute denominational identity over time, by giving the impression of the existence of a denominational congregation where in fact very little denominationalism actually exists.

The caveat I would add to this point, with regards to St. Lydia’s at least, is that the congregational adoption of Lutheranism was only just explicitly beginning as I was reaching the end of my research. As the process of the congregation’s incorporation into the ELCA got underway pastor Scott became increasingly concerned to stamp more of a Lutheran identity on the congregation, to make congregants aware of the Lutheran identity of the congregation, and of what that identity meant, both in practical and theological terms. For example, a new line was added to the weekly worship script mentioning the ELCA, and a number of sermons specifically addressed the issue. However, by that time my data collection had ended I was not in a position to explore this process in detail.
Progressive Christianity as “modern religion”

What, then, do the findings of this study suggest about the sociological understanding of progressive Christianity? The liberalization of Christianity has been a major source of contention and debate amongst Christians themselves. On the one hand, liberal Christianity has been seen as having a positive effect of opening churches up to traditionally marginalized younger demographics, helping to bolster severely depreciated congregational memberships (Miller 1999). However, critics argue liberalization waters-down the Christian message, giving worshipers less and less to hold onto in their faith (Reeves 1996). Critics of the Emergent Church movement, for example, see Emergent Christianity as essentially being heretical, claiming it has moved too far away from the basic tenants of the faith (McCracken 2010; Carson 2005). This critique contrasts with discourses of Emerging Christians themselves, who frame their religiosity as being an attempt to create and recapture authentic Christian ethics, community, and worship practices which they see as having been lost or diluted over time. St. Lydia’s is very much indicative of this sentiment, with the dinner church worship service being modelled on early Christian practices, and with authentic and close religious community being a central discourse in the culture of the congregation.

St. Lydia’s, and congregations like it, raise the question of the viability and future of progressive Christianity, and progressive congregations. If religion is a chain of belief and memory which binds believers of the past, the present, and the future together (Hervieu-Leger 2000), to what extent can religions endure innovation and reimagining before this chain is severed? To what extent are individualized and subjective interpretive approaches to Christianity sustainable in congregational form over time? Sociological thinking on this question has been varied. Peter
Berger (1967), within the paradigm of the secularization thesis, argued that the religious pluralism of modern societies would undermine the legitimacy of religious truth claims; ultimately undermining the legitimacy of religion itself, and in turn leading people to abandon their faith and their religious institutions. Transposing this hypothesis to the congregational level leads us to consider how congregational stability and legitimacy is maintained in highly inclusive and deinstitutionalized religious contexts. Indeed, lack of doctrinal strictness has been cited as having negative consequences for congregational commitment and cohesion (Finke and Starke 1992; Innaconne 1994). Similarly, deinstitutionalized and individualized forms of religious practice have been seen as synonymous with the logic of modern commercialism, compromising the status of the sacred, and turning religious adherence into one life-style choice among many, involving minimal levels of profound religious commitment or obligation (Turner 2011, 2012; also see Hadaway 2008).

On the other hand, de-institutionalized religion can also been viewed as giving rise to a diversification and transformation of the religious field as a whole, rather than being an erosion of 'the religious' by 'the secular'. Instead of having a negative impact, religious pluralism and doctrinal inclusivity can open-up new kinds of religiosities and provide religious congregations like St. Lydia’s a high degree of flexibility and adaptability, assisting their longevity and durability, rather than jeopardizing it (Ammerman 2006). Additionally, Courtney Bender’s (2010) research on spirituality challenges the notion that so-called 'non-institutional' forms of religiosity are necessarily unstructured or lack coherence. Bender notes that while spiritual practices may often be individualized and lack a formal institutional context they are nevertheless very much always embedded within specific historical, geographical, and discursive
frameworks which shape religious practices, as well as the religious experiences practitioners
report, and the meanings which they attach to those experiences. It is within these contexts that I
think we should see St. Lydia’s and other forms of progressive Christianity more generally, not
as a symptom of secularization, but rather as a particular end-point in the historical development
of Christianity over time. In this I am following Robert Bellah in his seminal 1964 ‘Religious
Evolution’, and his description of “modern religion”:

…standards of doctrinal orthodoxy and attempts to enforce moral purity have largely been
dropped. The assumption in most of the major Protestant denominations is that the church
member can be considered responsible for himself. This trend seems likely to continue, with an
increasingly fluid type of organization in which many special purpose sub-groups form and
disband. Rather than interpreting these trends as significant of indifference and secularization, I
see in them the increasing acceptance of the notion that each individual must work out his own
ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is provide him a favorable environment for
doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers. And it will be increasingly
realized that answers to religious questions can validly be sought in various spheres of "secular"
art and thought. (p.373)

For Bellah churches have a reduced social function, but nevertheless retain a function as a
potential source of religious identity. As Wuthnow pointed out, that function is particularly
important in terms of Christianity and Christian identity. I have conceptualized progressive
Christianity as an individualized and deinstitutionalized religion, to the extent that it is highly
inclusive with regards to subjective individual interpretations of Christian doctrine and practice.
However I have also shown that the culture of St. Lydia’s is very much tied to historical
discourse and practices of Christianity in a range of different ways, and is therefore a
congregation which successfully resolves the tension between this religious individualism and
the corporate worship. St. Lydia’s is also clearly a congregation which successfully functions as
a source of a particular kind of Christian identity. To this extent I disagree with Ellingson that an
abandonment of denominational identity necessarily compromises the ability of a congregation
to be a “community of memory”. While St. Lydia’s may display weak denominational ties, denominational identity is not the only form of historical religious identity. As this thesis has clearly shown, the congregation has extremely strong ties with particular historical Christian traditions and particular interpretations of Christian doctrine, and those who go there to worship very much see themselves as connected in an authentic way to those historical religious traditions. Christians from other traditions, particularly more conservative Christian traditions, may see progressive or innovative Christian congregations as illegitimate or invalid in terms of their theology or worship practices. However, from a sociological perspective, innovative progressive congregations of this kind are part of the rich and pluralistic religious landscape of the United States, and an analysis of these religious cultures reveals much about religious innovation, and the religious changes and developments that are ongoing in modern social life.

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By the time I was writing the final chapters of this dissertation I had left New York City and was living in England. During this time an email appeared in my inbox from the St. Lydia’s email list. Although I had been away from the congregation for many months, I was still on the church’s mailing list. The email was a long and heartfelt message from pastor Emily Scott to the congregation, informing them that she was leaving and that a new pastor was going to be appointed at the church. In many ways, it was not a surprise. The possibility of pastor Scott leaving the congregation and the appointment of a new pastor had been alluded to several times by Scott herself and others while I was there, especially during the process of incorporation in the ELCA. But the way in which Scott’s departure coincided with writing the final chapters of my dissertation somehow seemed a little poignant; just as I was finishing writing about the congregation, Scott herself, the founder of the congregation, was leaving and moving on. It was
the end of long journey and the start of a new one, both for me and for those that I was researching. For a moment I wished I was still there, documenting Scott’s exit, interviewing her about the transition, and about the arrival of a new pastor, and interviewing the new pastor about taking on the role. I wanted to see how the congregants would react to the change, and how St. Lydia’s might change as a result. But of course, I could not do any of that. I was a long way away, and my work was finally over. But the news of pastor Scott’s departure did bring home to me the fact that work of this kind very much captures a particular configuration of people, at a particular time, in a particular place. Religious congregations, like all the social worlds we inhabit, are ever evolving and changing, and they go on evolving and changing long after the sociologists have left.
**APPENDIX**

**Coding Scheme**

**Biography**

The individual biography of interviewees, particularly in relation to religious background and beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Label</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bio-Bible</td>
<td>Reading the Bible, interpreting the Bible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bio-Church Attendance</td>
<td>Church attendance over the life course, previous churches attended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bio-Demographics</td>
<td>Age, marital status, employment and other demographic characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bio-Formative Religious</td>
<td>Events or memories considered significant or important in relation to faith, spirituality, or religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bio-God</td>
<td>Attitudes towards, and perceptions of, God, interpretation of the meaning of God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**St. Lydia’s**

Interviewee attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs concerning St. Lydia’s. Topics and themes discussed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Label</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Lydia-Age of Congregants</td>
<td>The age range of the congregation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Lydia-Attitudes Towards</td>
<td>Attitudes towards the congregation, explicitly stated preferences and opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Lydia-Baptism</td>
<td>Baptism ceremonies at St. Lydia’s and in other churches, the significance of baptism as a sacrament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Lydia-Bereavement and Illness</td>
<td>Experiences of bereavement or illness in relation to St. Lydia’s or in relation to religion and faith more broadly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Lydia-Community</td>
<td>The formation of religious community, perceptions of community at St. Lydia’s, community as an idea or ideal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Lydia-Community Coordinator</td>
<td>The role of community coordinator at St. Lydia’s. Duties and responsibilities of the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Lydia-Comparison with Family and Home</td>
<td>Comparing St. Lydia’s with family or home, characteristics of the church which are perceived to be similar to, or different from, family and home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Lydia-Comparison with other churches</td>
<td>Comparing St. Lydia’s with other churches attended in terms of styles of worship, formation of community, and so on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Lydia-Denomination</td>
<td>Affiliation of the congregation with Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), self-reported denominational identity of interviewee. Attitudes towards denominations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Lydia-Discovery and First Visit</td>
<td>Finding out about St. Lydia’s and visiting the church for the first time, memories of first impressions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Lydia-Donations and Money</td>
<td>Donations and money in relation to St. Lydia’s and religion and churches more broadly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Lydia-Influence of</td>
<td>Explicitly stated impact or influence of St. Lydia’s on interviewee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Lydia-Eucharist</td>
<td>The Eucharist as practiced at St. Lydia’s and at other churches, theological significance and interpretations of the Eucharist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Lydia-Food and Dinner</td>
<td>Food in the culture of the congregation, dinner as an aspect of the worship service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Lydia-Gender and Sexuality</td>
<td>Gender and sexuality in relation to theology and church practices, at St. Lydia’s and elsewhere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Lydia-Growth and Expansion of</td>
<td>The growth and expansion of St. Lydia’s over time. Church planting. An increase in congregant numbers, diversification of services, financial issues in relation to congregational growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Lydia-Hipster Culture</td>
<td>Perceptions of St. Lydia’s in relation to so-called ‘hipster culture’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Lydia-Intern</td>
<td>Internships at St. Lydia’s. Duties and responsibilities of the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Lydia-Leadership and Hierarchy</td>
<td>Leadership and hierarchy at St. Lydia’s in terms of organizational structure, congregational governance, worship practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Lydia-Lectio Divina</td>
<td>Reading scripture at St. Lydia’s, the practice of Lectio Divina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Lydia-Music</td>
<td>Music in worship, music in the congregation, attitudes towards music and religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Lydia-New York</td>
<td>New York as the context for the congregation. The impact of the culture of New York on the formation and planting of the church. Impact of New York on congregants’ attitudes towards churches and St. Lydia’s in particular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Lydia-Origins of</td>
<td>The early beginnings of the church, establishment, formation, and planting, theological and liturgical origins, finances, moving locations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Lydia-Pastor</td>
<td>Scott as a pastor and leader of the congregation. Perceptions and attitudes towards the pastor.</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Lydia-Poem</td>
<td>The use of poetry in liturgy, reciting a poem as part of the worship service at St. Lydia’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Lydia-Prayer</td>
<td>Prayer at St. Lydia’s during the worship service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Lydia-Race</td>
<td>Race and racism in relation to St. Lydia’s or religion and churches more broadly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Lydia-Religiosity</td>
<td>Explicitly stated beliefs and values in relation to the religious culture of the congregation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Lydia-Sermon</td>
<td>The sermons given during worship, Scott as a preacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Lydia-Sermon Sharing</td>
<td>The practice of making comments and sharing experiences as part of the worship service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Lydia-Social Class</td>
<td>Social class in relation to St. Lydia’s or religion and churches more broadly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Lydia-Social Justice and Politics</td>
<td>Social justice and political issues in relation to St. Lydia’s or religion and churches more broadly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Lydia-Work, Participation, Cooperation</td>
<td>Work as an aspect of the culture of the congregation, working together, participating in worship service, cooking and other tasks at the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Lydia-Worship</td>
<td>Experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards the worship service at St. Lydia’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. Lydia-Hospitality</td>
<td>The idea and ideal of hospitality as an aspect of the culture of the congregation, worship practices and organization in relation to hospitality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Key Concepts

Key concepts tied to research questions and theoretical contexts, and conceptual framework, present either explicitly or implicitly within the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Label</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45. Church-Sect Theory</td>
<td>Typology of religious institutions, theory of the development of religious institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Denominational Citizenship</td>
<td>Denominational identity understood in the same terms as national identity, ie: an ‘imagined community’ with distinct rules, culture, identity narratives, understood and recognized by members (Ammerman, 2005: 210).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Emergent Christianity</td>
<td>Nascent reform movement within Christianity with an emphasis on de-institutionalized forms of worship, liberal theology, early church practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. Institutionalization of Christianity</td>
<td>The history of Christianity and its establishment as a major world religion. The relationship between the state and Christianity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. Religious Individualism</td>
<td>Religious practice, belief, and experience that is individuated and/or divorced from religious institutions, freedom of practice, belief, and experience within religious institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Secularization/the secular</td>
<td>Loss of power and influence of religious institutions over time, at the macro societal level and at the micro individual level. Boundaries, perceived or otherwise, between religious and secular spheres.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Miscellaneous

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Label</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51. Pastor Emily Scott Bio</td>
<td>Pastor Emily Scott’s self-reported biography.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Interesting Phrases</td>
<td>Interesting, unusual, or notable words and phrases used by interviewees. Words and phrases for further analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Green, E. (2015, September 7th) *The Secret Christians of Brooklyn*, retrieved 2/14/16 from


