

**Greatest Commandment:
Lived religion in a small Canadian non-denominational church**

Master's Thesis Presented By:

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Abstract

Canada has distinct contemporary faith communities that differ from western and European counterparts. Unfortunately statistics tracking denominational allegiances give little insight into the daily intricacies of collective religious practice. The purpose of this study is to contribute towards filling a gap within scholarly research on the lived culture and experiences of contemporary religious communities within Canada. This study examines the pattern of culture-sharing within a non-denominational faith community as lived and practiced in Ottawa. Through autoethnography, this study asks why members attend and how members view the use of popular culture video clips within church. Individual and collective religious identities are constructed through observations, interviews and material artifacts gleaned through participant observation from January 2011 to December 2011.

The results show that within the church, a community of practice is built around shared parenthood and spiritual journey. Members place importance on children, on providing support of all kinds for one another, and on keeping religion relevant. Reasons for attending are echoes of the patterns of culture-sharing: members enjoy the feeling of community, the support, the friendships, the play dates. Participants view popular culture video clips played within church as one aspect of an overall importance placed upon relevance. Mutuality of engagement results in members experiencing their lives as meaningful, it validates their worth through belonging, and it creates personal histories of becoming within the context of a community of practice. Future research recommendations include further study of other contemporary faith communities within Canada, with investigation into the possibility that communities of practice may be what the church and unchurched are seeking.

Thesis Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the attendees of Greatest Commandment for the community that your concerted effort builds daily. Many thanks for sharing your lives with me.

Acknowledgements

Thank you God for your grace and mercy! Thank you to my husband D.R. for making me coffee while I burrowed so deep into writing you no longer knew me. Many thanks to my supervisor, Professor Rocci Luppicini, for guiding and supporting me throughout this process. Your encouragement was invaluable. Thank you to my committee members for your time and energy. Thank you to the attendees of Greatest Commandment who gave interviews. Thank you to the pastor of Greatest Commandment for welcoming this study. Thank you to all who took the time to discuss this study, give feedback or edit, and special thanks to my peer reviewer Cameron McIntosh. Finally, thank you to my children for giving me the motivation to finish.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction	1
Research Questions	4
Literature Review	4
<i>Ethnography and Lived Religion</i>	4
<i>The Habitus, Religious Identity, and Everyday Life</i>	6
<i>Community of Practice</i>	8
<i>Use of Media within Christian Faith Communities</i>	9
<i>Anthropologic Study of Christianity within Canada</i>	11

CHAPTER TWO

Research Site and Methodology	14
<i>Greatest Commandment</i>	14
<i>Approach and Rationale</i>	16
<i>Role of Researcher</i>	18
<i>Ethnographic Fieldwork and Data Collection Procedures</i>	20
<i>Data Analysis Procedures</i>	22
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	23
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	25

CHAPTER THREE

Main Findings	26
<i>Going to Church</i>	27
Belonging and Believing	32
<i>Differences in Spiritual Journey</i>	32
<i>Amy</i>	36
<i>Heather</i>	42
<i>Patrick</i>	46
<i>Henry</i>	49
<i>Insider Researcher Perspective</i>	53

<i>Summary</i>	56
Building Community	59
<i>Journey to the Center of the Community</i>	69
Being Relevant	73
<i>Popular Culture Video Clips</i>	74
<i>Sermon Style</i>	79
<i>The Super Bowl Party</i>	88
CHAPTER FOUR	
Advanced Analysis and Interpretation	93
<i>Greatest Commandment as a Community of Practice</i>	93
<i>Entrances, Exits, and Non-Participation</i>	96
<i>Conflict within Greatest Commandment</i>	99
CHAPTER FIVE	
Conclusion.....	101
<i>Limitations</i>	104
<i>Future Research Recommendations</i>	106
References	108
Appendix A	114
Appendix B	116
Appendix C	117
Appendix D	118
Appendix E	119
Appendix F	129
Appendix G.....	130

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

*“Observers of American religion regularly need to map the terrain.
Its bewildering pluralism they soon learn resists a single or permanent outline.”
– Martin E. Marty*

Patrick is a regular attendee of Greatest Commandment,¹ and it is the first time he has ever regularly attended church in his life. Growing up in Ottawa, Patrick only went to church on rare occasions: Christmas, Easter, or if he was with his grandmother on Sunday. He describes his childhood experiences with church as torture – forced to sit quietly as the priest droned on and on.

His attendance at Greatest Commandment is coincidental or divine; depending on your belief in God’s hand in matters. The Pastor of Greatest Commandment, Keefe Coleman, is his co-worker. Patrick says “(Keefe) sparked an interest in me, he was happy and everything seemed to be going well, even though you could tell things weren’t going well, but he always seemed to have some inner spark or drive or guidance or something”. Keefe invited him to check out the church he was starting, “no pressure, just to check it out”, and since then Patrick has continued attending.

Patrick is reluctant to call himself a Christian. Why? He thinks it may be because he places too high an expectation on that word. He attends Greatest Commandment currently because it is relevant to him, but he leaves his future religious options open, including changing major religions from Christianity to Buddhism for example. To try and categorize Patrick into a denominational allegiance for statistical purposes would result in frustration and inaccuracy. Yes, he attends a non-denominational church, but that does not make him a Christian, at least not

¹ All names within this study are pseudonyms, including the attendees, pastor, and church name.

yet. There is much more going on here than can be explained through check boxes and survey questions. Patrick describes the sense of community as a good feeling, and he enjoys the friendships he has made through the church.

The Canadian religious landscape continues to shift. Religious attendance and religious affiliation is on the decline according to Statistics Canada (“Religion,” 2001). Theorists posit that disinterest in religion can be attributed to changes within society and culture which have decreased the relevance of religion for most people. Gordon Lynch believes that “the data of contemporary life no longer fits the paradigm of traditional religion” (Lynch, 2007, p. 24). Other theorists insist that religion is not on the decline, it is only changing forms and venues and that “the religious economy as a whole remains stable” (Montgomery, 1996).

Churches have made changes to try and remain relevant to an increasingly secular world, and there are several books by prominent pastors who speak of their successes and failures in living out this new form of “messier” Christianity (Burke, 2005). However, there is a scarcity of rigorous scientific investigation on the lived culture and experiences of contemporary religious communities, especially within Canada (Beaman, 2006, p. 275). David Hall (1997) comments, “while we do know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women” (p. vii).

This study will seek to address this deficiency and add to the current research on lived religion. The term lived religion is used to describe the ethnographical study of religion (Hall, 1997). The church culture will be explored in detail through the beliefs, values and behaviours shared by participants. The lived religion of the members of Greatest Commandment will be

studied through their everyday practices, with the hopes of developing a depth and clarity not available through classification.

I will examine participants' reasons for attending Greatest Commandment as a way to further understand their involvement in the community. I will also examine how the use of media within church impacts their experience. Popular culture video clips are shown before or during sermons: do participants find the inclusion of secular television and movie clips remarkable in any way? The University of Ottawa website describes the study of identity and diversity within the field of communication as "the representations and communication challenges posed by "otherness" and diversity in an era of globalization and accelerated circulation of information". The purpose of this study is to explore the community of a small Canadian non-denominational church and its relation to larger culture. Developing a snapshot of this group of believers will garner observations useful in understanding other similar contemporary faith communities within Canada.

The pseudonym Greatest Commandment was chosen based on Matthew 22:36-40 wherein which an expert in religious law attempted to trap Jesus with the question, "What is the most important commandment?":

Jesus replied, "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments." (New Living Translation)

Loving God and loving others is of great importance to the community members of this faith community.

Research Questions

The central research questions addressed in this study are:

RQ1: What is the pattern of culture-sharing of the members of Greatest Commandment?

RQ2: How do participants describe their reasons for attending Greatest Commandment?

RQ3: How do participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment?

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to situate my thesis within the existing literature. I will cover the historical and present use of ethnography for examining religion, with particular attention paid to accounts of researcher co participation in the ethnographic encounter. I will provide an overview of the conceptual frameworks - practice theory, religious identity, everyday life, and communities of practice - that I use to study Greatest Commandment. I will also address the presence of media and popular culture within communities of faith. Finally, I will describe the lack of current ethnographies detailing the religious landscape of Canada and clarify what contribution this thesis makes to the existing research.

Ethnography and Lived Religion

Research on religious experience is shaped by the contributions of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner in the 1970s and 1980s (Tweed, 2002, p. 64). Clifford Geertz wrote in 1973 that “believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it... an interpretive one in search of meaning” (p. 5). These cultural anthropologists developed ethnographies by focusing on

religious ritual, symbols and thick description, expanding their interpretations outward to make suppositions regarding social structures and community norms (Michie, 2010).

A criticism of this interpretive move is that it stems from an elitist European viewpoint that privileges the ethnographer over the marginalized subjects, assuming that the ethnographer's insight is more profound than the subjects (Brodwin 2003; Ewing 1994; Hinson 2000). This "power inequality constrains ethnographic practice" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986, p. 8) and "acts as a barrier to participation and understanding" (Ewing, 1994, p. 578). Diane Goldstein provides another criticism specific to religious ethnographers by saying:

In the church, at prayer meetings, at religious ceremonies, we become frightened scientists hiding behind complex theories, narrow definitions, and sometimes even older notions of an irrational-but-quaint peasantry clinging to remnants of primitive thought and behavior. ... It is possible that, by doing so, we are avoiding personal cognitive dissonance (1995, p. 25).

Scholars have remarked on the resistance of anthropology to take religious experiences seriously (Bowie, 2002; Turner, 1992; Engelke 2002) and Katherine Ewing points out that the "abyss" between the ethnographer and their subjects is the result of the anthropologists "refusal to believe" in the supernatural (1994, p. 571). Within this study I traverse the abyss through my existing beliefs and participation in Greatest Commandment. I am not alone: some recent forms of research approach religious experience with a willingness to take believers descriptions and explanations seriously, and/or to be transparent about the researchers own religious identity. This evolution within ethnography is labeled by Tedlock as a new "co participation within the ethnographic encounter" (1991, p. 69) and is a form of autoethnography. Close personal connections are formed between the ethnographer and their subjects during research, and the

ethnographer's own life or beliefs become part of the storytelling. Robert Orsi calls this the study of lived religion and states that the researchers "most deeply held existential orientations and moral values are on display with an obviousness not found in earlier ethnographic or, especially, historical accounts" (Orsi, 1997, p. 18). This study adopts Hall's (1997) use of the term lived religion to describe ethnographical approaches to the study of daily life of believers (Hall, 1997, p. vii). Ethnographers who have engaged on this level include Brown (1991), Csordas (1994), Grindal (1983), Turner (1994), Turner, et al (1992), Ammerman (1987), and Michie (2010). This study seeks to join these ranks and contribute an account of lived religion within Canada.

The Habitus, Religious Identity, and Everyday Life

This section explains the conceptual foundations from which I approach this study, and gives background to its inception. I begin with a description of Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory called the *habitus* (italics are his). In attempting to create an accurate science of practice, Pierre Bourdieu claimed that the biggest obstruction is scientists themselves, loyal to their science, professing "the superiority of their knowledge, often won through enormous efforts, against common sense" (1990, p. 28). Bourdieu rejected the old dichotomies of social science, claiming that objectivism is insufficient in part because "all objectivist knowledge contains a claim to legitimate domination" (p. 28), and subjectivism is incorrect because not all practices are a result of calculating agents or "mechanisms external to the agents" (p. 50). Bourdieu argues instead for a conceptual framework that he terms the *habitus*:

The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes

of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (1990, p. 54)

Holland and colleagues developed a similar framework that aims to “move beyond two central approaches – the culturalist and the constructivist”. Holland terms this *history-in-person* and theorizes that one’s past experiences shape their present actions, allowing for improvisations due to present subject positions and cultural resources (Holland, 1998, p. 18).

This concept of moments arising from and built upon a history of distilled moments is a practice-centered approach to everyday life. It is necessarily fluid and complex, allowing for improvisations and explaining for continuities. Lived religion is well examined through this framework. David Hall writes that using a practice approach is fitting since practice suggests that constructions and conclusions about lived religions are tentative or temporary (Hall, 1997). Religious identity is not static or institutionalized. Individuals simultaneously belong to multiple communities, necessitating a complex interaction of behaviours and beliefs harvested from personal backgrounds, community and society, and divine experiences. An adequate interpretation of dynamic rituals and beliefs has to take into account the framework and relations between religious groups, sub-cultures and the larger culture (Becker & Eiesland, 1997).

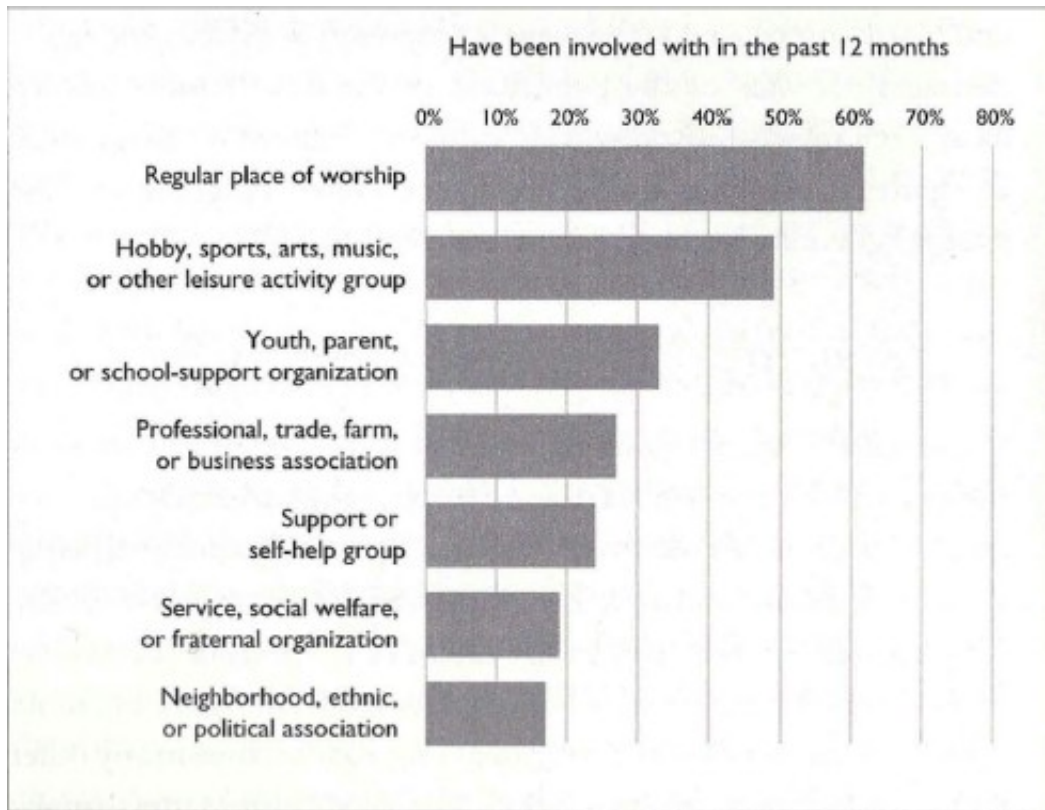
Lived religion will be constructed within this study through the pattern of culture-sharing among the attendees of Greatest Commandment. I define pattern of culture-sharing broadly to capture all observations relevant to “paint a picture of people going about their daily lives”, including their beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, values, social networks, use of tools, and communication (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 4). Having a basic understanding of the complex nature of everyday life inherent to the concept of the *habitus* will help the reader to

understand individual's religious identities as usually consistent over time yet fluid and malleable.

Community of Practice

Within this study, especially in the advanced analysis section, I frame Greatest Commandment as a community of practice. Etienne Wenger (1998) conceives of a community of practice as a specialized group wherein members share both a domain of interest and a practice, building relationships that enable them to learn from each other. All of us belong in varying degrees to multiple communities of practice: at home, at work, through hobbies. Learning, meaning-making and identity development occur as interrelated individual and collective processes within communities of practice. While learning is an outcome of these relationships, it does not have to be the primary reason for meeting (Wenger, 1998).

The associations in the figure below are all potential sites of learning communities. As shown in the figure, Americans participate more in church than any other type of association (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 30). This figure validates regular places of worship as important sites to study communities of practice. Framing congregations as communities of practice is a valuable contribution to literature: it gives scholars additional ways to analyze church participation (or lack thereof) and it gives pastors tools to help build meaningful practices. To frame Greatest Commandment as a community of practice gives us an additional lens through which to understand patterns of culture-sharing. Wenger's theory helps explain why Greatest Commandment is highly specialized and highly engaging.



SOURCE: FAITH MATTERS SURVEY, 2006.

Figure 1. Americans involvement in associations (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 30).

Use of Media within Christian Faith Communities

Some religions, like Hasidic Judaism, aim to keep their traditions virtually unchanged over centuries; other religions change over time. Christian religious practice continues to change, creating the need for continued study. Robert Orsi (1997) theorizes that changes within American religion have arisen from material circumstances in people's lives: the effects of industrialism, mass movement into cities, and corporate culture. Robert Orsi (1997) states, "material circumstances have been largely hidden in the study of American religious history" (p. 10). Also needing further examination by scholars has been the usage and influence of media within religious practice.

According to Communications theorist McLuhan, the introduction of new mediums has implications farther than their obvious uses. Shane Hipps (2005) reflects on these changes within the Christian church:

Because the medium is the message, our media revolutions—from the printing press to the Internet—have led to unintended changes in our message. Among them is a shift from a modern, individualistic, and highly rational concept of the gospel to a postmodern, communal, holistic, and experiential one... Like it or not, our theology and interpretation of Scripture have a long history of mirroring our forms of media. (Hipps, 2005, p. 88).

Not only has church practice been subtly changed by societal shifts and innovations but a more obvious aspect of media use is found within Greatest Commandment: the pastor of Greatest Commandment uses secular video clips to portray religious messages. My third research question asks, “How do participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment?” I seek to know what church members think about the presence of primarily secular popular culture video clips within their Christian faith community.

Media is affected by the religious lenses of both producers and viewers. Diane Winston (2009) applies the concept of lived religion to television studies, showing the ways in which television is a “discursive field that mediates contemporary issues of faith and values through character and narrative” even though the programming itself is primarily secular (p. 6). Stewart Hoover (1997) commented that since daily life now involves “interaction with the symbolic resources of the media sphere”, it should be no surprise that some of those symbolic resources are found to be religiously significant. Exploring how participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment fills a gap within scholarly research. Winston (2009) notes, “Whether in investigation of effects or of texts, reception or production, the notion

that there is a religious dimension to the experience of electronic entertainment has not received adequate attention from media scholars” (p. 428). Attending to the crossroads of popular culture and religion through the use of media within church gives input into the framework and relations between Greatest Commandment and larger culture (Becker & Eiesland, 1997).

Anthropologic Study of Christianity within Canada

To justify the necessity of this study, I will explain within this section the lack of anthropologic studies of contemporary Christianity within Canada. Although commonly grouped with the United States under the umbrella of North America, Canada has its own religious landscape. The differences started early: upon the founding of Canada, there was but a small sparse population, deep ethnic and lingual divides, and strong local identities. These diversities led to “a regular habit of negotiation and compromise rather than.... absolutism and conflict” (Farhadian, p. 143). These habits affected not only Canadian politics but religion. For example, Canada did not develop a religious right in the 1980’s and 1990’s like the United States (Malloy, 2011, p. 319). Lipset (1990) states “the differences between religion in Canada and the United States are large and clear-cut” (p. 88). Although there are studies of contemporary lived religion in the U.S., there is a paucity of studies on Canada’s own unique religious landscape.

How does one measure the prominence of a research topic such as contemporary Canadian Christian faith communities? Regna Darnell (1997) studied the prevalence of Canadian Inuit and Native anthropologic study through listing Canadian professors and their study specializations. Darnell’s technique involved searching through the American Anthropological Associations database for the listed research interests of anthropologists. Using this method, a search for “Christianity” brings up 21 professors worldwide. Of the 21 professors, only one professor, Pamela Klassen of the University of Toronto is studying Christianity within a

Canadian context, and her current interests are historically based. Others are studying Christianity in South Korea, the Philippines, Spain, Europe, Africa, Fiji, Japan, Latin America, and Native North America. This search only includes those interested in anthropology, and not those who may be addressing the topic from other fields such as theology, but it provides cursory input: there is a lack of ethnographic studies on Christian faith communities in contemporary mainstream Canada. Further searches of databases and journals uncover only a handful of contemporary Canadian Christian ethnographies, the most formative to this study being Paul Bramadat's (1997) ethnography of McMaster University's Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship.

The scarcity of Christian ethnography may be because the Christian religion is so commonplace as to be invisible or considered irrelevant to a scholarly world interested in the "other". Fenella Canell (2006) describes Christianity as both "the most tediously familiar and the most threatening of the religious traditions" for anthropologists. Susan Harding (1991) claims conservative Christians to be the 'repugnant cultural other' within anthropology. She found the academic world loathe to accept the importance of studying Christians. She argues that Christians should be studied with care and that Christianity is analogous to other minority positions like gender, sexual orientation, class, and race (Harding, 1991).

A large portion of the Canadian population identifies with Christianity: within the 2001 Census 72% of people reported denominational allegiances to Catholicism or Protestantism. Specifically pertinent to this study is the increase in those identifying simply as "Christian". The 2001 Census reports that this group has more than doubled during the last decade, and now represents two point six percent of the total population of Canada. Christians attending non-denominational churches would be in this category. This increase is one of the largest amongst all major religious groups (Religions in Canada, 2003). The study of the lived religion of these

“unspecified Christians” within Canada is needed to add to literature on the identity and diversity of this major demographic of persons.

CHAPTER TWO: Research site and methodology

Greatest Commandment

My research site lies in a quickly growing suburb of Ottawa. Typical of urban sprawl, there is a low level of diversity in housing and business types. Cookie cutter townhouses feel claustrophobic side by side and great empty plots of land are being prepared for even more.

Strip malls dominate. There is a disproportionately large number of children, and a lack of senior citizens.

In one of the newly developing areas of this suburb lies a Catholic school that houses Sunday morning meetings of a non-denominational religious group called Greatest Commandment. They gather in the school gymnasium for a service, setting up and tearing down all church paraphernalia in the same morning. The group believes that the church is not the building that they meet in, but the collective group of people who meet: they *are* the church. The pastor says that:

There is a fundamental misunderstanding that has taken place in the Western church over the last 1500 years or so – as people started building buildings that they felt could somehow represent the greatness of God, confusion came in, and people started to think of church as a building. One of the many reasons why we don't own a building is because we don't want to play into that confusion – “to go to church” means to join up with a group of people who are sharing a spiritual journey of growth and transformation – and we insist on that – it's not the stuff, it's not the space (thank goodness for all of that) – it's the people. (Coleman, 2012)

Who are these people? The chapters following will provide rich description of the diversity of this group, but here I will note some preliminary compositional generalizations. The group of people is not large – the size of the congregation ranges weekly from ten to thirty adults. The number of attendees has remained fairly stable over the lifespan of the church. Loren Mead (1993) comments that though many congregations may not grow in size, they are far from pointless, as there are different kinds of growth occurring *within* the congregations. Alice Mann terms this the *family-sized church* and comments that it operates as a social system akin to a biological family where everyone knows everyone else (1998). The large majority of attendees are white, middle-class, in their 30's, married, and with young children. There are a few university students that attend, and no seniors other than the occasional visiting parent. The plethora of young families is one of the defining features of Greatest Commandment. There are regularly more young children that attend than adults.

Attendee's come from various religious backgrounds. Many of them have a history of regular religious participation, having “grown up” in the church. Others have never attended church regularly before in their life. Religious backgrounds include such denominations as Lutheran, Anglican, Wesleyan, Mennonite, Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal. A few of the attendees went to Pentecostal Bible College but are not practicing ministers.

The leader and founder of this group is Pastor Keefe Coleman. Three additional couples make up the leadership team of Greatest Commandment which meets with Keefe and his wife. They function as a team supporting the pastor, and each person is a leader of a section of the church: music, children, finances, etc. They are all also similar in socio-demographics: white, middle-class, 30-40 years old and married with children. Other leaders within the church like leaders of Bible studies, special support groups, Sunday school teachers, musicians and worship

leaders are all church attendees who were either asked to help or volunteered their assistance. Volunteers cycle in and out of positions, as their changing life situations allow, keeping the church fluid and flexible – only the leadership team is constant.

Greatest Commandment was founded by Keefe out of love for his suburb, but it did not begin without birth pains. Keefe did not receive permission from the PAOC (Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada) to plant a church in his suburb. Keefe made the difficult decision to give up his credentials and denomination and seek other avenues through which to found a church. Keefe also had to start a career outside of the ministry, Monday to Friday, to provide for his family. Keefe eventually found the support he needed through a small network of like-minded non-denominational churches, and Greatest Commandment began.

Greatest Commandment's non-denominationalism creates an interesting research site: religious tenets are less prescribed and more fluid between attendees, with attendees of differing opinions on various subjects, and diverse worship practices incorporated by attendees of different religious backgrounds. In short, there is a 'salad bowl' of identities, making the focus on lived religion the most relevant lens through which to view the group. Within the main findings of this study, I move beyond this provisional description of Greatest Commandment to probe deeply into the lived religion of the attendees.

Approach and Rationale

The qualitative research design of narrative ethnography is used in this study to examine Greatest Commandment's culture. Narrative ethnography is a form of autoethnography that includes the ethnographer's experiences in the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of the culture under study (Tedlock, 1991). Autoethnography uses elements of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

John Saliba (1974) advises ethnographers of religion that “one does not look for religious beliefs and practices, but rather for ways of knowing and experiencing the world. The scholar therefore asks, how do people explain their daily experiences? What values are experienced and emphasized in their lives?” (p. 155). It was with this goal in mind that I collected and analyzed data. Throughout the study I quote many different attendees on topics that emerge as relevant to the community, attempting to let the voice of participants be heard. But quotes and even rich description can only give part of the picture, as minimization of individual differences will still occur. Mandelbaum (1973) comments on the discomfort this produces in the researcher, an acute awareness that something is missing: “his dear friends have been dissolved into faceless norms” (p. 178).

To contribute deeper richness to the main findings I find it necessary to provide a profile or life history of some of the attendees. These profiles give me confidence that the reader has been given all the tools possible to fully understand the community. I am not alone in presenting profiles or life histories; it is a research tool that has been used by a variety of scholars (Langness and Frank, 1981; Linde, 1993; Mandelbaum, 1973; Rosenwald, 1992; Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985; as cited in Bramadat, 1997).

When used within familiar territory, ethnography can be termed “backyard ethnography” (Smith & Watson, 1996) or “at-home ethnography” (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). Denzin’s (1997) definition of ethnography, which as Alvesson points out is an apt description for at-home ethnography, and I believe also an apt description for autoethnography, is “that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about” (as cited in Alvesson, 2009, p. 163). Since autoethnographic research relies heavily on the individual researcher collecting data and writing the report, it is essential for the

reader to have knowledge of the researcher's backgrounds, interests, assumptions, biases, and worldviews. Within the next section I present my role within the study.

Role of Researcher

I am an attendee of Greatest Commandment and a Christian. Within this study, Christianity is the primary ethnographic perspective that I use to discuss Greatest Commandment. I freely mention my own subject position throughout the study so that the reader can understand from where I write. The hope is that my own narratives, side by side with Greatest Commandment attendees, will combine to create a richness and depth to the autoethnography.

My perceptions of Greatest Commandment have been shaped by my personal experiences. From September 2007 to October 2012 I have been an attendee of Greatest Commandment. My uncle, Keefe Coleman, is the founder and pastor of Greatest Commandment. I participate fully in the community by volunteering as a daycare worker and Sunday school teacher, and I sustain relationships with attendees outside of church.

I believe that my involvement in the community has given me a deeper awareness of the patterns of culture-sharing. However, due to my emic perspective I bring certain biases to this study. Despite attempts to foster an etic perspective, my biases may shape how I understand and interpret data. As a Christian researching other Christians, the challenge is to step back from my own perspectives and allow the group members to express each of their own unique perspectives of the same matters. Reid (2006) describes the need in researching what you know to "problematize my own 'taken for granted' world view" (p. 150). To gain fresh insight I question my views. Alvesson states "the trick is to get away from frozen positions; irrespective of whether they are grounded in personal experiences or shared frameworks" (p. 167).

Despite a secular tradition within academia, Brian Howell (2007) argues there is no legitimate reason why one cannot openly hold beliefs and undertake ethnography. Brian Howell (2007) cites that both Katherine Ewing's (1994) and Matthew Engelke's (2002) articles argue "drawing a sharp line between 'belief' and conditions of ethnography as mutually exclusive is problematic, part of the modernist legacy of the discipline rather than any sort of intellectual or theoretical imperative" (Howell, 2007, p. 379). A researcher's Christian identity can function as a valuable ethnographic perspective. Howell argues that Christianity (and other religious positions) should be considered a valid subject position, much the same as feminism. They operate similarly from a moral/ethical commitment standpoint (2007, pp. 371-372).

My position as an active participant within Greatest Commandment has been conducive to research in several ways. For instance, I did not have to spend excess time gaining participant's trust; this was something that I had prior to research through naturally born friendships or mutual respect. Many people were willing to give interviews, and most with surprising depth and frankness. Marsha Michie (2010) fittingly describes the relationship between ethnographer and congregants in her ethnography of a Pentecostal church:

The term (engaged ethnography) implies a sense of collaborative openness on the part of the ethnographer and the people with whom she works; it also suggests ethical responsibility (including reciprocity), reflexivity, and a human connection that goes beyond that of scientist and object of study." (p. 20)

Importantly, my familiarity with the community meant that I had an empirical starting point (Alvesson, p. 162).

I also had insider access to a community that could be difficult to study by an outsider. For Christians, talking about faith to a non-believer is an opportunity to witness. Within

ethnographies of religion there are records of overt attempts by the participants to convert the researcher (McGuire, 1982; Harding, 1987; Palmer, 2006; Tweed, 2002), and at the least intentions to present themselves as good role models in the hopes of future conversion (Landres, 2002). This tension to convert the researcher or at least to present a positive picture would affect interactions and interviews.

There are also nuanced differences between how a believer talks with a believer versus a non-believer. William Shaffir (1991) records a Chassidic Jew in his study questioning Shaffir's personal interest in the religion. The Lubavitcher explains, "You see, if it is just for school then I can answer your questions one way. But if I know that as a Jew you are also interested in this, then I will answer your questions differently" (as cited in Landres, 2002, p. 106). As a Christian, I believe that attendees felt freer to include religious lingo, to talk about tensions and negative aspects of churches, and to share divine experiences with me.

Ethnographic Fieldwork and Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted from January 2011 to December 2011. Formal data collection included the following: observations, documents, and interviews.

Observations took place whenever Greatest Commandment members met together. This included Sunday morning services, smaller evening study groups, and informal gatherings such as baby showers and potlucks. I acted as an observing participant, engaging in the community whilst observing for research purposes (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). I relied on field notes and memory during events as this was less obtrusive than the presence of a tape recorder within conversations. I discretely took jot notes covering situations, and after the event I wrote out full notes. I recorded the event structures within time and space, behaviours, conversations and

interactions of the community members (LeCompte & Schensul, p. 128). For example, during Sunday morning services I recorded the number of attendees, the lay-out of the church, the physical places of attendees and their behaviours and conversations. I also took notes regarding the sermon, powerpoint slides used, media clips shown, and worship songs sung. Using Cresswell's suggestion I separated descriptive notes from reflective notes (2009, p. 181).

Documents collected include: the pastor's sermon notes from each sermon, web resources from the Greatest Commandment website concerning the vision and values of the community, and all email communications both formally from Greatest Commandment church and informally between attendees. Email communications both official and personal gave another method through which to study the shared pattern of beliefs, values and behaviours of church attendees (Edleman and Mandle, 2002). In total, 15 sermons, two sections of the Greatest Commandment website, and 172 emails were included in the document analysis.

Data was also collected through interviews. Through purposive sampling nine interviews were completed: eight church attendees and the pastor. I attempted to interview a diverse range of attendees: those who I viewed as being most typical of Greatest Commandment, as well as extreme cases and disconfirming cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Out of the church attendees, four were female and four were male. Three of them had grown up not attending church, and five of them had grown up regularly attending church. Two of them were in the leadership team and had been present from the first day of Greatest Commandment, two of them were new attendees, and four of them had been attending for a few years. Two of them were single, and six of them were married with children. The attendees covered a range of socioeconomic status from mid-level to high.

Interview protocol included standard interviewing procedure, ensuring consistency on behalf of the researcher (Cresswell, p. 183). Interviews were semi structured with open-ended questions, exploring their personal and collective religious histories and present experiences at Greatest Commandment. See Appendix C for the interview instrument. I purposely kept questions open-ended and broad so that attendees could guide their answers in whatever direction they thought appropriate. Through this method I searched for what was significant to the attendees themselves. Answers often led to conversations about different aspects of church, both at Greatest Commandment and in general at other churches. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, with the attendees determining the pace and essential content. An interview with the pastor covered additional topics pertaining to the history of Greatest Commandment, as well as the leadership and direction of the church.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis occurred throughout the research process: during data collection and the writing of the report. I used memos throughout the data collection and data analysis to help analyze what was happening, ask questions, record personal thoughts or emotions, and give directions for further research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110).

Raw data was organized and prepared for analysis, the data was read through, and then an inductive process began whereby items (whether events, behaviours or conversation topics) began to stand out due to repetition, rareness, or a lack thereof. No computer programs were used. Transcripts of the in-depth interviews, observations, sermon content and emails were studied for emerging patterns. As per LeCompte and Schensul (1999) I “engaged in a systematic inductive thought process that clumps together individual items at the specific level into more abstract statements about the general characteristics of those items as a group” (p. 68). Themes

and descriptions were interrelated and interpreted and then the structural level of analysis was completed with respect to the entire body of research (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

I shaped a narrative about Greatest Commandment attendees in their own words as much as possible. I include my voice alongside theirs, discarding the traditional invisibility of the researcher in order to “better communicate the substance of lived experience” (Ellis, 2004). This is my story as well as other congregants, and I invite the reader into the experience with us. The reader is then able to see for themselves similarities or dissimilarities between my experiences and those of other congregants (Ellis, 2004).

Trustworthiness

At-home ethnography is particularly susceptible to sensitivities and biases. The researcher may feel pressure to “express views that support one’s own interests and/or to be (more) sensitive about the respondents” when describing them (Alvesson, p. 166). To an extent this is a natural evolution within ethnographic co participation that privileges the rights and prerogatives of participants (Gobo, 2008). While this study does not go so far as to hand over the reins of research to the participants, I have attempted to represent the attendees of Greatest Commandment accurately and respectfully and sought member checks on the emergence of themes. To combat inaccuracy, I kept a detailed researcher diary. Observational notes were jotted down in brief during events and encounters and typed in full as soon as possible to ensure as much accuracy to details as possible. In tandem with observational notes I also recorded my own emotions and subjectivity, thoughts about data selection and strategy, and analytic memos of possible themes in the data and directions of research. The researcher diary was to aid my memory of events and thought progression, to guard against researcher biases and to add to my own level of self-awareness.

Another validity method used within this study is triangulation. Through collecting different data sources to create a richer dataset, the research has more scientific rigour (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 144). I employed observation, interviews, and material artifacts to construct a window into the community. The triangulation of different sources lends more strength to the study than relying on any one method only (Alvesson, 2009, p. 158).

Another challenge inherent to at-home ethnography is the “confusing complexity and blinding normality of everyday life” (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 104). Because it can be difficult if not impossible for a fish to describe the water around them, I had to find ways to combat this type of ignorance to raise the trustworthiness of my study. In order to make the familiar look strange and generate an etic perspective, I sought reflexive distance. During the writing stage of data analysis I visited different churches for Sunday morning services, writing observational notes on their practices, and by doing so was able to focus more clearly on what a stranger would find significant about Greatest Commandment. “In successive immersions and retreats, a fieldworker may move in and out of the field, creating distance through visiting different sites, studying new situations, and talking to the other parties involved” (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 111). Visiting other churches opened my eyes to both the variety and continuities that exist between churches in Ottawa. I became more aware of the lingo and customs of a contemporary church experience.

Another method of distancing is to preserve and cultivate any sense of surprise I had while observing (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 106). I used these moments of surprise as tools to dig deeper into the cultural differences that set apart Greatest Commandment from the larger culture. I also sought for these moments from other attendees through observations and interviews. Several of my interview questions asked about their “introduction and initiation” to

Greatest Commandment and “relating them to their experiences” at other churches, thus giving attendees a chance to remember their own epiphanies (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 107). I paid careful attention to include these moments in the data analysis, understanding their significance in setting apart and revealing the substance of Greatest Commandment.

Another validity method used was peer debriefing; to ensure this study made sense to those outside of Christian faith communities. I was fortunate to locate a peer debriefer outside the realm of the University of Ottawa and outside of Greatest Commandment: an unbiased third party who is regularly asked to peer review articles for scholarly journals. This person kindly edited and reviewed the study to ensure that the narrative would resonate with others (Cresswell, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were followed to ensure that participants were treated with proper care. Since I am an existing participant within Greatest Commandment steps were taken to ensure that my trust-based relationships with attendees did not result in coercion to participate. Interviewees were briefed on the nature of my research and their rights as participants to withdraw from the study at any time. Since religious identity can be a delicate topic, steps were taken to ensure the anonymity of participants through the use of pseudonyms, and the church as a whole remains anonymous. The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board granted an ethics certificate of approval for the research conducted in this study during the 2011 calendar year (Appendix G).

CHAPTER THREE: Main Findings

This chapter presents the results of the study of Greatest Commandment. Within the findings I balance my narrative of lived religion with more conventional social-scientific modes of analysis, interpretation, and theorizing (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). I have separated the results into thematic sections, each answering one of the study's research questions. I begin with a descriptive tour of a typical Sunday morning service. "Going to Church" is the most basic communal event, the hub around which all other activity revolves. Providing a basic understanding of the dynamics of this event, as well as a visual depiction of the surrounding environment, sets the stage for painting a more in-depth picture of this contemporary religious community.

Following the overview of a morning service, I present the theme "Belonging and Believing". "Belonging and Believing" answers the research question "How do participants describe their reasons for attending Greatest Commandment?" I give profiles of four Greatest Commandment attendees to breathe life into otherwise faceless community members, focusing on how their individual religious identities intersect with the collective. I then follow with an insider researcher perspective to show my own religious identity within Greatest Commandment. This section explains why, when analyzing the pattern of culture-sharing within this non-denominational church, it is not feasible to extend generalizations to shared beliefs.

The next section, "Building Community", answers the research question "What is the pattern of culture-sharing of the members of Greatest Commandment?" Herein lays the heart of Greatest Commandment: a support system of relationships built upon the common ground of raising and nurturing children. This is the strongest and most remarkable part of Greatest Commandment. There is a high value placed on children, and attendees go to great lengths to

support each other's families in a variety of ways. The result is a community where new babies are welcomed frequently.

“Being Relevant” is the final theme uncovered through data analysis. This section answers the research question “How do participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment?” I discuss how participants view and use media within church and how participants are repeatedly drawn to the concept of relevance. The importance of relevance appears throughout the community, within: the pastors preaching, the video clips and contemporary music, and events. I give a rich description of the 2011 Super Bowl Party to show how the church is permeable by larger cultural and contextual forces, and is therefore perceived as more relevant than more traditional religious institutions, in which services and other related activities tend to function more in isolation from such influences.

Going to Church

Outside of Greatest Commandment, a sign on the sidewalk invites people inside with the name of the church and “come on in, the coffees on!” Upon entering the Catholic school that houses the church, there is a banner hanging from the ceiling with “Greatest Commandment” written on it, letting everyone know that the school is for the moment repurposed. Visually upon entrance, other than this banner, the school still looks very much like a school. In the lobby and hallways, a mosaic of signs, symbols and pictures dominate expressing the Catholicism of the school (such as paintings of Mary the mother of Jesus) and student artwork (such as finger-painting and crudely written explanations by children).

Greatest Commandment paraphernalia is limited to the entrance lobby and consists of a table with coffee and snacks, a table with books that anyone can borrow, and a table with information about the various persons and organizations supported by financial donations. .

Some donations support a small clinic for the disabled in Africa; the contact is through two Greatest Commandment attendees who were missionaries in Africa themselves years ago.

Handfuls of people are bustling about with various tasks like setting up the coffee and snacks, preparing last minute Sunday school lesson changes, and taking care of children. There is no designated greeter, but attendees and new visitors usually get a hello from someone if not a full introduction and conversation. The congregation size is small enough that there is never any question about who is new, and a person would be hard pressed to try and slip in and slip out of Greatest Commandment anonymously.

Sunday morning service is assembled in the gym of the school and all of the church equipment has to be set up and taken down each Sunday. The weekly church set-up transforms an otherwise bare gymnasium to a place of worship through the addition of a band and their instruments, simple standing lamps for softer lighting, plastic plants to hide unsightly loudspeakers, four rows of ten blue plastic chairs, and a projector casting its light upon a room divider.

The Sunday morning service begins with music. The band begins to play an opening worship song. Attendees slowly trickle into the gymnasium when the music starts, chatting along the way. A four person band plays and one of the musicians leads the small congregation in song. A couple of upbeat contemporary Christian songs are sung, as well as “Lovers in a Dangerous Time” by Bruce Cockburn (1984). The band is amplified through loudspeakers, but you can comfortably hold a conversation without raising your voice. Lyrics are on PowerPoint slides projected onto the room divider behind the band. Peaceful nature scenes decorate the background of the lyric slides: a forest scene, a mountaintop, a castle by an ocean.

People usually stand as they sing. Attendees in general are not loud singers. Some sing, some hum along, and some stand quietly just watching the band or reading the lyrics. Anyone unfamiliar with church could attend without having to alter their behaviour to appear to belong – they could simply stand and observe and they would fit in well. A rare attendee will close their eyes in reverence or raise their hand in worship, but people are more apt to chat with each other. The atmosphere is relaxed and light hearted, and the worship is low energy. Most children turn to ask their parents a few questions during worship. One little boy sings loudly and off key. Spontaneous applause (or hoots or hollers) after a song occur rarely, and there is no clapping along with the music or dancing.

After worship songs there is a small prayer by the leader of the band, who prays a simple, personal prayer for God to help us focus on Him amidst the busyness of life, and then participants sit down. A Bible verse is read by a chosen attendee who reads from wherever they are seated. Pastor Keefe usually hands the verse to someone before the service begins, asking them if they would be willing to read it for him. The verse is also projected onto the screen; no one brings their own Bible, and the pastor never asks you to “turn to” a certain section of your Bible.

A clip from the TV show *House* is shown, and then announcements are read by one of the leadership team members. There is information about the upcoming Living Rooms which are Bible studies held within attendee’s homes, an upcoming Man-date for the Super Bowl, and there is a local park cleanup scheduled in the coming months. Laughter is shared over small mistakes in details that are made and immediately fixed during the course of announcements.

Announcements end with the “grocery deal of the week” which is “bottles of Pepsi for only 89

cents at Wal-Mart”. An attendee speaks up about a sale on pork, and someone else comments that now we can marinate the pork in the Pepsi.

There is a ten minute coffee break where everyone gathers outside the gym in the lobby for coffee and cookies. People take this opportunity to catch up with each other. Most people stand in groups of three or four during break. There is a mixture of light and general conversation between attendees, group discussions, or private conversations with confidants. Someone looks troubled as they share their problems with a friend. Conversations often center on children, housework, yard work, schoolwork, work-work, vacation plans, problems or politics. Children run into (or are shepherded into) a classroom for Sunday school.

Always too soon, as attendees enjoy this free moment of visiting, Pastor Keefe says “Let’s bring it in” and people trickle back into the gym for the service. Pastor Keefe keeps the atmosphere informal. No one calls him Pastor Keefe, just Keefe. Keefe does not use a microphone; he speaks loudly and clearly and has no need for artificial amplification. He sits on a three legged stool, dressed in casual attire and holds a sheaf of notes while talking. He does no walking back and forth, no great waving of his arms or asking for “amens”; although he does ask open-ended questions to attendees. Participation can also happen spontaneously; it is not uncommon for someone to crack a joke to Keefe that everyone laughs at. Whispered side conversations happen alongside preaching. Some people lean forward towards Keefe, some lean backwards in their chairs; hands and bodies are relaxed. One woman nurses a baby, another knits a baby blanket, and most attendees nurse a coffee.

Common themes within services include the values of Greatest Commandment which are: being reliant on God, being real with each other, being relevant to the world around them, being responsive to people and demonstrating God’s love, and reproducing faith. Keefe

commonly references aspects of life that would be familiar to the demographic attending, like taking care of children, being busy with work, and the use of Facebook.

Services end with a Take Home screen of a key thought or Bible verse and a picture of Chinese take-out. Keefe closes in a simple brief prayer using no religious lingo or phrases. Attendees rise and start chatting to one another, stacking the chairs and putting away sound equipment. The coffee dispenser is emptied and washed out, the library of books anyone can borrow from is stacked away, and the donations are all put in a ledger. Children are released from Sunday school and they start darting into the gym, running and laughing. They go into the empty side of the gym and start taking out school gym supplies, playing with basketballs and pool noodles and rubber chickens.

After cleaning up, chatting, and promising trades of baby equipment or future dinner parties, family by family the attendees head home. The church slowly folds up and vanishes, leaving an empty Catholic school ready for children on Monday.

Belonging and Believing

So why bother? Why keep going to church? Why are you and I here this morning? Why are we coming every week? Why do we set things up? Why do we tear things down? Why do we get up in the morning to come here? We could be reading the newspaper, we could be jogging, we could be drinking coffee. Why do we organize, why do we attend, why do we keep things going? It seems like a lot of work. There are many answers to that, but for me, the answer is . . . this idea that when we come together, we're more than we are separately, because not only - depending where you're at in your spiritual journey - is God with you, but when we're together, there's just this incredible focus it seems that He is able to do so much more. (Coleman, 2012)

Differences in Spiritual Journey

The research question “How do participants describe their reasons for attending Greatest Commandment?” is central to understanding the community of Greatest Commandment. This is not a question I am alone in asking; the quote aforementioned is from Pastor Keefe Coleman during a Sunday morning service in 2012. This section answers this research question and also explains why when analyzing the pattern of culture-sharing within this non-denominational church, it is not feasible to extend generalizations to shared beliefs.

Within communities of faith people gather to hear a central figure confirm and expound on tenets of faith that one would assume most people attending agree with, or else they would choose to go elsewhere. Yet this assumption of belief homogeneity is problematic. Morgan (2005) states that

For any approach to the study of religion that regards it as a set of practices more than a set of teachings, the English word *belief* is problematic. A belief or the act of believing

understood as assent to a proposition is unequal to conveying the complexity and lived experience of religion. (p. 6)

Beliefs are highly individualized and there can be stark differences and subtle nuances between the beliefs of attendees. There are multiple possible reasons one chooses to attend a church including community support, family obligations, or because of friendships. Attending for any of these reasons or numerous others are all possible without sharing any kind of belief system. Attending church and even believing in God are not synonymous.

My own father attended a Pentecostal church regularly with my mother and me without sharing any Pentecostal beliefs. For ten years he was a regular church-going atheist. He sat unbelieving in a pew out of family obligation. He didn't sing any worship songs, and most Sundays he fell asleep during the sermon. My mother would only elbow him if he started to snore.

Faith is commonly talked about within Greatest Commandment as a path or journey toward God. It is viewed as a continuum, with people at different stages, and that this is "okay"; it is not necessary for everyone to share the same beliefs. Within the quote at the beginning of this section you can see that Pastor Keefe also references this idea in his sermon by saying "depending where you're at in your spiritual journey". Out of respect for the different stages of the journey, I do not call congregants believers throughout this study, but simply attendees.

One of the values of Greatest Commandment is to be "real", and the church website expounds that there are "no perfect people allowed", and reassures visitors that no matter who they are, what they've done or what they've gone through, there is a place for them at Greatest Commandment. This corresponds to the Bible verse Mark 2:17 wherein Jesus said "Healthy people don't need a doctor--sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are

righteous, but those who know they are sinners." The word sinner is not in vogue, it could be construed as offensive and repelling whereas the phrase "no perfect people allowed" displaces the condemnation onto those who would judge. The phrase extends Jesus' invitation from 2000 years ago into our contemporary society. For Amy an attendee of Greatest Commandment, the part of church that excites her the most is,

Seeing people come to church who don't have a church background, or who have been totally turned away from the church. To see them start a new connection with God... That's the most - that's what it's all about" (Amy, 2011).

Amy also conceded however that "We need Christians to make church work too, right? If you just have a whole lot of people who don't believe, it doesn't work" (Amy, 2011). Within the congregation of Greatest Commandment, there is a mixture of those who are just starting (or perhaps haven't even started) their "journey toward God", and those who have "grown up in the church" and been Christians their whole lives.

To attempt to lump together such a disparate group of people under any umbrella of belief is problematic. Most attendees may share commitment to the community but beliefs vary between individuals. Herein lays a difficulty with ethnography. Ethnographic analysis requires the researcher to synopsise and condense experiences and people into manageable forms to be communicated. Some of the most interesting idiosyncrasies are ironed out of people in order to be generalizable on the broader scale necessary for ethnography (Bramadat, 1997).

For this reason, I find it necessary to present four profiles of Greatest Commandment attendees. By reading the narratives of these members, you can see the storylines of their lives that they have created, and how their past experiences inform their present choice to attend Greatest Commandment, thus answering the research question "How do participants describe

their reasons for attending Greatest Commandment?” You can also see where they sit on a continuum of belief, from unbelief to devout practice. These profiles show the complex relationship between individual religious identities and collective religious identity.

It is impossible to profile any one person as “typical” of a community. Truly no one person is capable of embodying a whole, which is why there is the need to represent diversity. But, I have done my best to sample from a range of attendees. I chose to profile two women and two men. Two of the women grew up in the church, and although their life stories contain similarities, there are interesting differences. The two men both have no previous experience with church, yet one has recognized God’s voice speaking to him and the other is uncertain. Most attendees of Greatest Commandment could find similarities between themselves and at least one of the profiles presented.

Each profile is necessarily small as I am specifically interested in how their individual religious identities intersect with the collective. A full life history would be outside the scope of this autoethnography. I am content that you, the reader, would share in the knowledge of their religious upbringing, what brought them to Greatest Commandment, the decision-making process to attend, and how the attendees shape their narrative of how, and why, they attend Greatest Commandment. This will give deeper insight into the histories, thoughts, and motivations of individual people within this community; not to represent a whole, but as a method of thick description.

All of these explanations occurred after the interview question: “How would you describe the experience of being a member of Greatest Commandment?” It is interesting to note that these respondents felt the need to reference their own *history-in-person* without being prompted. This showcases Holland’s theory of *history-in-person* wherein which one’s past experiences

shape their present actions, allowing for improvisations due to present subject positions and cultural resources (Holland, 1998, p. 18). Within the following sections, you will see how each person's *history-in-person* invariably affects their reasons for attending Greatest Commandment.

Amy

Amy is a member of the leadership team of Greatest Commandment. She is one of the Greatest Commandment attendees who grew up in the church. This does not mean she has attended Greatest Commandment her whole life; “growing up in the church” is one way Christians typically describe a childhood of regular church attendance, wherever they attended. Amy attended a Lutheran church with her parents until she was nine or ten years old until her family began attending a large Pentecostal church in Ottawa, of which she remained a member until she went away to the University of Toronto.

Amy became part of an exciting “church plant” (the beginning of a church) in Toronto, which started out with attendance as low as 50 people, but a few years later had up to 1000 people attending. This experience played a “huge part” in her getting involved with the planting of Greatest Commandment, as Keefe “recogniz(ed) us (her and her husband) as people he would want to have involved in starting up a new church, because we both had that experience of being involved in something from the start” (Amy, 2011).

Amy explains that it was this history of church planting and the experience of this type of church that made her interested in Greatest Commandment:

...It also made me really interested in being involved in a church that was relevant to its current environment, and that had that community feel. Where, you know the other people who you go to church with, and if someone's not there, you miss them, and you ask why they're not there. Or you give them a call during the week to make sure things

are okay and you hang out with some of those people outside of church too. So, I think that was really why (we began attending Greatest Commandment).

It's funny though, when Keefe asked us if we would consider being involved, it was the furthest thing from our mind, and it took us a really long time, I think it probably took us six months before we gave him an answer. I don't think he thought it was going to be that difficult for us. It *was* difficult for us, because I grew up, and I had been at a church in Ottawa for like 15 years, my family was there, and I knew, or suspected that there was going to be some controversy in starting up Greatest Commandment, so I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved in that.. but I really just felt like I was lost in the crowd (at the church I grew up in). I was still having people come and ask me, "Oh, you're home from University for the weekend". And I'd been there for three and a half years. It was just so big, people had no idea. So, I think that's why we got involved in Greatest Commandment. (Amy, 2011)

Amy views her past experiences at the church she grew up in as having a central role in the reason she now attends Greatest Commandment. Her beginnings at Greatest Commandment arise out of endings at other churches, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Like most periods of change, it was not without conflict, both internally and externally. The external controversy Amy references was the fact that the PAOC was not sanctioning Keefe to start a new church in Ottawa.

The internal conflict Amy experienced was because changing churches can be a difficult decision. There is stability and comfort (and potentially boredom) in the known, and uncertainty and fear in the unknown. There are many factors that combine to create "church" – the individuals attending and their beliefs, values, and attitudes, the pastor, the structure of the

service, the tone and style of sermon delivery, the location, the scale, the music, the childcare, the list goes on and on. One term used to describe the search for a church that fits the individual is “church shopping”, an insight into the consumer mentality that can shape the search. It can be difficult for a believer to find a church to call home, and once they finally find a church that resonates with them, they can become deeply attached. So for what reasons would a believer think about leaving a church they attend regularly? Michie (2010) observes that

Dissatisfaction with some aspect of a church pushes believers to consider leaving, but it must either be strong enough to outweigh other factors that keep them in the church, or combine with a pull toward something else in order for them actually to uproot themselves and make a move. (p. 142)

This description matches the concept of *history-in-person*: that one’s past experiences shape their present actions, allowing for improvisations due to present subject positions and cultural resources (Holland, 1998, p. 18). As Bourdieu said about the *habitus*, it is a product of history and produces more history based on repeating schemes, which tends to create a constancy over time (1990, p. 54). There must be significant factors present, either inner conflict and/or outer impetus to produce change.

In Amy’s case, she did not have an existing dissatisfaction with her old church so the decision was very difficult for her. The first impetus to leave presented itself in the form of the invitation from Keefe. In Amy’s words, leaving the church was “the furthest thing from our mind”. Her *habitus* at her old church shaped her present actions and her desire to continue attending.

Amy was asked by Keefe to join his church and have an integral part of Greatest Commandments beginnings through participation in the leadership team. However, Amy had

emotional ties to the church that she had grown up in. She was happy where she was, she had 15 years of experience there, and her parents still attended there as well. The process of deciding to leave took six months for Amy, during which time she closely examined the collective identity of the church she attended and her own desires. Amy found a disconnect through her examination: a lack of close personal relations because of the large size of the church.

The catalyst came about when she had people comment that she was “home from University for the weekend” when in fact she had finished University and been attending the church regularly for three and a half years since then. This created the dissatisfaction that, combined with the pull from Keefe, was enough to cut ties at her old church and embark on a becoming part of a new collective religious identity with Keefe.

Amy detailed that she was interested in a church where she would have close relationships with the other attendees. This is in sharp juxtaposition from her old church in which she could go unnoticed for years. Amy’s narrative of her experience at her old church is an important insight into why she currently attends Greatest Commandment, and what factors shape and influence decisions about changing churches.

Another factor that drew Amy towards Greatest Commandment was to “be involved in a church that was relevant to its current environment, and that had that community feel.” She wanted to be “investing more in a church that is having real impact on real people, outside of the Christian club.” The Christian club is a fictitious term created by Amy to describe what she saw within her old church:

(It was) a church centric or Christian centric organization, and as much as it was great at (my old church) to have all sorts of programming, no matter what your age level was, or your background, there were groups for people going through divorce, and people going

through family struggles, they had life groups for all sorts of things, and that was all really great, but it was all focused on the people already in the church. Granted, those people have needs, and you need to meet those needs, and if you have a church that's, you know, all those people coming out of broken families, you need to have support groups for those people. And, I can't say that there was never *anything* going outside into the community, but there wasn't a lot. I wanted to be involved in a church that was more about reaching out to people that weren't already in the church. (Amy, 2011)

This was the second area of dissatisfaction that she found during her examination of her old church. Amy viewed Greatest Commandment as appealing because of Keefe's commitment to reaching those people who did not go to church. This is a common commitment of Christianity – Jesus “came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). This next passage details the present reality at Greatest Commandment for her, explaining what her Sunday morning experience is like:

So, for us, I think the experience is about having a church service and connecting with God in some way, and it's also about connecting with people in a meaningful way. That said I find that difficult to do sometimes on Sunday mornings because there's so much setting up, or tear down, or getting ready for music, or whatever going on, that it's not as easy as I would like it to be, but, I think that in a lot of cases the relationships are there, and so the connecting is able to happen outside of Sunday morning as well. . . .

So I guess my Sunday morning experience is a mix, because I'm usually fairly heavily involved every Sunday morning, there's a big mix of running around doing the prep stuff, and getting the set up, and the logistical side, and then during the actual service there is a

chance to connect to God, and probably one of the times that I do that more than other times, is when I'm singing... I think for me, singing is a good time for me to connect, I'm done the practicing that needs to be done, so once it comes to the time to lead other people in song, I'm able to really focus in and have that sort of God moment. It's a mixed experience. There's logistical stuff, there's connecting with God, and as much as possible, connecting with people. (Amy, 2011)

Amy considers connecting to other attendees to be an integral part of her Sunday morning experience, a goal which can be difficult to attain because of her duties setting up and tearing down the church each Sunday. Connecting is important to her since one of the main reasons she left her old church was because of a disconnect between herself and other members. However, she reasons that if she does not have time to connect meaningfully during a Sunday morning service, those relationships also continue outside of church and she can connect at other times.

Connecting with God is a term used by Amy to describe the process of communicating with God or being in tune with Him. She finds that while she is singing worship songs she is able to have "that sort of God moment", where she experiences God. Other Greatest Commandment attendees have also discussed similar moments of connecting with God. A "God moment" could be a variety of things depending on specific circumstances but in general it could include such things as feeling close to God, feeling God is close to you (which translates into a kind of physical comfort or peace), feeling in touch with God, talking to God, listening to God, feeling God is giving you a message or speaking directly to you, praising and worshiping God, having a joyful soul because of God, complaining to God, or asking for forgiveness from God. A God moment could be any one of these or a combination of many of these.

Amy's narrative of her *history-in-person* including her reasons for leaving her old church and coming to Greatest Commandment is significant to her religious identity. Understanding how a Christian constructs, conceives of and maintains their religious identity and their relation to the collective identity is an important part of lived religion.

Heather

Heather is another member of the leadership team of Greatest Commandment. I chose to profile her because her story is similar to Amy's and yet her religious identity is unique in different ways. Coincidentally she also had an experience with a church plant (a new church) in Toronto. Her experience in Toronto gave her a love for churches just beginning which contributed towards her being part of Greatest Commandment.

Different times I would hear "There's a new church starting, here or there", and I used to say to Jeff (her husband), oh why don't we go check that out, but he was very content with where we were, and we were both involved, so we never did. Then one day Keefe and Jessica invited us over, and Keefe kind of like, pitched the whole, we're going to start a church in this suburb, and would you guys be interested in helping out? And so we said we would think about it. And when we got in the car, Jeff's like, I know you want to say yes already! (Laughter) And I'm like, no... it has to be a decision that both of us are going to be happy with. So, he thought about it, and yeah, so that was kind of how that started. (Heather, 2011)

Unlike Amy, Heather had an existing dissatisfaction with the church she was attending. Heather explains that her experience in Toronto altered her tastes:

When I moved to Ottawa I started attending (a church), and I did enjoy it, but I kind of felt that the experience in Toronto had kind of moved me in a way... And it was really good. And the church that I had gone to in Toronto was small (versus the church in Ottawa she attended was large). (Heather, 2011)

Heather expressed a desire to her husband Jeff to explore new churches starting up in Ottawa, but Jeff was “content” at the large church they attended in Ottawa. Between her husband’s wishes and the fact that they were both involved in the church, Heather’s nagging dissatisfaction never outweighed the factors keeping them in the church.

When Keefe invited them to help him begin Greatest Commandment, Heather knew instantly that she was interested. For Heather, this was exactly what she had been waiting for, and she was ready and willing to leave her church for the opportunity. True to Michie’s (2010) observation that dissatisfaction combined with a pull to another church causes change, it was these two factors that drew Heather and Jeff to Greatest Commandment. For Heather, the reason she attends Greatest Commandment is tied to her past participation at a similar church in Toronto. She “missed what I had before” (Heather, 2011).

Heather is familiar with a variety of church experiences as a devout Christian attendee who has been raised in church from birth. Heather comes from a family of pastors. After high school she attended Pentecostal Bible College and received her degree in theology and was a licensed minister for a time. Now, she is a stay at home mom of three whom occasionally guest speaks at Greatest Commandment.

Heather attends church because she defines her religious identity as Christian. When did this self-identification start? Heather describes how she remembers the exact moment she asked Jesus into her heart. She was 4 or 5 years old, and colouring a page her mother had given her that

showed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. She said that after hearing her mother describe the Bible story to her, wherein which Adam and Eve disobey God, she realized that she had also made bad decisions and needed to be forgiven. It was there that she “asked Jesus to forgive me and come into my life”.

This is the method whereby a person is transformed from a sinner into a Christian. While not a magical panacea (although some people experience instant solutions or release from any manner of difficulties) this is generally conceived as a major point in the journey towards God. This prayer of forgiveness and asking Jesus into your heart or life is what most Christians consider to be the key to salvation. After praying “the sinner’s prayer” you are “saved”. Christians also reference this moment as being born again. My father, previously an atheist, celebrates the day that he was saved as his new birthday. He will tell anyone who will listen that he is “six years old” this year.

When asked how Heather would describe the experience of being a member of Greatest Commandment, she replied:

Well, I love it, I really enjoy it, I enjoy being connected with, kind of knowing everybody, I find I can know everybody, but with that I would never be opposed to it growing, it’s not like I want it to stay at 30 people, but, I must say I do enjoy the fact that I know everybody and everyone’s name and all that...

What it means for me on Sunday or during the week: being committed to going and doing things where I kind of fit. I’m probably really influenced by how I grew up, we always attended church but we were always involved, we didn’t ever just go. Even, how you know sometimes people say ‘Well just do what your strengths are’, well that never passed in my family, you did what was needed, even if it wasn’t what you always wanted

to do, or where you thought, ‘This is what I love to do’, you kind of have to do things for a time just so that it can be done. That in effect is what I do, I do things that I might think, I don’t want to do this all the time, but, I see a need (and I do it). (Heather, 2011)

Similar to Amy, Heather also has duties and responsibilities as part of the leadership team. Her attitude towards her duties shows how her individual religious identity shapes her relationship with the collective religious identity. Since Heather grew up within a family of pastors, she was instilled with an attitude of servitude whereby she is willing to volunteer in whatever way needed, even to her own discomfort. This runs counter to our larger cultures focus on personal happiness and self-fulfillment.

For Heather, church is busy. Getting out the door with her whole family on a Sunday morning can be hectic, and sometimes she may feel more like staying home than setting up at church. But she does it anyway, and “by the end I say it was good to have been here, it was good to have done this”. For Heather, involvement in the church is tied to her religious identity in complex ways; being raised as the daughter of a pastor. She believes that being a Christian is not about how much she reads her Bibles or prays, but more about “living out, not just reading it, but living that out, all aspects, because Jesus was with the people”. She enjoys that at Greatest Commandment she “feel(s) like I have a good group of people around me that I can count on, I can call on, and that they can do the same for me”. She enjoys knowing everyone within the small community. Heathers initial reasons for attending were to do with her positive past experience at a church plant: her reasons for continuing to attend circulate around her sense of duty and sense of belonging.

Patrick

Patrick, a man with no previous history of church attendance, also attends Greatest Commandment. Patrick is Pastor Keefe's coworker, and Patrick described an interest in "this thing that Keefe's got going on". Patrick describes this as "kind of odd, to put that onus on Keefe as opposed to searching for God, or however you want to put that, but to me it wasn't about searching for God, that way" (Patrick, 2011). Patrick was intrigued by Keefe's character:

(He) sparked an interest in me; he was happy and everything seemed to be going well, even though you could tell things weren't going well, but he always seemed to have some inner spark or drive or guidance or something, because obviously some times were pretty tough and not good but he was always upbeat and positive. (Patrick, 2011)

The initial stimulus for Patrick's attendance was the same as Amy and Heather: Keefe invited him. Beyond this similarity between these attendees, there are vast differences in religious upbringing and religious identity. People like Amy and Heather can seem intimidating to some who may have grown up with no church background. When I asked Patrick where he fits into the puzzle of Greatest Commandment, he had this to say:

That part I'm still trying to figure out, if I do fit. There are times that I question that – do I fit? Because others that are involved in the church, not naming names, are good people, and come from good stock, and I .. where do I fit in, or I wasn't there, or I haven't had that. There has been in the past, let's say, eight months, where I did a little bit of a recoil in my own faith, or my own thought process of what was going on at Greatest Commandment, was I really meant to be there? Am I really going to fit? Because these people come from, and this seems to be the majority of the members of the church there,

come from some form of religious background, you know, formal or not, they all went to church, they all went to Sunday school, or it seems that way anyhow. But, I was like, these are good people, do I fit in with good people? That was a bit of a hiccup in my path... Do I belong, do I fit? (Patrick, 2011)

Learning about the people that Patrick went to church with caused him to doubt his own presence at Greatest Commandment. He began to feel like he might not belong in the “Christian club”; a term that Amy used for her old church but that seems fitting for Patrick’s feelings at Greatest Commandment during his time of extrospection and introspection. To Patrick, it seemed like most of the people had backgrounds vastly different from his own. He analyzed his own individual religious identity and wondered if and where it fit with the collective. Does a history of church attendance mean that the others are in some way fundamentally different from him? Better? Do shared histories of Sunday school, Bible camps, worship songs, and family friendships mean that Patrick does not belong as well?

This is another way in which an individual’s religious identity intersects with a collective religious identity: the collective provides a window through which an attendee peers, attempting to see not only the others, but themselves. The attendee needs to be able to imagine themselves as belonging amidst the collective. Sometimes this process could be instantaneous as when people attend a church only once and make an instant judgment about the fit between themselves and the church, or this process could be drawn out as in Patrick’s case where someone begins to have second thoughts.

Patrick’s feeling of estrangement could have resulted in dissatisfaction that would ultimately draw him away from Greatest Commandment. Patrick however had some resolution in his thought patterns:

I persevered in the church anyway, like I go to see if there was something that was going to really stand out, but you know, during break, or after and beforehand, you're talking to people, and these are good people, but really I'm a good person, I try to be a good person, the best I can, and what makes them any better than I am? (Patrick, 2011)

Patrick continued to attend and analyze the other attendees: their attitudes, behaviours, and values, seeking any large discrepancies between the others and him. Patrick decided that he was more similar than different. They were good people but he was also a good person. He was able to see his individual religious identity as fitting with the collective – he changed his perceptions of himself of “not good enough” to “as good as they are”. His self-doubt was replaced with newfound confidence. Patrick felt that God could have been talking to him throughout this process.

So what, that God is speaking to me, like, don't go off this path, stay with Me, and I'll guide you through this, or whatever, could very well be, I don't know. I went to this quite open, but also... not 100% committed. I had told Keefe that right off the bat, you know he said well come and if it works for you, it works for you, if it doesn't, it doesn't matter, it has to work for you. And I went into that, thinking, and we both did (my wife and I), that we were at a point in our lives where we wanted to reconnect with something, and reconnect is an appropriate word. We didn't know where we wanted to go... so I said, well we'll try this, but it doesn't mean I'm going to be Christian. I could be Buddhist, or whatever, at this point in time, it's just the path I'm choosing to take, and I say choosing, because it is a decision to go this route, and if I feel that it's not working for me, then I may explore other religions, or other roots or whatever. But as it stands

right now, it's relevant, it keeps me interested, it keeps me intrigued, I want to come back for more, and find out more about it. (Patrick, 2011)

Patrick had limited experiences with religion growing up, only being brought to church on special occasions or if his grandmother was visiting. Patrick's religious identity is therefore in the beginning stages of construction and very malleable. He does not have an existing religious *habitus*, so he feels free to choose from all religions. He describes it as a conscious decision to try walking this path and if he becomes dissatisfied then he feels free to explore other religions. Patrick's reluctance to label himself as Christian is an important point to remember: there is a wide range of diversity among the beliefs of the attendees of Greatest Commandment. As Fenella Cannell notes, "Christianity does not always and equally convert people to the idea of conversion" (2006, p. 28). The reason Patrick gives for attending is that it is relevant to him, it keeps him interested and wanting to learn more (about Christianity) and that he and his wife wanted to reconnect with something. Patrick says that going to Greatest Commandment "puts me in a good place, a good feeling, (it gives me) a sense of community, which I think is really strong" (Patrick, 2011).

Henry

Henry, like Patrick, did not grow up in the church. Henry only had a handful of experiences with church, which he describes here:

Sunday school a couple times as a kid is all I can remember. Weddings and funerals. That was always tougher. You only came in to celebrate or you want me to be sad. Really, to get anything more out of that, I had no idea. And like I said, the story itself, of God, Jesus, Joseph, Mary, I didn't get it.

You know, when your friends make fun of the fact that you're standing in a wedding "oh you're going to burn up as soon as you go through the church doors" you know what I mean? Like that kind of stereotyping. Not that I was ever a bad person, morally and ethically, my values were always pretty on board with how they should be or how they're acceptable in society and everything else, my parents taught me the difference between right and wrong. But as far as a religious background goes, I never had it. If there was a guy who was going to have fun to the extreme, it was me. Whether it be partying, or whatever else. (Henry, 2011)

Henry reveals an ignorance of all narratives and precepts inherent to Christianity. With almost no religious background whatsoever, Henry is a complete blank slate. Why would Henry be interested in attending Greatest Commandment when he has no previous *habitus* of church attendance?

I thank Michelle and Chris every time I see them almost for introducing me to Greatest Commandment. Because I mean, Michelle has known me for over ten years. And knew that I needed something and never knew how to approach me... I told her, I need something, and she's like, I think I have something for you. They invited me out, and the timing was perfect. I think three or four years sooner there's no way I would have went. (Henry, 2011)

Henry went through a series of difficult situations that brought him to a very low place in his life. He suffered death in his family, the divorce of his wife, and financial ruin. These unfortunate events changed his perspective from self-sufficiency to seeking "something", similar to Patrick's wanting to reconnect with "something". This process of change created an

opportunity for improvisations to his normal existence. The stimulus to attend church came in the form of Michelle and Chris, a couple from Greatest Commandment; they invited him to attend.

Attending Greatest Commandment was one way Henry started seeking a religious identity – another is that Henry developed a relationship with Keefe outside of church. Henry would meet Keefe at a restaurant to discuss life and God, and he found it therapeutic. Keefe encouraged Henry to pray, explaining that there is no wrong way to do it or certain words you have to say, you just have a conversation with God.

Henry had a divine moment early on when he first began attending church. One Sunday Keefe asked attendees if anyone had ever had God speak to them; Henry said he wanted to tell his story but his “wall shot up right away”. Henry shared his story with me: One day early in the summer Henry took off in his boat from his cottage on the lake. He was alone, and it was a cold cloud-covered day. He drove the boat to the middle of the lake, shut it down, and began to pray.

I’m out there, and I’m having my conversation, and I’m sitting in the bow of the boat and hands on my legs and I’m kind of looking down and I’m talking to him, and I was very emotional and very upset, just asking for the strength to get to where I want to go and help the people I want to help and be a proud husband again be a proud father stuff like that, make my parents proud of me, not that they haven’t been... but you know, to do that... You know you need a good cry once in awhile, and I was like, ‘Just give me a sign that things are going to be alright’.

And the sun opened up, *like that* (Henry snaps his fingers). It was within thirty seconds, so to me, like, what can you do? It was overwhelming, like goose bumps. There was a bit of a breeze, but the sun opened up, and when you looked around, there was still cloud

cover everywhere. And the chrome on the boat was shining, and the boat was shining, I mean honestly you can't tell how far the sun was around the boat, I looked back at the island and back at the mainland (and it was dark), and I just laughed, and I started the boat. But it was overwhelming in such a positive way.

And I do it now almost every time I'm at the cottage. It doesn't matter what we did the night before, I'll get in the boat and I'll just go for a boat ride and that's my chance to pray, and just have my talk with Him. Whether it's a pep talk, whether it's just hearing myself say things that I don't want to say out loud to anyone in particular, that's it. Yeah, it was awesome, and I really wanted to share that story with people, I just didn't know how. (Henry, 2011)

Henry uses none of the language that someone who has grown up in the church might use. He never mentions 'conversion', 'committing his life to God', 'giving his heart to Jesus', 'becoming a Christian' or any other specific phrase that might signify a decision to 'follow God'. Yet, something is happening here. Aware of this, Henry says "I feel like I'm approaching a crossroads, in terms of my journey spiritually." He has experienced God speaking to him. Henry also expressed an awareness of God's presence throughout his life history by saying:

And I know He looked out for me in my life, I know that there are things that have happened where I could have easily ended up in a lot of serious trouble... Like he's always been there for me and stretched me to my max and let me come back a bit. And now he's stretched me to my max but in such a positive way. (Henry, 2011)

Despite having no religious background, Henry perceives that God has had a hand in his life and protected him in the past. Looking to the future, the biggest desire Henry expressed was

for his girlfriend to attend Greatest Commandment with him. He describes his girlfriend as having very bad experiences with church in the past. His girlfriend agreed to attend church with Henry for the Christmas service, and Henry describes it as the best Christmas present he could have gotten. He prays that she will start coming with him on Sunday, because “I don’t want to have the communication breakdown like it did in my marriage. I don’t want to go through that again” (Henry, 2011). Henry views the church and by extrapolation a relationship with God as a possible tool to help cement their relationship. Henry’s reasons for attending Greatest Commandment are tied in with his spiritual journey. He is becoming more aware of the presence of God in his life and he is interested in learning more (Henry, 2011).

Insider Researcher Perspective

In this section I will explain my background, and my own moral and ethical commitments and conflicts uniquely due to my subject position as Christian. I will also profile my religious identity and how it intersects with the collective religious identity of Greatest Commandment. This section will give my reasons for attending Greatest Commandment.

I grew up regularly attending a mid-sized Pentecostal church in a small city. My history of regular church attendance and involvement means that within this autoethnography I often use classic Christian jargon. This terminology is often exchanged between attendees of Greatest Commandment who also grew up in the church. It is a secondary nature, part of our language. I include explanations of terms and sayings as much as possible.

I went through a rebellious phase as a teenager: smoking, drinking, cavorting around late at night, and not attending church or continuing a close relationship with God. I never stopped believing in God and knowing that he loved me, but I did not make being a Christian a priority. I

did none of the things conducive to a Christian life – attending a community of faith, praying daily or reading the Bible. This rebellion reached an apex at University.

Suddenly, one night I had an epiphany and I rededicated my life to the Lord. This means that I began to serve him anew, seeking his face. Michie (2010) explains these two phrases well:

Most aspects of Pentecostal faith and practice are centered around two intertwined spiritual priorities: submission to God's will, and "seeking God's face," an expression Pentecostals often use for entering into an experiential engagement with the divine. In order to be closer to God, a believer must submit to Him—first accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, to be forgiven of past sins. The subsequent "walk with God" as a Christian entails continually submitting to God's will for one's life. (p. 5)

If you would like me to share what exactly the epiphany was or how it occurred, I would have trouble doing so. All I remember from the event was looking at the moon outside of my window and being overwhelmed with how much God loved me, despite how far I'd tried to run from Him. "Running from God" is an aphorism that describes someone who is willfully disobeying God and attempting to live separately from Him, despite the fact that He is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Jeremiah 23:24 says "Can anyone hide from me in a secret place? Am I not everywhere in all the heavens and earth?" says the LORD." What followed my rededication was a series of events that helped cement my devotion to God – prayers prayed and answered in miraculous ways. I did not turn into a perfect person, but I stopped ignoring God.

I moved to Ottawa to complete my Communications degree at the University of Ottawa. I started to search for a church after awhile, and spent a couple of Sundays visiting different churches. I went to a church comprised mostly of students that met in a local church basement.

I went to an art-based church with little structure – there was a live band playing Radiohead and you could draw or colour, dance, or play an instrument. Neither of these churches resonated with me; and although I went several times to the student church, I did not make any personal connections and I did not seem to belong. When my uncle told me he was starting a church, I attended a few times during my undergraduate years. It was either a long bus ride or a long bike ride, so my attendance was sparse at best and solely to support my uncle.

I met my husband D.R. when I moved to Ottawa. He was an atheist when I met him, but I was attracted to him nonetheless. We began to date. This was an intense period for me, because I had prayed my entire life for a Christian husband, and I believe dating to be the preamble to marriage. I had purposely been considerate about not getting involved with someone too early – I wanted to save myself for my husband, a notion that had been instilled in me during my years at church. I struggled with a variety of emotions: young love, infatuation, and a deep grief that D.R. was not Christian. I decided to turn it over to God to make the decision about whether or not I should continue a relationship with D.R. I prayed and fasted for three days, asking God for a sign if He wanted me to break up with D.R.

I did not receive a sign, so I did not end our relationship – and a few months later D.R. found God. In much the same way that I cannot satisfactorily explain the divine epiphany that brought me back to God, my husband D.R. cannot explain how he became a Christian, other than through saying: “I was at Bluesfest in Ottawa, and in between songs the drummer randomly beat on his bass drum three times. When the third drumbeat sounded, I suddenly knew: God was real” (D.R., 2011). In that moment he went from atheist to Christian, calling himself “born again”, and he has continued on the path towards God ever since.

Fast forward to today, and we have been attending Greatest Commandment regularly for over two years and we both feel as though we belong. My theoretical reason for attending Greatest Commandment is to keep my faith invigorated. Being a Christian can be difficult, and to attempt to foster a religious identity with no communal support or religious teaching is to invite failure. However this reasoning may exist more in my mind than in practice. In practice, it may simply be because I feel as though I belong.

Our original reason for attending was simple: it was my uncle's church. To attend meant that I also got to have lunch with my aunt and uncle afterwards. Both my husband and I cannot pinpoint the exact moment that it went from being Keefe's church to being *our* church, but this process occurred through our steady participation. Within the next section called Building Community, I will discuss the process whereby we went from outsiders to insiders within Greatest Commandment.

Summary

Within Etienne Wenger's community of practice theory (1998) he presents ways in which identity and practice are mirror images of each other, a conceptualization that gives deeper significance to the profiles in terms of the nexus of the individual and the collective. Wenger describes that

We define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation (in the community) ... we define who we are by community membership ... we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going ... we define who we are by reconciling our various memberships into one identity. (1998)

The five profiles of Amy, Heather, Patrick, Henry and I highlight the complexity and interrelatedness of the relationship between the individual religious identity and the collective religious identity. Each person has their own reasons for participating in Greatest Commandment, and these reasons arise out of their own unique histories. Joining a community is a large commitment. An individual's *habitus* shapes who they are and guides their decision making process. For each of these people, the decision to attend Greatest Commandment every week occurred through a process of change in their lives, a change from their previous *habitus*. Change is possible only when a variety of factors align, forces within and without. I have discussed each of these attendee's thought processes on what brought them to Greatest Commandment as examples of the decision making and reasoning processes involved in joining a community of faith. In each case, part of the catalyst to attend Greatest Commandment came in the form of a personal relationship – they were invited. This is not a reason unique to only these profiles presented; indeed the large majority of Greatest Commandment attendees were also invited personally, a foreshadowing of the importance of relationships within the community.

Although the attendees are united through participation in the faith community of Greatest Commandment, they do not necessarily share the same beliefs. Everyone is at a different point in their journey to God. Amy said in her interview that “The building community is between Christians and other people who have decided to become a part of Greatest Commandment whether they're believers or not. But to have those authentic person to person relationships” (Amy, 2011). The main point here is that the community of Greatest Commandment is not built around beliefs, it is built around relationships. Whatever personal epiphanies and individual experiences led attendees to Greatest Commandment, it is the

community itself and the relationships therein that help sustain and further develop religious identity. The community adds further purpose and direction without imposing homogeneity or conformity of beliefs. The next section titled Building Community addresses the bonds between attendees.

Building Community

Because it is so much like a community, I consider... it's an extension really of my family. And me coming from a place where, I have really no family here, and not having a very strong family life, this is my family. (Laura, 2011)

Church family is a term used to describe a congregation, but going to church does not always translate into close relationships. Laura's quote above illustrates the sense of belonging and feeling of love that she experiences within Greatest Commandment. Within this section I will construct a narrative to describe the kind of system that would create this emotional response. This section answers the research question "What is the pattern of culture-sharing of the members of Greatest Commandment?" As culture is a decidedly broad term, another way to conceive of this question is to "paint a picture of people going about their daily lives", including their beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, values, social networks, use of tools, and communication (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 4). This question attempts to uncover the heart of the community. Within Greatest Commandment, the most significant patterns of culture-sharing revolve around the disproportionately large number of young families.

Statistics Canada reports that married people with children are the most likely to attend religious services regularly (Clark, 2000). This is true of Greatest Commandment. The main demographic of attendees subsist of heterosexual couples ages 25-45 with the largest concentration in their 30's. Married people outweigh single people within the church at a ratio of roughly ten to one. Every regularly attending couple is married, or engaged. Every regularly attending couple has at least one child. Most people have two or three children. There is a wide age range of children, but a large concentration of children between 2 years and 6 years old.

Because of a few couples who have more than two children, there are commonly more children than adults at Greatest Commandment.

This concentrated demographic makes Greatest Commandment a unique research site. While visiting other churches in the Ottawa area, I made the informal observation that churches with five to ten times as many attendees as Greatest Commandment do not have as many children within the church daycare. This can partially be explained by the fact that other churches have a wider demographic of attendees so their children are also a wider age range – including children over a young age who would have been in Sunday School (which I did not access) and young adults (who would have been in the main service).

Because of the similarities between families attendees share much in common with each other, thus building a strong central pattern of culture-sharing. Conversations often revolve around children, so much so that when I was telling an attendee about a dream wherein she and I were chatting at church but I could not remember about what, she suggested “about kids?” and laughed (Observations, 2011). Julie said during her interview that,

We are in, me and my husband and kids, are in the same demographic as pretty much everybody there, save a couple of people. And so it's a very easy community to be a part of, because we have a lot in common with a lot of people. Obviously there's lots that's not, but I guess in terms of the community aspect of it, we kind of all have lots of things to talk about, mainly kids and raising them, and all that stuff.

That's really why we started going to Greatest Commandment, because there's a place for our kids, and we saw that there's a lot of people in the same spot, and it's just easy to fit in that way. (Julie, 2011)

The following paragraphs will highlight the ways in which attendees sharing parenthood intersect and interact.

One Sunday morning a question was asked of attendees. Pastor Keefe posted the question on PowerPoint so that people could think about it during the singing of worship songs. At the end of the singing, Keefe vocalized the question, saying “What was the highlight of your week?” This open-ended question gave perspective into the priorities and values of Greatest Commandment members. I eagerly recorded their answers in jot note form: Lisa said, “My son squealing like a parakeet with excitement to ride in a stroller car at the mall”, Matthew said, “Seeing the smile on my girls face after her haircut”, Cathy said, “My daughter still calls for advice even though she’s moved out now”, Julie said, “Getting my son into daycare” and Jeffrey said, “I got a discount on my annual CAA payment” (Observations, 2011).

Four out of five of the attendee’s highlights of the week had to do with their children. Children are a driving force within Greatest Commandment. A great deal of all community activity revolves around attendee’s children. The community shares great joys and great heartaches over their children as they participate with one another in life.

Greatest Commandment officially places great value upon children and their parents through consistently addressing the needs of children and parents in event organization, speaking highly of children during sermons, and providing many caregivers and Sunday school teachers during Sunday morning sermons (Coleman, 2012). Children are welcomed within the community as a blessing. During a message series where Pastor Keefe was discussing controversial topics, Pastor Keefe referenced abortion and the churches role in advocating for life:

Anytime that anyone has ever felt ashamed for being pregnant and not married in church, we've done a poor job of advocating for life. Because you know what? It's done. Hey, you're having a baby, fantastic! Anybody having a baby? Fantastic! Whoever you are having a baby? Fantastic! Going to the moon and having a baby? Fantastic! There is one proper answer for, 'Hey I'm having a baby', guess what it is? *Fantastic!* Congratulations! And you mean it from the bottom of your heart because life is this beautiful thing.

(Coleman, 2012)

This attitude is contrary to larger culture's attitude where children can be seen as a burden involving sleepless nights and financial drain. From the commonality of having children, a support system is both fostered and encouraged by Pastor Keefe and the leadership team and grows naturally through relationships between attendees.

Part of the parental support that attendees give each other is material support. I had all of my maternity clothes given to me by other women at the church when I was pregnant with my first child. These items were borrowed for a time, and when I was finished they were returned for the next attendee's pregnancy. Also, between all of the women at Greatest Commandment having toddlers exiting the infant stage, I had most of the necessary baby equipment given to me, as well as baby clothes. This situation was not unique to me; during Sunday morning service I often saw items pass between the hands of mothers for each other's children. Some of the items that I saw passed between attendees include a children's ventolin inhaler, a jolly jumper, a baby chair, a booster seat, crib bumpers, a high chair, a double stroller, a baby sling, baby clothes and toddler clothes.

Another example of the supportive network within Greatest Commandment is when mothers are going through a difficult time the community steps in to give practical help. Amy mentioned in her interview,

There's something invaluable about having other people around you to create that network of prayers and people to care for you when... you know, when you've just gotten home from the hospital with a baby, and you have meals come to your house. That is all invaluable. I had meals for ten days or something. It was fantastic, and it's so important me to have other people around me who can lift me up when I'm discouraged and hold me accountable. (Amy, 2011)

The difference between Greatest Commandment's community of parents and a secular playgroup can be seen here: it is not just the practical support that Amy appreciates but also the spiritual support of prayer and accountability. Accountability is an important support between fellow attendees; in execution it is practiced through having someone to confide in, listen to, pray with, and encourage.

Practical and spiritual support was also given to Amanda during her pregnancy: when Amanda went into preterm labour and was placed on bed rest, she sent an email to Jessica, Pastor Keefe's wife, telling her of the incident and asking for prayer. Jessica forwarded the email to the other regularly attending women of Greatest Commandment and through an email chain they began to brainstorm ways in which they could help her. Some women offered ways that they could contribute, and other women gave information about what they thought she would prefer. Ideas were discussed such as making meals for her and putting together a gift basket of activities to occupy her while on bed rest. According to Statistics Canada the odds of a person providing

caregiving to someone else is 1.3 times higher for regular attendees of church versus the unchurched (Clark, 2000). Faith communities can act as important vehicles to help provide care.

The community has also provided financial support to attendees in the form of fundraising. When Ella's son was diagnosed with a condition requiring therapy not covered by the Ontario government, the pastor's wife organized a garage sale with proceeds to go towards therapy. Most of the Greatest Commandment attendees donated items to the garage sale and more than seven hundred dollars was raised.

The pattern of culture-sharing includes the maintenance of values, attitudes and behaviours that encourage this support system. The Golden Rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", kindness, acceptance, helpfulness; all of these are explicitly encouraged through sermons and implicitly encouraged through celebrated past behaviours of the community. When Dustin was asked what he thought the values of Greatest Commandment were, he spoke in terms of participation and action:

It's almost as if it's this idea of building this relationship with God but then allowing God to just shine through you into the community, this idea that you have a purpose of so much more, that you can be used as a tool for God. (Dustin, 2011)

Helping each other is not the only priority - raising children with these same values is also of great importance to Greatest Commandment attendees. During the 2012 anniversary celebration of Greatest Commandment, attendees were invited to speak about the role that the church has played in their life. Lily went to the front and commented that since her life is currently spent looking after children she wanted to talk about children within Greatest Commandment. As she was at the front speaking, one of her children spilt her coffee. Lily drew attention to this as an example of her daily experiences and everyone laughed. Lily talked about how she loved that

children were so central to the community. She said that “it is important to teach them values” and that as parents it is our “honour and responsibility to teach them”. She read from Deuteronomy 6:5-7 of the New Living Translation,

And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.

Early in 2011 a biweekly meeting began for Greatest Commandment attendees titled Boundaries with Kids. The series used a Christian book called Boundaries by Henry Cloud to go through issues of how to set boundaries and discipline your children. I attended Boundaries with Kids with my husband D.R. D.R. was disappointed to see that the only other man in the group was Jeffrey, the husband of Heather, and he was present because the meeting was being held in their home. All of the other attendees were mothers and their husbands were at home with the (mostly) sleeping children.

Jessica went around the room and asked the question of each attendee: “What character do you want your child to have 40 years from now?” (Observations, 2011). Most of the women’s answers were similar: wanting their children to be well-adjusted, independent and happy. Michelle said that she did not want her son to feel peer pressure to have to believe the same things the other kids (at school) believed. Jeffrey facetiously answered that all he wanted for his daughter 40 years from now was to be able to eat her dinner without screaming. D.R. was the second last to speak, and he said he wanted his child to “get the God thing right”, and that if he could introduce them to God and get their relationship started and they could get that right

they would be set. Jessica, the last to speak, agreed with D.R. and seconded his answer (Observations, 2011).

Boundaries with Kids provided an organized atmosphere to discuss issues surrounding raising children with Christian values. Laura appreciated these focused sessions since she did not grow up in the church.

Right now we're talking about raising kids, because we're all kind of at the same stage; I guess it's more than just raising kids, its raising kids with Christian values basically. I've really actually enjoyed that, it's kind of talking about what different people's backgrounds are and how they were raised, because a lot of the other girls were raised more Christian, and how their parents had raised them, and what values had been instilled in them, so I can get a lot of valuable information from that and how I want my children to be raised and what values I would like them to have. And it's been really good. (Laura, 2011)

Why almost all of the attendees at Boundaries with Kids were women is because gender plays a more traditional role within Greatest Commandment than in larger culture. There are no self-identified lesbian, gay or transgendered actors within the community. There *are* a disproportionate number of stay-at-home moms at Greatest Commandment. According to Statistics Canada, families with a child under 16 living at home are four out of five times dual income earners. One in five has one stay at home parent and one employed parent. Within Greatest Commandment, this statistic is reversed. Approximately four in five families have one spouse at home to care for children. One in five is dual income earners. According to Statistics Canada (2011), 11% of these stay at home spouses were fathers, and 89% were mothers. This ratio remains similar within Greatest Commandment as there is at least one stay at home father.

Greatest Commandment also has a large percentage of stay at home mothers that provide daycare to other children. This provides another point of commonality. All of the stay at home mothers that I interviewed mentioned getting together for play dates, in addition to being involved in other areas of the church. Heather commented “On the phone, getting together, and different ways. It’s a strange group where a lot of people have kids the same age, and there are a lot of moms not working” (Heather, 2011). The stay at home mothers commented that they are in communication with other Greatest Commandment attendees definitely weekly, and sometimes daily. They had the largest percentage of social meetings with others throughout the week echoing O’Neill and Gidengil’s (2006) findings that women typically devote more time than men to visiting friends. In addition to play dates the women organize girl’s nights out or potlucks, and family dinner parties.

O’Neill and Gidengil (2006) also found that women spend more time on associational involvements than men, and the mothers of Greatest Commandment mentioned these organizational factors that drew them together: involvement in the church worship team, biweekly Living Room meetings, biweekly Boundaries with Kids meetings, or planning future Greatest Commandment events.

Conversations between attendees can often center on dilemmas or problems with their children. At other times, the problems may be personal like an ill parent, financial hardship, or emotional stress. Other attendees can act as a sounding board, a shoulder to cry on, give advice or encouragement, or even help in some way financially. Julie mentions why she communicates with other Greatest Commandment attendees:

Socialize, so friends. Music (referencing here her involvement in the church worship team). Support, for what we’re going through in life. I think as the years go on you build

deeper friendships. Particularly when you're open to sharing with people. And being concerned about people and not just yourself in the mix. I've noticed in the last while that people who I'm closer with, go through different things, where before it would have just been kind of a talking, now it's a different and deeper concern and that I find myself even praying for. When that's not always the case when it's just a casual friendship. But as it's getting deeper it's something that is more on my heart. (Julie, 2011)

These emotions, this "deeper concern" that Julie references, is the successful functioning of the community to delve past the superficial relationships that our technologically driven world encourages. Although attendees communicate through a variety of mediums including phone, Facebook, and email, it is the regular face-to-face get-togethers that foster meaningful relationships. Men are typically less socially active than women, but even Patrick feels the support system in place when he comments that "I don't have a lot of close friends, and I don't really have a problem with that, but it's nice to have that background of people that are there, legitimately there" (Patrick, 2011). The importance of this feeling of connection and belonging that attendees share cannot be understated. Statistics Canada (2000) reports a clear causal connection between health and personal support networks. People are more likely to be healthy when they feel like they belong to a community. Statistically, participation in religious organizations enhances the feeling of being connected to community. This strong sense of belonging is two times higher in church attendees than non-attendees, and this chapter on the patterns of culture sharing within Greatest Commandment clearly narrates reasons why this statistic is accurate (Clark, 2000). People not only feel as though they belong, they reach out to each other in concrete ways, providing invaluable care.

Within all communities there are people closer to the center and people on the periphery or margin (Wenger, 1998). Greatest Commandment is no exception. Since the majority of communal activity revolves around children and their parents, those who do not fit within this demographic struggle to find their place within the community. Attendees who do not fit within the majority often drift away to other churches. Even those perceived as within the core of the community can struggle at times to feel involved when sometimes excluded from play dates or get-togethers. I will address this further in the advanced analysis section. In the following section I discuss my own experiences with inclusion and exclusion, and how my husband and I grew to mimic the pattern of culture-sharing found within Greatest Commandment.

Journey to the centre of the community

Both my husband and I credit Greatest Commandment as the main reason why we decided to have children so early. Every week at church we were exposed to the lifestyle of parenthood and the existence of beautiful and unique children. My husband played with all of the children after every service in the gym. Our social circle began to include Greatest Commandment attendees more and more, and I found myself babysitting their children, talking about their children, and becoming excited when they were pregnant. Having children became normalized for us, amidst a larger culture in which having children is generally placed at a lower priority than having a career, having a house, or simply having free time. Whereas all of the Ottawa first time mothers (outside of church) I know are 37 years old, I became pregnant at the tender age of 27.

Our reasoning process involved considering the strong support network available within Greatest Commandment - I saw the many benefits of having a community of helpful mothers. Free baby clothes, baby equipment, postpartum meals, childcare, and support. If it takes a

village to raise a child, I reasoned I had the village. I was also privy to the heartaches of attendees suffering from infertility, which made me seriously consider the idea that if I waited too long I may never have children.

The critic inside me says that perhaps we had children to fit in more with our peer group. My husband comments that God loves family, and that having a family is part of the journey to God, so having children simply means that we are drawing closer to God; that we love what He loves. Considering the complexity inherent to life, it was probably a bit of the above and more.

Bringing our daughter to church for the first time was a climactic moment. She was just five days old. Bringing a newborn to church as soon as possible is seen as an informal rite of passage. The age one is brought to church becomes part of the child's (and parents) life story – the beginning point of “growing up in the church”. Attendees boast of how young they were when they were first brought to church.

It was our first time driving with our daughter anywhere since we had a homebirth. We woke up that morning three hours earlier than normal in an attempt to make it to church on time. We needed every minute. Between changing her outfit several times, breastfeeding multiple times, and struggling to take a shower, it was amazing that we got out the door. It was also our first time packing the diaper bag, putting our daughter in the car seat, putting the stroller in the trunk, and worrying about other drivers on the road who were all suddenly reckless.

Throughout the morning, the air was charged with excitement as we anticipated introducing our church family to our daughter. We had lived this moment vicariously many other times. During the few years we had attended church, we had seen many other women slowly balloon to unimaginable sizes before one Sunday suddenly bringing a sleeping cherub with them to church that they claimed as their own. Seeing what sweet little baby had been

growing inside a fellow attendee and friend for months was always a thrilling moment. Hearing their name for the first time, welcoming them into the church family, and seeing the other children swarm around the little baby was enough to warm the cockles of anyone's heart. We had been looking forward to this moment from the time we first discovered we were pregnant. Now, the day was upon us.

We pulled up to the school and parked. Jeff was setting up the Greatest Commandment sign outside. My fingers tingled with excitement as I fumbled with our daughter's car seat clips. We had a brief tug of war over who would get to carry her inside. I relented and let my husband have the honour, reasoning that I would get a better perspective of the event watching him carry her.

We walked the interlocking stone sidewalk to the door and pressed the automatic door button. A couple of seconds seemed like eternity while the gears slowly came to life and the heavy door swung open. We walked inside with smiles as wide as the ocean.

As soon as anyone saw us they rushed to our sides. They called out to the others, "D.R. and Carol are here!" and cries of "She's so sweet!" brought more people swarming. Keefe joked that our daughter so far had a perfect attendance record. Emotions overwhelmed me. I was extremely grateful to everyone who had provided us with meals. Each night a different Greatest Commandment attendee showed up at our door to give us a hot dinner, and this continued for two weeks after she was born. I found myself thanking person after person for either a meal, or a gift of clothes, or a gift of toys or books, in addition to everything they had already given us during an earlier baby shower. Within five minutes of entering the church, we had fifteen people encircling us like a football huddle, with everyone eager to see our baby. The overwhelming support, love, and attention at this moment brought tears to my eyes.

I had started sparsely attending Greatest Commandment as a single University student. I felt like an outsider, not sharing much in common with other attendees. Meeting D.R. and becoming engaged was a step towards belonging within the community, seeming to bring us closer to other attendees. Marriage was another step towards the centre. Becoming pregnant was yet another step towards the centre. Over the months and years, we had more and more in common with the other attendees. Finally, at this point, bringing our daughter in to meet everyone, I felt like we were right at the center of the community. Physically surrounded by all of our friends and in the middle of the swarm, I finally felt like I perfectly belonged. I looked up, and overtop all of us was the Greatest Commandment banner. How fitting, I thought.

Over the space of months and years my *habitus* changed to reflect the new values I learned from being a member of Greatest Commandment. Bourdieu comments on how it can be difficult for one's *habitus* to change but that it is by no means fixed:

Not something natural, inborn: being a product of history, that is of social experience and education, it may be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education or training...Dispositions are long-lasting: they tend to perpetuate, to reproduce themselves, but they are not eternal. (Bourdieu, 2002b, p. 29)

My continual participation within Greatest Commandment amounted in a plethora of new experiences that served to emphasize the importance of children, eventually resulting in a new state of mind regarding the possibility and plausibility of parenthood. The powerful influence of a group mentality over a prolonged period of time cannot be understated. Within the next section, I will discuss one of the main values of Greatest Commandment attendees: being relevant.

Being Relevant

Popular culture video clips are sometimes shown on Sunday mornings in church before or after coffee break. Pastor Keefe uses them to illustrate the point of his sermon, which at the outset is unknown, and may not be illuminated solely through the content of the clip. As popular culture is secular and some traditional sects of Christianity refrain from watching *any* television, I posed the research question “How do participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment?” Overall, attendees had some trouble verbalizing their thoughts on the use of media. Knee-jerk reactions tended towards the use of video clips as being unremarkable. I believe the ubiquity of television and popular culture made it difficult for attendees to critically evaluate the presence of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment. Upon further or deeper reflection, the majority of attendees saw the video clips as being “relevant”, a valued concept within the community. Since this study attempts to let the participants voices be heard alongside my own (Ellis, 2004), in the following section I give insight into my reasons for asking this question, and then I focus on what the participants themselves find significant: “relevance”. Relevance is a core value of Greatest Commandment, and it is defined by the church as “Finding and furthering connections between church, Christ and culture in our beautiful, screwed-up world”. Attendees in general define relevance as a concept best understood in opposition to the term obsolete. The repeat mentioning of relevance gives it great significance to the attendees as an important facet of Greatest Commandment’s culture. The importance of relevance appears repeatedly throughout the community, within: the video clips and contemporary music, the pastors preaching, and events.

Popular Culture Video Clips

Video clips are shown every few Sundays within Greatest Commandment. The clips are projected onto the same screen that during worship has lyrics inscribed overtop of nature scenes and during readings of the Bible displays the verses. Video clips are usually shown immediately before or after the coffee break. From January 2011 to May 2011 there were video clips from the movies *What About Bob* and *Despicable Me*, an advertisement for Peace Corps, a video of 20 to 30 year olds saying what they think worship is, a National Geographic video, a classic commercial for Jenga, the music video for Mumford and Sons “The Cave” and a clip from *Dr. Phil* of Ted Williams (the man with the golden voice) (Observations, 2011).

Growing up in the church and my education in the field of communication has made me acutely aware of some of the tensions that exist between popular culture and religion. As a child attending Bible camp, I have been exposed to more fundamentalist exercises of Christianity; for instance an altar call encouraging disposal of all non-Christian music and movies. An altar call is an invitation by a preacher for attendees to physically come forward to the front of the church and dedicate or rededicate their lives to the Lord. In this particular case, the purpose of the altar call was also to purge all ungodly influences by throwing CD’s and DVD’s in a large garbage bag.

In addition to this early experience, later as a communication scholar I was taught of the underlying hegemonic forces involved in the production of media. Advertising and popular culture are linked in a symbiotic relationship, with producers creating desires within consumers that touch upon our most vulnerable selves, creating insatiable needs within the masses and great monetary gain for corporations. Because of an awareness of the manipulation that occurs

through media such as television, I personally do not have cable, and I attempt to be critical about what television or movies I do choose to watch.

This snapshot of my background should serve to inform the reader of the influences in my own life that lead to my questioning the presence of secular video clips within Greatest Commandment. I wanted to know what participants thought of this practice. Overall, none of the participants were critical of the use of media. Since ethnographies of religion seek to explore what members find significant (Saliba, 1974), I will now seek to move beyond my bias and let the participant's voices be heard on this topic.

The general consensus among Greatest Commandment attendees during interviews was that the video clips help make church more relevant:

You know, relatedness, it's what society is seeing out there, you see pop culture like Seinfeld clips or Simpsons or car commercials it's all stuff that we're bombarded with daily so if you can pick something out of someone's daily routine and loop it into a religious way or a thought process to bring you to thinking in a religious way, I think it's almost genius. It's definitely a mind at work. I enjoy that part of it. (Patrick, 2011)

Patrick was not the only interviewee to mention the video clips changing his thought process, Amy also said:

I really like the clips. I think it helps all of us see that the messages of the Bible are still relevant today - and not only relevant because we (Christians) say so. If this kind of messaging is also found in the general media, then it's because it's of interest to society today. I also find that because of the inclusion of media clips and songs at church, I am

often looking at TV or movie clips, or listening to music, through that same lens. I'm just more reflective about what I see and hear through the media. (Amy, 2011)

These two attendees found that viewing media within church caused them to alter their frame of reference from a secular frame to a religious frame, either just for a time during church or outside of church as well. Quentin Schultze (2005) comments that some religions see evidence of God everywhere within culture:

After all, culture is "cult," worship. Father Andrew Greeley says that after viewing *The Cosby Show* and other sitcoms he is "prepared to propose that anyone who can certify that they have viewed two of these programs during the preceding week can be dispensed, if not from Sunday church attendance, then at least from listening to the Sunday homily/sermon. They do a lot better than we do it." Greeley seems to marvel at the grace in popular culture. God is there, too. (Schultze, 2005, p. 8)

When one uses Christianity as a lens through which to view cultural productions, films or songs develop religious meaning. For example, the movie *The Matrix* turns into a modern day retelling of Jesus' death and resurrection. This notion is known within religious visual culture theory and practice as the "sacred gaze". David Morgan (2005) describes the sacred gaze as "the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance". Pastor Keefe Coleman then can be said to be inviting congregants into his sacred gaze through the use of video clips. Heather, who grew up in the church, mentions the sacred gaze through which she already views movies or music:

There are different things that we can do to make people (non-Christians) feel more at ease, and I found that through media. Because I love music, like just regular music, I like

mainstream, and I often find in songs, ‘oh that song means something to me’, which could be the complete opposite (meaning) of whoever wrote it, but I can see there’s a spiritual meaning in it, or a movie clip, so then sometimes it would be, sort of trying to explain what you’re saying, through an outlet that someone else could identify with.

(Heather, 2011)

Heather appropriates mainstream media and interprets it within her religious perspective. Heather views media use in church as an opportunity to share the Christian message in a non-threatening way. She likes the idea of inviting non-Christians to view a video clip or song through a sacred gaze. David Morgan (2005) comments that

The visual culture of belief offers scholars the opportunity to understand the powerful and pervasive ways in which the devout see the world, organize and evaluate it, and infuse into the appearance of things the feelings and ideas that make the world intelligible and familiar to them. (p. 260)

Heather shows that the “visual culture of belief” offer not just scholars the opportunity to see the world as the devout do, but also non-Christian laypeople. Pastor Keefe Coleman also spoke of this opportunity to communicate to the unchurched when he was asked why he chooses to use popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment. Coleman answered,

Pop culture is the air we breathe and the milieu in which we exist, especially for those Gen X and younger. It's a commonality that people of all backgrounds and places in life can identify with, given the ubiquitous and pervasive nature of the media. And as such, it displays in many cases a searching for God, meaning, truth and spirituality, or conversely, a need for those same things. It allows me/us to communicate using language

within language - a shared series of reference points in order to communicate spiritual truth. Jesus told parables - these to me are modern day equivalents, illustrations of greater spiritual truth. (2012)

Several people took this idea farther and commented that the video clips help them actually *invite* people to church. The use of media can make a church experience seem more intelligible and familiar to the unchurched. Watching video clips in the company of others is a comfortable and common aspect of modernity, and mentioning media use can be an indicator of a contemporary style. Laura says, "I don't mind saying to someone else who's maybe interested or questions the church, you know, come, it's a cool church" (2011). I identify with this process; it is a technique that I also use. When inviting someone to church, I often explain that video clips are shown to contrast Greatest Commandment with, paradoxically, the media stereotype of church as old-fashioned.

People unfamiliar with a contemporary church can have a narrow vision of what church is like. Henry mentioned that in his view "the old school way of doing things is changing, in society in general. So going to like a Catholic church, and going through a big, up, down, singing..." (Henry, 2011). Henry references here the structure of many services, particularly Catholic wherein to a person unfamiliar with church one of the biggest noticeable characteristics is how often you are asked to stand up, sit down, or kneel. Greatest Commandment in contrast has much less ritual and more in common with larger culture. Laura feels that people are looking for churches that are relevant to their lives and not based on ritual.

They're not looking for that uptight regimented, you have to do this - now it's time to pray, now we get down on our knees, now we get up, now we stand, now we sit, now we get back down on our knees, you know, that's pretty regimented. (Laura, 2011)

In summary, participants view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment as having a multitude of mini-purposes: as contributing to keeping the church in step with current culture or “relevant”, as restructuring their perspective of media towards a sacred gaze, and as helpful in inviting people to church. Overall the video clips did not affect people as strongly as I had speculated. No one credited video clips for the reason they attend Greatest Commandment or conversely had any criticisms of the practice. Attendees had varying degrees of enthusiasm for the video clips. Some commented that it did not matter to them whether video clips continued to be shown or not. Most people were not surprised by the use of video clips, having had experience in other churches with media to a lesser extent. Most people *were* surprised at the interview question about the use of video clips within church and had to think a few moments about their answer. Undoubtedly due to my own academic training in Communications I place a greater importance on the use of popular culture within church than other people do. Julie said, “I think you can still relate God into our culture without using the pop references. I think He’s kind of timeless and ageless and I don’t think that’s necessary” (2011).

Another area that participants repeatedly mentioned appreciating relevance in was Keefe’s preaching. This value of Greatest Commandment attendees will be examined in the next section.

Sermon style

Pastor Keefe Coleman’s sermon style is not traditional. Lacking much of the religious lingo that traditionally peppers a pastors language, Keefe sounds less like a pastor and more like your neighbor or co-worker. Attendees of Greatest Commandment continually referenced in interviews how down to earth and understandable Keefe was, and how he in turn made the

sermons and Biblical lessons and precepts relevant. Some used the word “educational” to describe his sermons, and some mentioned that the style of his delivery was the reason for their attendance. It is clear from the following quote that Laura finds the sermons enjoyable because of their relevance:

And I found Keefe to be an amazing speaker, and just very down to earth which is what I really love. He made it relevant to my life, today. And was able to joke, and not take it so seriously. (Laura, 2011)

Sunday mornings are full of laughter. She enjoys the more lighthearted approach and relaxed atmosphere. Laura also comments, “I don’t want to be preached at, I want to be preached to” showing the sermon style she prefers (Laura, 2011). When one is “talked at”, it implies a one way conversation with no discussion. Conversely being “talked to” implies a conversation, a more intimate approach with the possibility of reciprocation.

Dustin, a University student who previously attended a Pentecostal church full time, also expresses his distaste of being “preached at” when he says:

(Within Greatest Commandment) I feel like I’m actually learning something, somebody is not preaching to me, and telling me to do this, or telling me to do that, it’s more like that I’m learning. Like even something as simple as where the background of a word comes from, I think that’s really neat, I’ve always liked that kind of stuff right, because even that’s a process to how something evolved, so to me, when I try to describe Greatest Commandment I think of it more as a learning process... cause coming from another church and stuff it felt like someone’s telling me and preaching to me exactly what to do. (Dustin, 2011)

This viewpoint matches with Peter Berger's analysis that there has been recoil from the authority of tradition and that religious thought is now based in experience (1990). Within Greatest Commandment Dustin conceives of sermons as a learning experience. This relaxed atmosphere is more conducive to honest interactions, part of Greatest Commandments commitment to "no perfect people" allowed (Coleman, 2012). Taking the "pressure sales pitch" out of preaching allows attendees to feel accepted without putting on an act (Lisa, 2012). Attendees within Greatest Commandment all referenced a fear or strong dislike of hypocrisy; they are all "tired of going to church where people are one way on Sunday and another way the rest of the week" (Lisa, 2012).

Many attendees also referenced how Keefe made them *feel*, in juxtaposition to how other pastors have made them feel in the past, or what they conceive of pastors to stereotypically make one feel. Patrick, an attendee with no regular church attendance history and mainly negative experiences with churches prior to Greatest Commandment said:

Most of it is Keefe's presentation, how he dumbs it down, or how he makes it relative to today's lifestyle, today's everything... In some churches they are trying to be more relative, and trying to change, but I think it's a huge battle. And I think it's a really unfortunate thing because people aren't going to church, and there seems to be an insurgence of new churches, and whether that's new churches or just a new spin on old churches, but I think that's the biggest thing, is making it so that people can understand and feel comfortable. Not to be made to feel dumb or to be beaten. (Patrick, 2011)

Interactions with Keefe fostered engagement, whereas prior encounters with church seemed to foster detachment and disinterest. Patrick perceives people in general to not be going to church. This was not part of the questioning, but emerged as part of his thought process and is a popular

viewpoint within society (Harding, 2000). Statistics Canada reports people attending church less than they did 20 years ago (Statistics Canada, 2012). Whether there is a declining church attendance rate or participation is merely shifting and morphing is an area of scholarly debate. James D. Montgomery believes that the decline of traditional denominations is balanced by the rise of newer denominations, and that “the religious economy as a whole remains stable” (1996). Patrick as a layperson also observes this possible phenomenon by saying “an insurgence of new churches”.

Patrick feels that traditional churches are shrouded in mystery to the average person who has grown up outside of church. Patrick believes that the rituals and sermons make strangers to church feel “dumb or beaten”. This opinion comes directly out of personal experience. Patrick explains an incident from a Catholic church he attended once with his wife Caitlyn through a family obligation:

What really struck Caitlyn and I (was that) they said, well, for those of you who are Catholic and who wish to have communion, communion I guess? Sacrament, or whatever they call it, see what I mean with all that kind of - but anyway, to come forward, and Caitlyn’s like, ‘you know we do that in the United church as well, why are you segregating’ - So they do all that, and then they said, oh are you Catholic? So the church was so full that they came around (individually to deliver the elements of the Eucharist, i.e. the bread and wine), and then they asked, Are you Catholic? And (I’m thinking) - are you Christian? Who are you to say that? (Patrick, 2011)

Patrick’s wife expresses her confusion in the moment as the Catholic rules of ritual do not make sense to her - why she should be allowed to partake in one church and not in another?

If it is the same ritual, and the same God, why is she “segregated” and unable to join in? For someone unfamiliar with Catholicism, this is a confusing point.

Patrick’s exasperation with the legalism of the Catholic Church is palpable. He was offended when the person delivering the Eucharist asked them if they were Catholic. He views the question as a very personal judgment call. The question is essentially asking “Are you in or are you out according to our criteria?”, and Patrick counters with, “Are you Christian?” How do you know you’re “in”? How does one prove this, and who is eligible to make the judgment call? As Patrick said, “Who are you to say that?” He does not accept the authority of the Catholic Church to regulate in such a way who can partake of communion.

This incident brings to mind a common Bible verse within the church culture that I grew up in – Matthew 7:1-2 says “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” And this is exactly what Patrick does, by judging the server of communion with the same measure they attempt to judge Patrick and his wife – by asking “Are you Christian?” As I mentioned earlier about Patrick within the profiles of attendees, he struggles with defining himself as a “Christian” because of the weight he attaches to the word. Patrick places a high value on labels and for him it is a deeply personal decision. A stranger asking his status through the question of “Are you Catholic?” and leaving room for only a yes or no answer must have been exasperating. For Patrick, who is on a journey of belief, is not willing or able to label himself yet.

Patrick also expresses his aggravation with the inconsistent and strange terminology used within church, words like communion and sacrament. It is this kind of lingo foreign to outsiders that can cause someone to feel out of place at best and unwelcome at worst.

Heather is on the opposite side of the church experience, having grown up in church and been intimately involved with all church culture from birth. Heather is familiar with all manner of religious language, rituals and traditions, yet she also mentions being aware of how an outsider might feel within a religious setting:

But I kind of felt, at times, the way I grew up... I always was a little bit nervous about saying why don't you come to church with me, because I felt that the church has its own culture sometimes. I don't think that necessarily is bad, when you have a group of people that believe something that may not be what your regular culture believes, but I felt that sometimes there are different things that we can do to make people feel more at ease.
(Heather, 2011)

Heather and Patrick both believe that there are many elements of Greatest Commandment that work towards making an average person with no religious background feel at ease. Patrick said,

That gives another experience and another appreciation for the way that Greatest Commandment is run, that all are loved, no matter what the background, it's just, come on in, and here's what we got. Enjoy it. Anyway, it's good that way. (Patrick, 2011)

Keefe keeps the sermon style simple and without pretense. There are no special requirements asked of attendees and no undue pressure placed on attendees, as attending church can already be stressful. Henry, another attendee with little to no history of church attendance, discusses how he views the sermons:

So, Greatest Commandment's approach to religion, as more of an educational based thing, how to apply it, how it applies to you, how it applied to life then and how it applies to life now, and the way that Keefe approaches it that way, it helps me. Especially in the

beginning it was helpful enough to be there, and it was helpful enough to go back. I think that was the biggest plus for me. Because it's less intimidating. The setting is more relaxed, the environment is relaxed. (Henry, 2011)

Henry's comments echo those of the previous attendees, mentioning that it is educational, relevant, and relaxed. The above sections show that individuals within the community of Greatest Commandment shared a need, and have rallied around a leader who emerged to fill those needs. The community may not have been able to clearly articulate what they were seeking before they experienced it, but once they found it they knew: "It was exactly what I was looking for. It was everything that I wanted, that I considered a church should be ... And that's why I haven't looked back. I've gone every time now" (Laura, 2011).

Because Keefe's sermon style and delivery is considered significant to Greatest Commandment attendees, it is prudent to include an excerpt from a sermon so that one can see first-hand what the attendees are referencing. This sermon excerpt serves to highlight the manner of preaching that attendees appreciate Keefe for. It also gives insight into community relations, and highlights the dominant value of children within Greatest Commandment.

This illustration occurred at the end of a sermon about Jacob. Jacob was a central figure in the Old Testament who was known to be a liar and manipulator, yet whom God continued to love. The Take Home thought of the morning was that "Jacob's God still loves flawed and broken people enough to make a way for us to be with Him" (Coleman, 2011).

Let's face it, there's a little Jacob in all of us, right? Like the old McDonalds song, there's a little McDonalds in everyone? And there is, because you can never actually process it all. So a lot of this is quarter pounders with cheese (points towards his stomach).

There's a little Jacob in all of us. Sometimes there's a lot of Jacob. Sometimes in our worst moments, we go *all* Jacob.

My kids have this really creepy Halloween mask that's Anakin Skywalker, and it's really creepy because it looks like a human face, so they put it on and they come up beside you and you turn around to look at them, and you go AHH! 'Cause it's not the face you expect to see on them. Anyways that's just my own personal trauma.

But we go Jacoby a lot. And that's why we need a God who is so proud and pleased to be called God of Jacob, the trickster God, the God of liars, the God of the conman; he's pleased because he can work with people who will engage him. I mean the thing about Jacob, no matter how messed up he is, he's always trying to bargain and con and all the rest of it, but he doesn't sort of live his life without God, he still keeps engaging with God, he still keeps coming back to God, he knows that God has this grip on his life. He lets God, sometimes kicking and screaming, but he lets God change him, and change who he is. And God will do that in us as well (Coleman, 2011).

The central message of his illustration, that God loves flawed and broken people, is also a tenet of Greatest Commandment church culture that Keefe continually stresses. This attitude is in sharp contrast to Patrick's experience of alienation at the Catholic Church where there was a religious requirement in order to participate. This is also an example of a way in which Keefe keeps sermons relevant: no one *is* perfect and Keefe does not pretend we can be or that he himself is.

Keefe continues by quoting, "C.S. Lewis said once that God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts at us in our pain" (Coleman, 2011). Keefe says he had a moment like that this last week when his daughter had a bicycle accident on Easter Sunday. He references an

email that was sent to attendees informing them of the accident, and he thanks everyone for their prayers. He recalls how horrible it was to see her in pain, and how since it was Easter, he immediately thought of Jesus' crucifixion. He thought about God, the father, having to watch his Son, broken and bleeding on the cross. Keefe says "I mean I wouldn't put my kid through that for anything, not for anyone, I'm willing to help somebody and sacrifice, but don't ask me to put my *kid* on the line" (Coleman, 2011).

Keefe said that amazingly, his young daughter also was thinking about Jesus during her pain – he said that she commented "now I understand a little bit of what Jesus went through" because she had been hurt so bad (Coleman, 2011). Within the congregation, several people said "wow", and some people were tearing at this point. Keefe ended his illustration by saying,

God see's beauty in broken things. And no matter how messed up my daughters face was that day, I didn't recoil in horror, I wasn't like, oh you know, you're going to have to look after yourself now. You know, or ohhh I love being your dad, but not today! Who would do that? We would arrest the person who was like that. If anything, I just loved her more in that instant. Because of her brokenness, because of her suffering.

But we think when we suffer and when we're broken and when we mess up and when we hurt others, we think that that takes us off the table for God. 'Now I'll never be what God wants me to be. Now He'll never accept me. Now He'll never want anything to do with me.' When in reality? He just wants to run to our side and comfort us if we will allow him to do so. When we stop pushing him away, through our tears and through our suffering and through our fallenness and our brokenness and our evil and all the rest of it, when we stop pushing Him away, He is *right* there. Because he just loves us all the more (Coleman, 2011).

The inclusion of this sermon excerpt conveys an example of the type of messages that attendees gather to listen to every Sunday morning. Diane Goldstein (1995) comments, “implicitly, and often through a kind of ethnographic sleight of hand, we secularize the study of religious groups, thus making them safe” (p. 25). Through the above illustration I aim to include religion within the narrative of Greatest Commandment, and give a concrete example of the sermon style and delivery. In addition to Keefe’s sermons keeping the church atmosphere relaxed, informal and relevant, there was another aspect mentioned that also supported these goals: church events.

The Super Bowl Party

Greatest Commandment hosts events that are not typically church sanctioned. By integrating church with the wider community and larger culture they remain relevant to the outside world; a permeable, responsive community, the opposite of overly traditional and stagnant. For example, Man-dates were created by Keefe as get-togethers solely for the men of Greatest Commandment, and Man-dates can include such functions as poker nights and Super Bowl parties. In the following passages I give rich description of the 2011 Super Bowl party and discuss the significance of this event.

Super Bowl XLV was held on February 6, 2011 at the Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas. Football players making up to millions of dollars play one of the most important games of their lives. The battle is for the Vince Lombardi trophy, fame and fortune. Adrenaline pumps through the players and fans. Even people who know nothing about football tune in to watch the Super Bowl. Super Bowl 2011 broke all previous viewership records, with approximately 111 million people watching the game.

Half a continent away from the football game in Texas, a group of Greatest Commandment men gather for their own Super Bowl party. Cars and minivans are lined up outside of a semi-detached house in a newly developed area. The house is one of a hundred on this suburban street, with three or four designs repeated in a pattern. The houses are all within a few metres of each other; the effect is overwhelming for all but the most conditioned suburbanites. Any other differences between houses are hidden by a blanket of snow on this cold February evening. Dusk has fallen by the time my husband D.R. arrives at the party.

Ken has volunteered his house for this function. The lights of his house spill warmly onto the snow, and the low murmur of voices can be heard from outside. D.R. rings the doorbell, and waits a moment. A fellow partygoer opens the door and invites him in. The smell of hot food fills the house. A table in the living room is set up with food: meatballs in a slow cooker, a bowl of jujubes, pulled pork, chocolate desserts. Pizza lies on the kitchen counter, fresh out of the oven, ready to be consumed. D.R. contributes several bags of chips, a bag of miniature chocolate bars and a bottle of pop to the cornucopia. The drinks are out on the porch behind a sliding glass door being kept cold by the accommodating Canadian winter. Pop or beer is available.

The guests are scattered throughout the living room, family room and kitchen. The atmosphere is laid back with most of the attention on the game. Ken's plush leather couches invite relaxation; tape covers up where his dogs have chewed. Kitchen chairs are also set up to accommodate guests. Most people at the party are Greatest Commandment attendees, except for a few friends of Ken's son who have come over. Two big screen televisions are set up especially for the event, one in the living room and one in the family room. One television is hooked up to cable, and the other television is hooked up to both cable and a computer. This allows the men

to switch between the two media, so that during cable commercials they are able to go online and watch commentary, replays, or the arguably more entertaining American commercials.

Commercials provide some of the content of discussions. After a commercial advertising the movie *Thor*, one of the men joke “Wow I can’t believe they made a movie about my life!” During a commercial for *Grays Anatomy*, one of the men swears “What the hell are they doing?” Two of the men attending were born in different countries; they compare notes about their homelands with each other. Two other men discuss furnaces and purchasing options.

The men have been asked to bring food to share amongst themselves, and ten dollars for a local food cupboard. Throughout the night bets are taken on different aspects of the Super Bowl, like what different game statistics would be, how many songs would be sung during the half-time show, and what companies would run commercials. Each winning bet earns a person a point, and at the end of the night the man with the most points gets the donation to the food cupboard made in his name. This gave some incentive for tax purposes.

This Super Bowl party is unremarkable to larger culture; indeed one could term it a common event. There were likely hundreds of other houses, if not thousands in the Ottawa area, hosting Super Bowl parties. Yet this is precisely why it is remarkable for Greatest Commandment – it is an instance of this non-denominational church attempting to be relevant to current society in a way that the unchurched or those with little church background would appreciate and be familiar with. It is a possible way to encourage those with no church history to come to a “church event” – there is nothing overtly religious and intimidating about a Super Bowl party – it’s just chips, beer, and a game. But those from a strict church background could be very surprised at the event.

There are aspects of the party that break with strict religious tradition, like the presence of alcohol and betting. The Super Bowl itself could be viewed as sinful – an act of idolatry by mainstream culture - fanaticism bordering on worship. Advertisements reflect secular values, the cheerleaders are not wearing much, and the halftime show could contain questionable content (as in the 2004 Nipplegate scandal with Janet Jackson). Any of these reasons or more could make a Super Bowl party off limits to more fundamentalist minded Christians.

Churches have traditionally strove to separate themselves from larger culture in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. Some of these are because of Biblically based precepts, while other separations have emerged more from local cultures and traditions. This topic emerged during my interview with Heather. Heather is the daughter of a pastor. She spoke about her experiences growing up with different churches, specifically the differences between the church culture of Newfoundland and the church culture of Vancouver. Both were churches that her father ministered at. Because of this cross country move, she gained a special insight into the differences between church cultures.

I found that in Vancouver, I mentioned that we were going to go out for Halloween, and they were like, ‘You celebrate Halloween? Oh my goodness, that’s terrible!’ But I always went out for Halloween, and never knew, whatever! And at church, when the kids opened the pack of cards and started playing cards, I was like, ‘What? You’re playing cards?’ Or ‘You’re going to movies?’

And so with all these different things it was interesting because I was just a kid but I was realizing that okay, so there’s things that my mom and dad tell me not to do, they don’t want me to do it because of some reasoning behind it, but it’s not Christianity, it’s these little extra things that we try to do. At some point when they were started, there was

probably a reason behind it, but it was just cast on through tradition that you didn't do these things, and then people kind of absorbed that into their actual faith. (Heather, 2011)

Heather's reasoning as a child is wise in its simplicity, and perhaps part of the same reasoning employed by Greatest Commandment. Having a beer, making some bets, and watching a game can be relatively harmless – and perhaps Christianity is better served by remaining relevant to the unchurched.

Greatest Commandment places emphasis on “being real” and attendees continually reference appreciating the church for this (Observations, 2011). Greatest Commandment is relevant to attendees because it applies directly to them and their lives: the issues, topics, discussions, video clips, contemporary music, pastors preaching, and events all serve to inform and reform their lives in meaningful ways.

CHAPTER FOUR: Advanced Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter is separate from the main findings to delineate it from the earlier narrative ethnographic account. Advanced analysis and interpretation indicates a step away from co-participation within the ethnographic encounter as defined by Tedlock (1991), and a step towards a more traditional researcher voice. Within this chapter of advanced analysis I will use Wenger's theory of communities of practice to more deeply explore the patterns of culture-sharing within Greatest Commandment. Communities of practice do not evolve from organizational design, but instead from lived practice – part of the reason I find this theory particularly fitting (Wenger, 1998). This theory gives insight into the nexus of individual and collective identities since: “Inevitably, our practices deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being. In this sense, the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities” (Wenger, 1998). Framing Greatest Commandment as a community of practice explains why the community is so compelling within its narrow demographic. The theory also assists in explaining outliers and negative information, therefore giving additional validity to the study (Cresswell, 2009).

Greatest Commandment as a Community of Practice

As discussed in the section “Belonging and Believing”, belief is highly individualized. Belief is conceived within Greatest Commandment as a never-ending spiritual journey, one that is neither linear nor unidirectional. For this reason my findings echo Brian Howell's determination that “inquiry into what these Christians ‘believe’ to be relatively unfruitful, as this invokes an individualist religion unsuitable for ethnographic inquiry, but also, I discovered, insufficient for Christian community and Christian selfhood” (Howell, 2007, p. 378). Brian Howell (2007) argues that religious identity is better understood through the concept of commitment (p. 373). Commitment and, by extension, practice places importance on the actions

and interweaving of members rather than private thought life or personal relationships with God. Within Greatest Commandment, the most accurate lens through which to view the pattern of culture-sharing among members is through their community of practice.

Community of practice is a social theory developed by Etienne Wenger. He theorized that communities of people who share a common commitment benefit by learning through their relationships with others in the group. Learning does not have to be the reason the group meets, but it is an incidental outcome. It is valuable to study the community of practice within Greatest Commandment because although Wenger covers “mostly things that everybody knows in some ways, having a systematic vocabulary to talk about it does make a difference. ... We pay attention to what we expect to see and we hear what we can place in our understanding” (Wenger, 1998, p. 8). Etienne Wenger describes three characteristics of a community of practice that are central.

The first characteristic that Wenger marks as crucial is a shared domain of interest. “Membership implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people” (Wenger, 1998). Within Greatest Commandment a community of practice has evolved around the shared domain of raising and nurturing children. Greatest Commandment acts as a more specialized domain than simply a playgroup. Greatest Commandment attendees share not only children in common but also a spiritual journey. While people within other religious communities may all say that raising and nurturing children is an important goal, where this goal ranks and how it is accomplished within different religious organizations will vary. This is where the uniqueness of Greatest Commandment is found. Greatest Commandment’s commitment to parenting and children is a powerful and vibrant goal, influencing all aspects of communal interactions.

Secondly, Wenger states that members have to have a shared practice, that they share resources such as stories, tools, and ways of addressing problems. He states that “this takes time and sustained interaction”. Within Greatest Commandment, this can be seen in the support system that the attendees have built. Mothers and fathers share stories of how to get babies to sleep, toddlers to toilet train, and how to explain to their children why some people do not believe in God. Attendees share tools such as baby equipment, maternity clothes, and health professional contacts. Problems are solved through email chains and prayer requests and common ways of addressing problems involve practical support. Most attendees have been participants in the community for several years.

The third characteristic that Wenger uses to identify a community of practice he calls simply “the community”. “In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (Wenger, 1998). In many ways, this aptly describes the relevance that Greatest Commandment attendees enjoy about their community. Discussion groups such as Boundaries with Kids, volunteering within the church, informal play dates and get-togethers, attending sermons and events; these are all places in which participants build relationships, help and are helped, and share and receive valuable information.

Viewing Greatest Commandment as a community of practice around parenthood and spiritual journey allows us to better understand why regular attendees are mostly limited to the narrow demographic of 25-40 year old married couples with children. Wenger’s theory also helps explain the process within Greatest Commandment whereby newcomers join, leave, or remain a non-participant while still attending.

Entrances, Exits, and Non-Participation

There is a learning curve involved in joining a new community, and Wenger theorizes that the most influential factor for newcomers is the existing members. Regular attendees are “living testimonies to what is possible, expected, desirable” (Wenger, 1998). This logic explains why newcomers to Greatest Commandment usually first come through an invitation from someone that they trust and respect: they are easily apprehended living testimonies. Existing friendships help facilitate the process of joining the community because,

Practice can be guarded just as it can be made available; membership can seem a daunting prospect just as it can constitute a welcoming invitation; a community of practice can be a fortress just as it can be an open door (Wenger, 1998, p. 120).

Regardless if someone already has a friend within the community; Wenger explains that it is the existing member’s participation that creates “paradigmatic trajectories”. Wenger conceives of identity in part as a trajectory, and that a paradigmatic trajectory is a set of possibilities for a newcomer to evaluate. Wenger comments that “No matter what is said, taught, prescribed, recommended, or tested, newcomers are no fools: once they have actual access to the practice, they soon find out what counts” (p. 156). As Lisa reminisced about her becoming part of Greatest Commandment, she said that she soon saw “the value of helping others was not just on our letterhead, but something that others actually did” (Observations, 2012). In contrast, a number of other people have moved on from the community because they saw no one to identify with: for example 40-55 year old couples with young teenagers and seniors. Patterns of culture-sharing do not include these groups’ experiences, “what counts” within Greatest Commandment does not “count” for them. Without a relevant paradigmatic trajectory to see the possibility of belonging they move on to other communities of faith that can better address their needs.

The intersection of individual identity and collective practice is also an area of struggle as seen within the section “Belonging and Believing”. As Patrick participated within the community, he was forced to negotiate his own identity: either to see himself as compatible with the group or withdraw. Wenger states an important connection between identity and practice:

Practice entails the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context. . . . Inevitably, our practices deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being. In this sense, the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities. (Wenger, 1998)

The negotiation of practice and identities is also discussed within the conceptual foundations of this study. According to Bourdieu, the *habitus* produces individual and collective practices according to past perceptions, creating a level of consistency over time. Within the profiles of attendees, it was clear how the men with no prior background in church had a harder time assimilating into Greatest Commandment at first because of their prior *habitus*. Their perceptions of themselves were mixed – acknowledging that they had some bad moments in their past but that overall they were good people. These mixed perceptions allowed them to participate within the community but also held them back from full engagement. Over time and with new experiences they were able to locate themselves squarely within the community of Greatest Commandment, showing how the *habitus* can be changed through learning, or according to Wenger how individual identity can be renegotiated within the community.

Another important consideration is those who attend Greatest Commandment but for various reasons are non-participants in the community of practice. Wenger uses two terms to explain varying degrees of non-participation: peripherality and marginality. Peripherality and marginality both involve a mixture of participation and non-participation, but with different trajectories. Members who are peripheral can be intentionally on the outside, but peripherality

has the possibility of entering into full participation in the future. Members who are marginal are also on the outside, but with a trajectory that does not allow future participation.

Within “Journey to the Centre of the Community” I explain how I was on the periphery at first, but gradually moved into full participation. Within Greatest Commandment, the most common type of attendee on the periphery is single young adults. One attendee commented feeling excluded by virtue of his demographic: “It was pretty much just all couples, and having children now, or this or that, and I’m like, I have a complete disconnect, I’m at a completely different point than they are” (Dustin, 2011). Wenger’s theory aptly explains why single young adults might attend despite non-participation in the community of practice: “Newcomers, for instance, may be on an inbound trajectory that is construed by everyone to include full participation in its future. Non-participation is then an opportunity for learning” (Wenger, p. 166). Despite non-participation in many of the conversations and exchanges, single young adults learn about marriage and parenting in ways that will benefit them in the future assuming that they will also someday marry and have children. Within the practice of Greatest Commandment, it is my observation that single young adults, once engaged and married, begin to attend more frequently. Similarly, once married couples conceive, they attend more frequently. Suddenly, they can participate fully in the community of practice.

The second type of non-participation is marginality. Marginality explains the outliers within Greatest Commandment; people who do not fit within the picture I have painted thus far of Greatest Commandment. In contrast with peripherality, marginality does not imply full participation in the future. A marginal position is one on the outer edge of the group, and the person’s non-participation can become so ingrained that it “may seem impossible to conceive of a different trajectory within the same community” (Wenger, p. 167). For example, within

Greatest Commandment there is a South-East Asian grandmother of two who attends regularly but has no participation due to a language barrier. Every week she attends and brings her grandchildren to Sunday school, smiles and waves at people, and helps put away chairs after church, but interactions with her are limited due to “no English”. Her position as an outlier within the community is necessary to give a well rounded account of Greatest Commandment. Due to limitations in resources I was not able to interview her.

Conflict within Greatest Commandment

Greatest Commandment is not a utopian community. As with almost any community, conflict is present within Greatest Commandment. Personality clashes, faux pas and hurt feelings, these all exist at times within Greatest Commandment. Julie commented that as a group, “We’re going to love each other, and we’re going to hopefully hate each other and get over that. And I don’t think that we should be afraid of that, community and relationships are heavy” (Julie, 2011). Wenger also believes that disagreements can be markers of strong community ties – they are indicators that people are invested (1998).

Within Greatest Commandment, conflict is often silent. Anger is not normally publicly expressed: comments expressed to me privately include “I just kept my mouth shut” and “Could you tell that I was quiet?” (Observations, 2011). Disagreements in group settings typically end with silence on the topic or by other attendees’ attempts to negotiate points of commonality.

Disagreements arose in group discussions of personal topics due to differences in attendees’ subjective positions. Goodall (2000) describes subjective positions as coming from “deeply felt lived experiences because they recall a life's self-defining moments, decisions, or turning points. Examples include instances of birth, death, divorce, separation, natural disasters, war, violence, love, or illness” (p. 133). Within Greatest Commandment, contentious topics

involve deeply felt lived experiences stemming from diverse parenting styles: home birth versus hospital birth, C-sections versus vaginal birth, coddling versus disciplining. Despite the shared traditional family unit between most attendees, the group remains diverse in backgrounds and opinions. Wenger states that “the enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same thing or agrees with everything, but in that it is communally negotiated” (1998, p. 78).

Diversity within the community means that misunderstandings can also occur over religious tenets and lingo. Despite Greatest Commandments commitment to not use religious lingo, within smaller groups like Bible studies and potlucks those who have grown up in the church can slip into familiar modes of talking “church”. Attendees with no religious background sometimes express confusion: “What the hell does running from the Lord mean? I thought God was supposed to always be with you” (Observations, 2011).

Regarding miscommunications and conflict, Heather preached one morning and commented: “The church is messy. Community is messy. A home renovation project is messy. But you do it because in the end, it’s beautiful” (Heather, 2011).

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

I came to the conclusion that there is no real way to describe Greatest Commandment. It is more of a feeling; it's a feeling of comfort with a warm smile a handshake or a hug. It's a feeling of friendship, which I consider all of you. It's a feeling of support, whether it's lending a hand to help move or just an open ear to hear about a hard day or hard times. It's a feeling of trust in knowing that people have your back in times of need or just to let you know that the power of God is with you. It's a feeling of belonging to something bigger than just me, a group of people that have similar but different ideas, but make it all work out in the end for a bigger cause. (Patrick, 2012)

This study fills a gap within scholarly research by providing insight into individual and collective religious identity within a contemporary Christian community in Canada. As both Christianity as lived religion and Canadian faith communities have been sorely understudied, this study's broad focus on patterns of culture-sharing was an ideal place to start. As I painted a picture of Greatest Commandment it is not my intention to narrowly confine all attendees to my interpretations. The nature of ethnography requires a condensing of materials, a generalizing to take place. I can provide only a representation, not reality, and individual identities intersect with collective identities in a multiplicity of ways. Wenger describes that in terms of identity, group participation translates into a perspective:

It does not mean that all members of a community look at the world in the same way. Nonetheless, an identity in this sense manifests as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences – all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises. (Wenger, 1998)

Individuals continue to be diverse, but there are aspects of shared perspectives. This certainly is true of my own life, as I discussed in “Journey to the Centre of the Community”. As I engaged regularly in the community of Greatest Commandment, I began to value what others valued, and as a result enact those values through actions and behaviours. This built upon itself with time, a spiral effect, with more similarities resulting in more participation, and vice versa. Eventually my self-identifiers shifted from single student to married mother.

Greatest Commandment defines its collective identity in terms of being unhypercritical, keeping religion relevant, and being responsive to needs. The pattern of culture-sharing within Greatest Commandment grows from the main demographic of traditional family units. Values, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, social networks and communications largely revolve around the shared experiences of parenthood and spiritual journey. Within the section “Building Community” I listed the ways in which attendees support each other: materially, financially, practically, emotionally and spiritually. Under this paradigm, Greatest Commandment reveals itself to be a unique community worthy of study and separate from larger culture. One attendee reasoned,

By relying on each other, by connecting, we’re building relationships that will shine out, because people will be like hey, you guys really do have each other’s back, right? That’s different, now. It’s not what everybody else is accustomed to. (Observations, 2011)

Within the section “Belonging and Believing” I focused on the reasons people give for attending Greatest Commandment. I found that the majority of people were first invited through friends, and that continued attendance often first depends upon the stimulus of existing relationships. Generation, region, class, race, ethnicity, gender, family history, and religious upbringing—what Holland and Lave (Holland and Lave 2001) refer to as “history-in-person”

and Bourdieu (1990) calls “habitus” help explain the trajectories that bring attendees to Greatest Commandment. The theory that best explains continued participation and immersion within the community is Wenger’s community of practice. Over time participants integrate fully into the community through mutuality of engagement (Wenger, 1998). Reasons for attending then become echoes of the patterns of culture-sharing: they enjoy the feeling of community, the support, the relevance, the friendships, the playdates. Attendees who are not in the primary demographic of Greatest Commandment find difficulty fully engaging with the group and either move to another faith community or satisfy themselves with peripherality or marginality (Wenger, 1998).

Within the section “Being Relevant” I discussed how attendees view the use of popular culture video clips within Greatest Commandment. This study contributes a cursory investigation into the religious dimension of media reception within a community of faith. Responses varied from indifference to an appreciation of viewing popular culture through a religious lens or sacred gaze (Morgan, 2005). Some participants employ references of the popular culture video clips when they talk about Greatest Commandment to those who are unchurched. The use of popular culture video clips within church was not seen as important in and of itself, but simply one aspect of an overall importance placed upon relevance. Attendees value the presence of larger culture within Greatest Commandment: through the video clips, Keefe’s down to earth preaching style, the contemporary worship songs, and Greatest Commandment’s choice of events. Attendees also value the relevance of Greatest Commandment to their outside community, and the church is seen as accessible to those without a history of church attendance.

Warren Clark (2000) writing for Statistics Canada remarks on the linkages between religious traditions and traditional attitudes about family formation. Statistically there are strong positive associations between religious participation and marriage and parenthood. Clark theorizes this is due to religious values formed early in life, but this does not explain the experience of attendees who grew up with no religious background. An explanation that includes this previously unchurched population is found in Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice.

Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice gives deeper understanding of the functioning of Greatest Commandment. It allows us to project why attendees invest so much time and effort into the operations involved in a small church, and in return get so much fulfillment out of participation. Framing congregations as communities of practice is a valuable contribution to literature: it gives scholars additional ways to analyze church participation (or lack thereof) and it gives pastors tools to help build meaningful practices. Here is the crux of Greatest Commandment: engagement in a social community results in experiencing our lives as meaningful, it validates our worth through belonging, and it creates personal histories of becoming within the context of a community (Wenger, 1998). This is why it is all "worth it" for attendees of Greatest Commandment.

Limitations

My role as an active participant within Greatest Commandment was a limitation. Participants may have felt unable to be completely honest, or may have tempered their answers because of their past and future relationship with me. I attempted to circumvent these issues by being honest with participants through revealing my biases, assuring confidentiality and respect, and keeping a researcher journal to remain aware of my own thought patterns and biases.

Consideration must be given to the fact that all interviewees knew that Pastor Keefe is my uncle. Some participant's answers could have been embellished or exaggerated since attendees know of our family ties. I tried to mitigate this by always assuring the respondents that they had anonymity. I also assured them that I would not be offended by any negative comments they had and to speak freely.

Due to life circumstances I was not able to attend every single meeting of Greatest Commandment attendees – however I asked someone who had attended what general topics were discussed. Through this limitation, I was made aware of another limitation: there was evidence that despite my efforts to take discreet notes, attendees were still more self-conscious in my presence. While Jessica was recapitulating a meeting she said, “The last Boundaries with Kids was really good, it was only Caitlyn, Laura, Heather, Michelle and I so we didn't end up doing the lesson, we just talked about our childhoods and it was really good. Everyone was crying”.

“I'm sorry I missed that” I said.

“That's okay, we were wondering whether you had to be there or not (for your thesis). But maybe it worked out better this way; maybe it would have been different (if you had been there)” (Jessica, 2011). This is a question every researcher involved in participant observation must grapple with: are conversations and behaviours changed by our mere presence? Due to the unanswerable nature of this question, this is a limitation of the study.

Finally, since there is not a lot of cross-fertilization between disciplines like communication, religious studies, sociology, psychology and organizational theory, it resulted in difficulty finding numerous resources and theories that used the full depth of knowledge attained

from the sum of the above-mentioned fields. But being free to choose from a multitude of theories allowed me to expand on new territory and contribute to gaps in research.

Future Research Recommendations

Despite the study limitations discussed above, the novel integration and application of interdisciplinary concepts to the reported experience of lived religion at Greatest Commandment has yielded some interesting and informative findings, as well as helped pave the way for additional, similar work in different religious communities. For guidance regarding areas in need of further exploration, results from Reginald Bibby's ongoing Project Canada survey provide some useful clues.

Since 1974 Reginald Bibby has been conducting what he terms the Project Canada surveys: national surveys that monitor social trends every five years. Conducted by mail, Reginald Bibby states that "the samples are highly representative of the Canadian adult population and are of sufficient size to be accurate within about three percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times in 20" (Bibby, 2012).

The Project Canada 2000 survey asked people who were not attending any church, but were receptive to the idea of attending, "What kind of things would make it worthwhile?" Roughly two out of every three people responded:

Close to 40% cited *ministry factors*, particularly relating to themselves personally, such as the meeting of personal needs, personal fulfillment and growth, and affinity with others. Some 30% of our survey respondents who reported that they would be open to greater involvement drew attention to *organizational factors*. They would like to see changes in style and outlook.... Another 30% noted the importance of factors pertaining to *themselves* rather than religious groups as such - including having children, the

participation of family and friends, and changes in their work schedules (Bibby, pp. 220-222)

These three factor headings perfectly complement the three areas which I perceived to be of most importance to attendees of Greatest Commandment: being a supportive community for each other, valuing relevance over tradition, sharing children in common and building relationships. I believe that what these unchurched respondents were describing without their realizing it are functioning communities of practice, relevant to their lives, capable of providing support. I also believe that this is what Greatest Commandment is and why it is so successful within its small population.

Reginald Bibby (2002) states that Canadians are looking for churches to fill a place in their lives, it is the “supply side that poses the problem”. Bibby believes that “the belief systems and programs offered by churches and other religious groups are simply not connecting with the people who need them or think they might need them at some point in the future” (p. 225). Future research needs to be done on other faith communities within Canada to explore the possibility that nurturing specialized communities of practice could enable stronger relationships between members and provide the unchurched with what they are looking for: meaningful engagement with others on a mutual spiritual journey, relevant to their lives not just in church on Sundays but outside of church as well.

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Appendix A



Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Département de Communication | Department of Communication
Head Researcher Carol Myhill

Consent Form

An Ethnography of Greatest Commandment Church:

Conducted by MA student researcher Carol Myhill, with supervision by Professor Rocci Luppicini, and the support of the Department of Communication in the Faculty of Arts at Ottawa University.

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Carol Myhill and supervised by Rocci Luppicini.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore the culture of Greatest Commandment Church. Through studying the attitudes, behaviours, values and shared experiences of people who regularly attend Greatest Commandment, the hope is to build an accurate story of one church within Ottawa, and to ultimately contribute to research in communications and religion in contemporary Canada.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially in providing the researcher with an interview, with possibility of another follow-up interview. The first interview will be a maximum of ninety minutes in length, during which I will be asked several open questions and conversation topics. The second possible interview would last a maximum of one hour.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information regarding my religion, values, beliefs, and membership within the Greatest Commandment community. I will also be asked to speak about my experiences both past and present within whatever churches I have attended or do attend currently. It is natural that volunteering such personal information may cause me to feel slight discomfort or vulnerability. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks. I will be able to keep in contact with the researcher regarding her findings. I will have an opportunity to read my statements and clarify or change anything previously said before publication of any quotes.

Benefits: My participation in this study will contribute to current research on religion in contemporary Canada. An in depth study of the culture and community of Greatest Commandment will benefit others by answering the question 'what draws people to church?', and 'what role does popular culture play in church?'. The majority of members of Greatest Commandment are young families with children. What is it about Greatest Commandment that draws this particular population? Through an in depth examination of these questions, scholars and pastors may be able to better understand the current and possible future state of religion.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for data analysis by the researchers at the University of Ottawa and that my confidentiality will be protected by the use of

pseudonyms instead of my real identity. **Anonymity** will also be protected in the following manner: any unique details pertaining to my identity that could possibly trace someone to find me will be changed, or not included in order to protect your privacy.

Conservation of data: The data collected in the form of hard copy transcripts or tape recordings will be kept in a secure manner in the residence of the primary researcher. The only people who will have access to the data will be the primary researcher, her supervisor and committee members. The data will be conserved until January 2017.

Compensation: Participants will be given a \$5 gift card to Tim Hortons in thanks. This compensation will be offered even if the participant chooses to withdraw from the study.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____ (*Name of participant*), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Carol Myhill of the Communications Department, of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Rocci Lupiccini, PhD.

Rocci Luppicini, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
University of Ottawa

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: (*Signature*) Date: (*Date*)

Researcher's signature: (*Signature*) Date: (*Date*)

Appendix B



Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa
Département de Communication | Department of Communication

Study Recruitment

Volunteers Needed

The purpose of this study is to explore the culture of Greatest Commandment Church. Through studying the attitudes, behaviours, values and shared experiences of people who regularly attend Greatest Commandment, the hope is to build an accurate story of one church within Ottawa, and to ultimately contribute to research in communications and religion in contemporary Canada.

Inclusion criteria: Participants need to attend Greatest Commandment on most Sundays of each month.

Participants will be asked to give an interview of an hour and a half long to Carol Myhill, with the added possibility of a follow-up interview with a length of one hour. Interviews will be audio recorded. The identity of each person within the study will be protected, participants will remain anonymous, and confidentiality is assured. Participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time. Participants will be thanked with a \$5 gift card to Tim Hortons for their time.

Participation in this study is first come, first served. If you are interested in participating, please email Carol Myhill, graduate student at the University of Ottawa with your contact information as soon as possible. Alternately, if you don't have access to the Internet you can call Carol. Additional inquiries may be forwarded to Professor Rocci Luppisini, thesis Supervisor.

Carol Myhill, Graduate student,
Master of Arts in Communication
Department of Communication
University of Ottawa

Rocci Luppisini, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
University of Ottawa

Appendix C



Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Département de Communication | Department of Communication

Interview Protocol

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Thanks for participating – explain the project.

- How would you describe the experience of being a member of Greatest Commandment?
- How would you describe the experience of Sunday morning church?
- Did you belong to any denomination before this?
- What was your experience with churches you've attended in the past?
- What made you decide to attend Greatest Commandment?
- What do you think of the pop culture video clips and songs used within Greatest Commandment?
- How often do you communicate with other Greatest Commandment members outside of church?

Appendix D



Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

Département de Communication | Department of Communication

Interview Protocol for Pastor

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Thanks for participating – explain the project.

- How would you describe the experience of being the Pastor of Greatest Commandment?
- How would you describe the experience of Sunday morning church?
- What was your experience with churches you've been a Pastor at in the past?
- Why is Greatest Commandment non-denominational?
- What made you decide to create Greatest Commandment?
- Why do you use pop culture video clips and songs within Greatest Commandment?
- How often do you communicate with other Greatest Commandment members outside of church?

Appendix E

Documents Collected

Title	Date Created	Source	Length
Our Vision	2008	Greatest Commandment website	1 page
Our Values	2008	Greatest Commandment website	5 pages
Sunday Morning Sermon Notes		Greatest Commandment	
Resolutions: Reliant	January 2, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	7 pages
Resolutions: Real	January 9, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	6 pages
Resolutions: Relevant	January 16, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	8 pages
Resolutions: Responsive	January 23, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	6 pages
Resolutions: Reproducing	January 30, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	8 pages
When I Fall In Love: Why Worship God?	February 6, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	2 pages
When I Fall In Love: Unconditional?	February 13, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	2 pages
When I Fall In Love: Love Songs	February 20, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	3 pages
When I Fall In Love: Something About The Name	February 27, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	3 pages
Biography: John (the favourite?!?)	March 6, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	6 pages
Renovate I: Baby Steps	March 13, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	5 pages
Renovate III: Chosen	March 27, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	7 pages

Renovate V: Respect	April 10, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	5 pages
Renovate VI: Serve	April 17, 2011	Greatest Commandment website	6 pages
Renovate VII: Sacrifice	April 24, 2011 (Easter)	Greatest Commandment website	5 pages
Email Communications	Date Sent/Received	Official Church Communiqué or Group/Personal Communication	Number of Replies Between Attendees if Group Communication
Sunday School Schedule	January 6, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	N/A
Amanda's Pre-Term Labour	January 8, 2011	Group Communication	#####
Babysitting Availability	January 4, 2011	Personal Communication	
Sunday School Lesson	January 9, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Marriage Course Logistics	January 10, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Living Room This Week	January 11, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
What's On at Greatest Commandment	January 11, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Dinner Invitation	January 13, 2011	Personal Communication	
Evite Invitation: Potluck Full of Fun!!!	January 13, 2011	Group Communication	
Hold That Date/Pampered Chef Party	January 13, 2011	Group Communication	#
Melanie's Trip to Haiti to Work With Orphanage	January 15, 2011	Group Communication	#
The Babysitters' Club	January 16, 2011	Group Communication	##
Lunch Invitation	January 22, 2011	Personal Communication	
What's On at Greatest Commandment	January 25, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	

Ultrasound News	January 26, 2011	Personal Communication	
Crib Information	February 1, 2011	Personal Communication	
Swimming Playdate	February 1, 2011	Group Communication	
Sunday School Schedule	February 5, 2011	Group Communication	
What's On at Greatest Commandment	February 7, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Used Clothing and Bake Sale	February 8, 2011	Group Communication	
Evite: Pampered Chef Party	February 9, 2011	Group Communication	##
Parking in Boston	February 13, 2011	Personal Communication	
Playdate Tomorrow?	February 17, 2011	Group Communication	##
What's On at Greatest Commandment	February 20, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
What's On at Greatest Commandment	March 3, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Sunday School Schedule	March 5, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 1	March 8, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Job Loss and Prayer Request	March 9, 2011	Group Communication	
Lentidote Day 2	March 9, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 3	March 10, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Shift Switches	March 11, 2011	Personal Communication	
Lentidote Day 4	March 11, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 5	March 12, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Evite: Bringing'n'Spring Womens Potluck	March 13, 2011	Group Communication	

Lentidote Day 6	March 13, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Selling Couch	March 13, 2011	Personal Communication	
Lentidote Day 7	March 14, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 8	March 15, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 9	March 16, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 10	March 17, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 11	March 18, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 12	March 19, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 13	March 20, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Prayer please	March 21, 2011	Group Communication	
Lentidote Day 14	March 21, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Chat Times	March 22, 2011	Group Communication	
Prayer please – update	March 22, 2011	Group Communication	
Lentidote Day 15	March 22,2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 16	March 23, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 17	March 24, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Kiddies	March 25, 2011	Personal Communication	##
Lentidote Day 18	March 25, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 19	March 26, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 20	March 27, 2011	Official Church	

		Communiqué	
Baby Shower	March 28, 2011	Group Communication	##
Lentidote 21	March 28, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Urgent prayer request	March 29, 2011	Group Communication	##
Lentidote Day 22	March 29, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 23	March 30, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 24	March 31, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 25	April 1, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 26	April 2, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 27	April 3, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 28	April 4, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 29	April 5, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 30	April 6, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 31	April 7, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 32	April 8, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 33	April 9, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 34	April 10, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 35	April 11, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 36	April 12, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	

Lentidote Day 37	April 13, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 38	April 14, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 39	April 15, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 40	April 16, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 41	April 17, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Photos from our trip	April 17, 2011	Personal Communication	
Lentidote Day 42	April 18, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 43	April 19, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 44	April 20, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 45	April 21, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 46	April 22, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Lentidote Day 47 – Easter Sunday	April 23, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Hope	April 25, 2011	Group Communication	##
Dinner?	April 26, 2011	Personal Communication	
Din-Din	May 2, 2011	Personal Communication	
Evite Invitation: Great Food and Awesome Company	May 4, 2011	Group Communication	##
Fwd: Mother's Day Deal: Free Baby Carriers Promo Code!	May 4, 2011	Personal Communication	##
Never Mind...	May 4, 2011	Personal Communication	
Babysittin	May 5, 2011	Personal Communication	

Schedule and summer theme	May 9, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
The Babysitter's club	May 9, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	May 10, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Couple of Things	May 19, 2011	Personal Communication	###
What's on at Greatest Commandment	May 25, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
This Sunday	May 27, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	June 7, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Prayer Request	June 10, 2011	Group Communication	
T Party	June 15, 2011	Personal Communication	
Tea Party	June 16, 2011	Group Communication	##
Breastfeeding Resource	June 17, 2011	Personal Communication	
Urgent Request – The Babysitter's Club	June 21, 2011	Group Communication	####
Baby to CHEO	June 21, 2011	Group Communication	##
What's on at Greatest Commandment	June 22, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Update July 4	July 4, 2011	Group Communication	
Evite Inviatation: Summer Evening on the Patio	July 6, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	July 8, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Evite Invitation: Lia Sophia	July 12, 2011	Group Communication	
Thank You	July 13 2011	Personal Communication	
Message about Summer Evening on the Patio	July 15, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	July 19, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	

Upcoming Schedule for Kids	July 20, 2011	Group Communication	
FW: [Friday Foto] Prayer request for Malawi	July 21, 2011	Group Communication	###
Event update: Lia Sophia	August 8, 2011	Group Communication	##
Dal Recipe	August 9, 2011	Personal Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	August 9, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Next Girl's Night	August 12, 2011	Group Communication	#####
Evite Invitation: Calling All Past/Future Bridesmaids and Brides	August 14, 2011	Group Communication	
Tummy Time Information	August 16, 2011	Personal Communication	
School Aged Kids	August 17, 2011	Group Communication	
Brittania Beach	August 19, 2011	Group Communication	####
Sunday	August 19, 2011	Personal Communication	
Question	August 22, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	August 24, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Dedication	August 27, 2011	Personal Communication	###
Meeting Wednesday Night, August 31 st	August 28, 2011	Group Communication	
Family robbed while child in hospital	August 30, 2011	Group Communication	#####
Prayer request	August 31, 2011	Group Communication	
Meeting last night	September 1, 2011	Group Communication	
Q	September 2, 2011	Personal Communication	
Prayer request update	September 3, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	September 7, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	

Sunday School bible verses	September 9, 2011	Group Communication	
Recipe	September 15, 2011	Personal Communication	##
Lunch	September 15, 2011	Personal Communication	##
Thrush Information Attached	September 16, 2011	Personal Communication	
Teething	September 18, 2011	Personal Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	September 18, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Painting Party?!	September 21, 2011	Group Communication	###
Message about Calling All Past/Future Bridesmaids and Brides	September 21, 2011	Group Communication	
Hi	September 25, 2011	Personal Communication	
Look Familiar????	October 1, 2011	Group Communication	
Bible verses	October 1, 2011	Personal Communication	
Bible series code	October 1, 2011	Group Communication	
Lunch	October 3, 2011	Personal Communication	##
What's on at Greatest Commandment	October 13, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Message about Lia Sophia	October 16, 2011	Group Communication	##
Real Women, Real Faith – October 18th	October 17, 2011	Group Communication	
Please Pray (Greatest Commandment)	October 23, 2011	Group Communication	##
Oct. 30 th	October 24, 2011	Personal Communication	##
What's on at Greatest Commandment	October 26, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Coverage	October 28, 2011	Group Communication	#####
Eats	October 28, 2011	Personal Communication	###
Please pray: Update	October 31, 2011	Group Communication	#####

Movember	November 1, 2011	Group Communication	
Evite Invitation: 3rd Annual Cookie Exchange/Potluck	November 5, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	November 7, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
December Four	November 10, 2011	Group Communication	#####
kid kaf or other play date location?	November 21, 2011	Group Communication	#####
What's on at Greatest Commandment	November 22, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Message about 3rd Annual Cookie Exchange/Potluck	December 1, 2011	Group Communication	#####
Gift for Keefe	December 2, 2011	Group Communication	##
Last Living Room	December 11, 2011	Group Communication	
What's on at Greatest Commandment	December 13, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
We've Moved	December 16, 2011	Group Communication	
Christmas at Greatest Commandment	December 22, 2011	Official Church Communiqué	
Message about New Year's Eve Party	December 30, 2011	Group Communication	
Kids Workers Post Christmas Get Together	December 30, 2011	Group Communication	###

Appendix F

Participant List

Interview 1: January 30, 2011 (Length: 14:01)
Keefe

Interview 2: March 7, 2011 (Length: 20:47)
Julie

Interview 3: March 14, 2011 (Length: 1:20:44)
Dustin

Interview 4: March 14, 2011 (Length: 42:33)
Amy

Interview 5: March 24, 2011 (Length: 42:48)
Heather

Interview 6: March 30, 2011 (Length: 47:00)
Patrick

Interview 7: May 13, 2011 (Length: 39:28)
Laura

Interview 8: May 19, 2011 (Length: 51:03)
Henry

Interview 9: September 14, 2011 (Length: 27:33)
Eric

Appendix G

File Number: 09-10-01

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 12/22/2010



Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:
http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:
http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp