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BUILDING THE COMMONS: CHURCH, COMMUNITY, AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION
ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATIONS IN A MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATION

BY

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INTRODUCTION: HOW I CAME TO [STUDY] PARKSIDE

“Our congregation sits on the corner where gentrification meets generational poverty,” explains Rev. Dr. Chris Patterson, from the pulpit one morning, during a sermon series on his congregation’s identity and calling. Pastor Chris is the pastor of Parkside Church, a historic congregation in the City Park neighborhood of Atlanta, and this pithy line reflects the complex history of Parkside’s neighborhood, a history that has profoundly shaped the life of this small, multiracial community of faith.¹ A historically white congregation located downtown, Parkside moved a few miles south in the 1930s, making their homes in City Park, a flourishing white middle and upper-class neighborhood. The congregation blossomed for the next two decades, but desegregation and white flight dramatically shifted the racial landscape of the city, and with it Parkside’s neighborhood. Through the 1950s and 1960s housing values plummeted in City Park, crime rose, and the neighborhood community began to unravel.² Parkside’s congregation struggled to stay alive through the numerous waves of transition. While at first members continued to drive in to the city from their suburban homes on Sundays, the congregation grew increasingly fearful of the neighborhood, and as elderly members passed away, younger members began relocating to churches in the suburbs.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the congregation, neighborhood, and individuals involved in this research.

² For more on white flight in Atlanta see Kevin M. Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), for more about this particular neighborhood and the relationship between desegregation and white flight, see pages 164-169.

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While the congregation continued to dwindle, the neighborhood was hit by a new wave of change: gentrification. Beginning in the late 1980s, middle class professionals and young families began moving into the neighborhood and the formerly deteriorating community started to see signs of new life: renovated houses, cleaner public areas, decreased crime.³ But gentrification also had a number of negative effects. While the neighborhood maintained some level of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, the rising cost of rent and property taxes displaced many families in the lowest income brackets. These families, most of whom were black, were forced to move outside of the Park's immediate perimeter, leaving a stark contrast between the inner streets of the neighborhood, which now contained well-kempt middle class homes, and the run down properties on the outskirts of the neighborhood, some of which eventually became large blocks of public housing. These complex economic dynamics escalated racial and class-based tension within the neighborhood and left deep wounds in the City Park community.⁴ By 2004, the congregation of Parkside had dwindled to eight members, all above the age of sixty, but the new changes within the community had given them a new sense of purpose. Rather than sell their building and close their doors, Parkside's elderly members made an intentional decision "open their doors" to the community around them. They dreamed of becoming a resource for their changing and hurting community, to reach beyond their walls. They wanted to diversify, to

³ For more on the effects of gentrification in Southeast City, see Ebenezer O. Aka, Jr, "Gentrification and Socioeconomic Impacts of Neighborhood Integration and Diversification in Atlanta, GA," *National Social Science Perspectives*, 41.2 (2009), 5.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

become a church “that looks like the neighborhood,” and to recast a vision for “the church on the corner” as a place for hope, spirituality, and service within the community.⁵

I first visited Parkside as a seminary student in the fall of 2011. As I drove through neighborhood streets making my way to the church, I found myself amazed by the diversity of this small, in-town community. Large Victorian houses stood beside small, quaint bungalows. Homes with well-kempt lawns shared driveways with dilapidating duplexes. A variety of people sauntered down the brick cobblestone sidewalks—I noticed a group of young mothers with strollers, a crowd of black youth walking toward the basketball court, and a homeless man carrying his knapsack and a bundle of plastic bags. I pulled up to the stately brick building that loomed over the northern corner of the park and thought to myself, “Here we go, again.” I was still new to Atlanta, and every Sunday morning seemed to be a painstaking reminder that the field of study for which I had rearranged my life was of dying cultural significance. A Masters student in theology, I was hungry to find a vibrant church community to call home for the three-year tenure of my studies, but it seemed there was none to be found. Sunday after Sunday I entered massive, historic church buildings that were once filled with vital communities of faith, now only hallow versions of their old self: choirs dwindled to a handful of committed congregants, sanctuaries a quarter full, buildings gradually sliding into disrepair. The people were wonderful, but the decline of traditional, institutional religion was not lost on me. And I was beginning to feel hopeless. As I climbed the stairs to Parkside that fall morning, I had all but given up, resigning myself to doctoral studies and washing my hands of the messy challenge of church in the twenty-first century. Thank goodness I didn’t.

⁵ Tony Lankford, *Cultivating Good Soil at Park Avenue Baptist Church* (under review for publication by Mercer University Press: Macon, GA, 2012), 3.

Before I even entered the narthex of Parkside I could hear the buzz of activity in the sanctuary. The pitter-patter of children's feet on the hardwood floors echoed in the hallway, and the enthusiastic voices of lively conversation filled me with hope. This was going to be different. I opened the door to the sanctuary and was immediately surprised at what lay in front of me. This congregation was as diverse as the neighborhood beyond its walls. A handful of elementary school kids barreled past me, shouting and playing. Two of them were black, one was white. A few African American teenagers in sagging jeans chatted with a twenty-something white woman and her small son by the stage. A young white mother with a physical disability was being helped to her seat by a middle-aged African American woman with dreadlocks. Two elderly women, one white and one black, sat talking quietly in a pew nearby. This was not what I had expected.

Multiracial congregations are exceedingly rare. Of the hundreds of thousands of religious communities in the United States, the average level of racial diversity within American congregations is near zero, and the number of stable, racially mixed congregations is less than seven percent.⁶ Yet I had landed in one. And my visit that first morning was just the beginning. Since that fall day nearly three years ago, I have learned the ins and outs of this unique, neighborhood congregation as a member, a pastoral intern, a religious educator and now as an ethnographic researcher. It is precisely my investment in this congregation over the past three years that has inspired me to more critically examine what is going on in this place. My own hopelessness at the vast decline of thriving urban congregations and my interest in the scarcity of multiracial congregations has left me wondering how this particular congregation successfully revitalized, and in the process, managed to become so diverse. What drew people here in the

⁶ Michael O. Emerson with Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multicultural Congregations in the United States*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 46.

beginning, and what draws people here now? Conversations overheard in the bathroom on Sunday morning and at meals with church members left me musing about why people choose to stay in this small congregation when it lacks ample programming or fancy worship, and when conflicts fueled by differences of race and class abound? My interest in Christian formation and racial reconciliation prompted me to wonder if being a part of such a diverse community of faith forms people of faith in particular ways? People of different colors share pews, meals, and prayers, but does this mean reconciliation is authentically happening here?

Engaging the complexity of community, spirituality, and revitalization in a racially, socioeconomically, and generationally diverse congregation has frequently challenged my theological assumptions and provoked, if not demanded, a theological response.⁷ This project is my effort to make sense of this strange and beautiful place, to listen honestly to the voices in this unique congregation and take seriously the important theology embodied in the lives of its members. My hope is that we may glean something of value from the creativity, commitments, and customs of this community of faith, as well as from its struggles and failures. I believe this small, neighborhood congregation has something to offer us about what it means to work out our Christian faith in the complexity of the world.

The project is composed of three parts. Part One is an exploration of methodology and theology. Here, I place myself in the converging fields of sociology, practical theology, and Christian ethics. I explicate my own methodological commitments, and trace the ways in which ethnography has been used in the disciplines of theology and ethics, in order to argue that

⁷ Mary McClintock in *Place of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), offers an understanding of theology as a response to wound. Similar to my statement above, she uses the metaphor of wound to suggest that theology is not something brought in after description, but rather, “like a wound, theological thinking is generated by a sometimes inchoate sense that something *must* be addressed” (14).

ethnography is no longer simply a tool for description but has come to be understood as a source for theological and ethical reasoning. Part Two provides a thick description of the congregation of Parkside and its surrounding neighborhood. Here, expands on the descriptive story above, aiming to situation the congregation of Parkside within the larger community landscape of City Park, and make the complex histories of both church and neighborhood clear. Part Three moves from description to theology. In this final chapter I offer the congregation of Parkside as a model for new ways of thinking about ecclesiology in our current, largely unreligious context. I explore what claims the congregation of Parkside embodies concerning the nature of the church and the relationship between church and world. I then offer concluding remarks concerning how this new ecclesiology points toward a different framework for thinking about racial justice and reconciliation within communities of faith. I name the contributions Parkside offers to a conversation about diversity, transformation, and reconciliation, and call for further research in this area of study.

PART I: METHODS & MEANING
EXAMINING ETHNOGRAPHY AS A SOURCE FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND ETHICS

The methodology for this project comes from the convergence of three primary fields within the realm of religious studies: sociology of religion, practical theology, and Christian ethics. These fields are currently converging with one another in the arena of religious research. It began with a move in practical theology to take up the tools of congregational studies in order to create descriptive theologies, and in ethics a move toward ethnography as a way to explore not simply how people should live, but how they actually *do* live.⁸ More recently, however, theology and ethics alike have made a “turn” to ethnography not just as a resource for the descriptive task, but as tool for offering normative standards for theology and ethics.⁹ In many ways, my own journey with these three disciplines follows the pattern set by this historical arc.

Placing Myself in the Field(s)

I first became interested in congregational studies and ethnography as a sociology student working alongside a seasoned sociologist of religion and congregational consultant. Yet, it was not until I was a young minister working in local congregations that I began using these tools informally to think in descriptive and prescriptive ways. Ethnography in this context had become

⁸ For a definition of “descriptive theology” see Don Browning, “Congregational Studies as Practical Theology” in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 198. For a survey of the turn toward ethnography in the field of ethics, see Thomas A. Lewis “Ethnography, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 38.3 (2010), 395-403.

⁹ The phrase “ethnographic turn” seems to be particularly important. It has been used numerous times in informal conversations among scholars within these converging fields as well as in published works, including as a chapter title in Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen’s book *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, “The Ethnographic Turn in Theology and Ethics.” This phrase seems to denote a move toward qualitative methods of research within various disciplines of religious studies. For the use of this term in other fields of research, see Rebecca K. Culyba, et al, “The Ethnographic Turn: Fact, Fashion, or Fiction,” *Qualitative Sociology*, 27.4 (2004).

a method for learning about the culture of a new congregational setting I was entering, and congregational analysis became a way to make sense of congregational politics or conflict, and to keep tabs on the relationship between theology and practice within the life of the community I served. The more I observed these congregations, the more I realized the value of sociology's tools, not just to help unearth the complexities within communities, but moreover, to name and frame the theologies embodied in the lives of the parishioners, theologies that supplemented and often corrected the academic theology I was encountering in the classroom.¹⁰ As I have worked on this project, I have been thrilled to find companions within the field that are equally disturbed by the gap between academic theologizing and the lived theologies of the congregants in the pews of local congregations. I have been encouraged to find scholars seeking new ways to name the normative nature of the theological and ethical lives of the people in the pews.¹¹ However, like the current fluidity of the field itself, this project does not have a definitive and exhaustive answer to the question of the precise ways the fields of sociology, practical theology, and Christian ethics fit together. Rather, it is seeking to look at various intersections within these fields as one would look at a prism, hoping to catch the infinite insights offered by a slight change in angle, or turn of the wrist. While these three fields share in common significant methods, tools, insights, and interests, it is important to begin by pulling apart each strand in order to examine it separately, and show the unique contributions it makes to this project.

¹⁰ See *Places of Redemption*, 9 for Fulkerson's similar critique of what she terms "trickle-down theory of applied theology."

¹¹ Including Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Christian Scharen, Aana Marie Vigen, Pete Ward, Melissa Browning, and Peter R. Gathje.

*Getting at What's Happening Here:
Research Methods in the Sociology of Religion*

Trained first as a sociological researcher, the methods I have employed for this project arise from the tools offered by the sociology of religion and congregational studies in the form of ethnography and congregational analysis. These two methods provided the platform for data collection, allowing me to gather information in the form of narratives and experiences by observing what is going on in this place, and listening to extended reflections on how people articulate and interpret their experiences.

The primary tools for data collection were ethnographic in nature, including participant observation and in-depth conversational interviews. Over the course of the past eight months, I have conducted ten in-depth conversational interviews, coded by generative themes.¹² I have also engaged in countless forms of participant observation during worship services, small group gatherings, business meetings, staff meetings, and a variety of congregational programs. The relationship between the interviews and the participant observation was reciprocal. My interview questions were developed largely out of my previous observation of the community, both formally and informally. However, after beginning interviews my choice of which activities to engage in participant observation were driven by themes that arose in interviews, and occasionally new experiences of observation prompted the addition of new questions to the interview schedule.

¹² My primary method for coding came from Mary Clark Moschella's *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, in which she offers an accessible methodology for organizing and analyzing data from interviews and participant observation. This method includes immersion in the data, "slicing and bagging" the data into categories determined by the data itself, coding the data by generative themes and analyzing and interpreting the data in order to understand how it functions within the life of the congregation. For more in this see Moschella's "Organizing Data: Methods for Analysis" in *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press: 2008), 167-190.

Secondary methods for data collection and analysis come from the tools offered by congregational analysis. I have drawn significantly on the work of Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, William McKinney and their contributors in the seminal book *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. I have formally and informally put the methods in this work to use within the Parkside congregation. Most significantly I have drawn on the tools they have crafted for ecological analysis, ritual analysis, and process analysis. Ecological analysis takes seriously the context in which the congregation resides, through analyzing census data, constructing congregational and neighborhood timelines, taking space tours, and asking members to create network maps.¹³ These methods provided helpful content for constructing a thick description of the complex relationship between Parkside and its surrounding neighborhood, City Park. Ritual analysis provides one frame for understanding the identity of the congregation by exploring the activities a congregation engages in together. Participant observation during important congregational activities, as well as interview questions that concern the types of activities congregants find meaningful, helped to paint a picture of the ritual life of the congregation. Although the rituals that the members of Parkside participate in are not what we traditionally think of as religious rituals, the lens of ritual analysis is used here to explore how the various activities that members engage in shape the life and identity of the congregation in meaningful ways. Finally, process analysis helps to make sense of decision-making, congregational planning, program development, and conflict resolution by uncovering the layers of power, leadership, and disparity at Parkside. Interview questions pertaining to

¹³ For more on the methods of ecological analysis, Nancy L. Eiesland and R. Stephen Warner, "Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context" in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 43-53.

conflict, decision-making processes, and access to polity, as well as observation in congregational, deacon, and staff meetings provides appropriate data for process analysis.¹⁴

*What Counts as Theological?:
Practical Theology, Methodology and Epistemology*

While congregational analysis and ethnography offer the primary method for this work, it is significant to note that I seek to go beyond the realm of the traditional analytical description that is often the result of these sociological methods. This project draws on practical theology for two primary reasons, first, to construct descriptive theology, and then move beyond this to make an argument for the normative shape of theological claims embodied within the life of members at Parkside.

Don Browning's critical book *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1991) and essay, "Congregational Studies as Practical Theology" (1994) trace his construction of a new proposal for a merger within the fields of congregational studies and theology. Browning argues for "descriptive theology," which uses the tools of congregational studies to craft thick descriptions of congregational life with a hermeneutical eye toward formulating the deep questions encountered by these communities of faith.¹⁵ Like Bellah's notion of hermetical social science, descriptive theology is a critical social science that does not seek to manipulate participants in order to obtain information, but rather to learn honestly from their stories so that the complexity of their lived experiences enables more concrete theological and ethical reflection.¹⁶ The notion

¹⁴ While all of these methods were used to gather and analyze data, it should be noted they do not all appear explicitly within this work, due to relative brevity of this thesis compared to the copious amounts of data yielded through ethnographic study.

¹⁵ Browning, "Congregational Studies as Practical Theology," 206-208.

¹⁶ For more on Bellah's notion of hermeneutical social science, see *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press,

of descriptive theology offers the grounds for this work to explore important questions of race, class, privilege, difference, reconciliation and transformation. The stories and experiences of parishioners at Parkside complexify these theological categories and compel new theological and ethical reflection that takes seriously the “situation” of faith within this congregation.¹⁷

Descriptive theology is only the beginning of the ways in which practical theology offers theoretical frameworks for this work. This project, like a number of other recent projects within the field of practical theology, seeks to move beyond descriptive theology and make a turn using ethnography as a means to make normative theological conclusions from the lives of the Parkside community. That is, not only do I want to offer concrete descriptions of the theological and ethical situations present within the congregation of Parkside, but to recognize the very situations themselves as theological and, as such, offering valuable truth about self, God, and world, from this specific concrete experience. A number of recent works in the field of practical theology push the boundary of descriptive theology and turn to ethnography in order to unearth normative theological insights. These arguments provide a foundation for the methodology of this work. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen in their edited volume, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, for example, suggest that ethnography is not simply a research method, but a process of meaning making in which researchers become learners by taking seriously communal and individual experiences as a source of wisdom. They state, “we understand ethnography as a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people—their worlds, practices, traditions, experiences, insights—in particular times and places in order to

1985), 301-302 and Don Browning’s *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 87-88.

¹⁷ For more on the “situation” of theology see Fulkerson *Places of Redemption*, 10-11.

understand how they make meaning and what they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationship, and the divine.”¹⁸

Like Scharen and Vigen, Mary McClintock Fulkerson also seeks to extend the bounds of normative theology in her work *Places of Redemption*. Fulkerson suggests that the theological frame she brought to bear on her ethnographic investigations was limited by a description/application model of theology. She argues that not only does ethnography enable more concrete theologizing by taking seriously the “complexities of contemporary lived situation,” but also by prompting its researchers to “seek out a patterning of the community that can yield the continuum of experience [she or he] has identified.”¹⁹ That is, ethnography pushes the boundaries of normative theological reflection by widening the framework of theological reflection itself. In her work, Fulkerson finds that the parishioners she seeks to learn from rarely used explicit theological language to articulate their experiences, yet this did not mean that their experiences lacked theological freight. Rather, their experiences demanded new frameworks for defining what constitutes theology itself. She states, “The dense situations of differences must be framed in a way that not only brings its complexity into view but also assesses its moves to redeem the realities associated with these harms.”²⁰ Fulkerson urges us to take seriously the realities within a situation and argues that these situations are *doing* something explicitly theological, in her case, “creating places for appearing that are redemptive and political.”²¹

¹⁸ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 16.

¹⁹ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

The important work of Scharen and Vigen, and Fulkerson not only encourages me to explore exactly what is going on in the congregation at Parkside, but more important, it allows me to suggest that what is going on here, whether articulated theologically or not, *is* theological. It buttresses an epistemological foundation of embodied knowing that takes seriously experience as source for theology (and ethics) and enables me to argue that the community of faith at Parkside, with their bodies, actions, and experiences of difference, makes important theological claims about the nature of ecclesiology and reconciliation. In my effort to take seriously the situation at Parkside, I have draw further on Fulkerson's work as a resource for this project. Fulkerson makes an important contribution to the field generally by interrogating our notions of the theological process and what constitutes theology. Her work also offers important insights to this project in particular because of the content of her ethnographic work and the aims she and I share in analysis. Fulkerson studies a multiracial, multi-ability congregation that has many similarities to Parkside. As such, her work provides two ways of expanding theological frames that are significant for my analysis of Parkside, including her definition of situational theology and her expanded notions of practice. Fulkerson suggests that theology is situational and that an adequate frame for understating the situational nature of lived faith must expand to incorporate a wider continuum of experience, including hidden inheritances, bodies, visceral reactions, and powers both local and global.²² This expanded notion of the situation of faith enables my reading of Parkside to take seriously the complexities of the congregation including differences in bodies, education, language, and socioeconomic status. Taking this density into account makes clear the ways in which these differences produce visceral reactions, raise to the surface distinct

²² Ibid., 11.

histories of privilege and discrimination, and reshape habituated senses of normal.²³ Second, Fulkerson seeks to expand the notion of practice in a similar way. Faithful practices, she suggests, are not confined to cognitive activities that display what Christians believe, but rather require “something more affectively and situationally rich,” which includes nondiscursive elements, like bodies.²⁴ She suggests that the answer is not to take into account theological discourse *and* lived faith, but rather the relationship between the two. She states, “what counts as complex enough to be considered a practice requires attention to the ceaseless interplay between the messages of bodies and the messages of explicit discourse.”²⁵ This expanded notion of practice allows Fulkerson to consider the importance of practices that may not seem explicitly theological by taking seriously the contributions of bodies, the things these bodies represent, and the way nondiscursive situations embody theology. This expanded notion of practices enables me to explore meaning-making at Parkside within activities that lie outside of what traditionally constitutes a practice and explore spheres that aren’t about cognitive theological discourse. This is particularly important for helping me to frame the patterns of reconciliation that occur within the congregation. Theological language used to talk about racial reconciliation is often lacking, yet the ways that bodies share and reform space creates openings of hospitality that enable glimpses of racial reconciliation. Fulkerson’s recreation of the notion of practice allows me to take into account bodies within a particular space, what these bodies represent, and how their arrangement embodies a particular theology.

²³ The language of “habituated sense of normal” comes also from Fulkerson’s work in which she suggests that encounters with “other” reshape one’s sense of what constitutes “normal.” See particularly Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 15.

²⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁵ Ibid., 50.

Christian Scharen, in his book *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, calls for a closer relationship between the disciplines of theology and sociology of religion. Scharen suggests that these two fields offer a corrective for one another—ethnography provides a reality check for theology, particularly ecclesiological theologizing, and theology offers boundaries for credible theology that is derived from within local congregations.²⁶ This project seeks to explore this co-constitutive relationship, exposing the ways that ethnographic investigations offer important insights to theological reflection (particularly theologizing on the nature of the church) and expand the frames used to make sense of life theologically, but also to place the theological claims embodied within the congregation of Parkside alongside more systematic theological reflection so that they may be credible within theological discourse, and also generative to the field of theology in a broad sense.

*Ethnography and Christian Ethics:
Formation, Social Engagement, and the Role of Human Experience*

The third methodological frame for this project is ethics. Question of formation and social engagement are at the very heart of this study, pointing to an intersection of virtue ethics and social ethics. I am not the first to point to this intersection. Stanley Hauerwas in his important work *A Community of Character* puts forth an argument for the relationship between virtue ethics and social ethics. He suggests that communities of faith as virtuous communities form people of faith in particular ways that enable the church not to *have* a social ethic, but to *be* a social ethic by embodying God's character in a way that stands in contrast to the character of the world. This notion of virtue ethics is compelling because it takes seriously the idea of formation—that is, communities of faith form Christians into particular ways of being in the

²⁶ Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 15-30.

world. For Parkside, the ramification of this intersection becomes clear: how does being in a multiracial, multi-socio-economic congregation shape people of faith in particular ways?

Fulkerson states succinctly, “Most accounts of academic theology assume that its ultimate end is contemporary lived faith, sometimes defined as ‘ethics.’²⁷ I would argue that the same end is true for my encounter with this unique community of faith, though my hope is not to define ethics as traditional academic theology would, but rather to *find* ethics. How does the theology embodied within this particular congregation through the arrangement of bodies and experiences of difference result in a particular way of living out faith? And how can the ethical commitments within this community inform us about matters of race, reconciliation, privilege, and difference?

While the convergence of virtue ethics and social ethics seems obvious, it is important to note that virtue ethicists have historically rejected social scientific methods of research that might enable theologians to unearth *how* formation occurs and what the *content* of this formation tell us about daily living. Hauerwas has been at the fore of this rejection, choosing to draw upon literature and personal biography to make claims about ethical formation rather than a careful study of congregational life. Only recently have a handful of scholars begun to criticize the anecdotal method of Hauerwas and others, noting how it conceals privilege and perpetuates the notion of a single, monolithic Christian narrative that forms all who call themselves Christian, and fails to take seriously the complexities of lived experience.²⁸ And while feminist social ethicists have long been turning to the category of experience to complexify moral reasoning and

²⁷ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 9.

²⁸ For extended criticism of Hauerwas and other virtue ethicists see Scharen and Vigen, “Critiques of the use of Social Science in Theology and Ethics” in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* and Gloria Albright’s *The Character of Our Communities* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

unearth normative ethical claims, they also have been hesitant to embrace qualitative social scientific research as a way to access personal experience.²⁹

Only recently, as in the field of practical theology, have ethicists, both religious and nonreligious, become interested in ethnography as a way to take seriously not just how one should live, but the ways individuals and communities actually do live.³⁰ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen offer a promising framework for the practice of ethnography in Christian ethics (in tandem with their framework for the use of ethnography in theology) in their edited volume mentioned above, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. Vigen also unpacks this claim more extensively in relationship to ethics in her important essay, “Descriptive and Normative Ways of Understanding Human Nature,” in which she calls for a reevaluation of the range of sources used in Christian ethics. Vigen makes two moves here that prove to be foundational to this project.

First, Vigen argues for an expansion the traditional quadrilateral of sources. While scholars within the field of Christian ethics have traditionally drawn upon Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience as sources for ethical reasoning, Vigen argues for the inclusion of other sources. She suggests a number of sources, but one is particular important for this project: communities of formation. Vigen's argument for the inclusion of communities of formation as sources for ethical and moral inquiry takes seriously the ability of congregations to offer

²⁹ Note in particular Beverly Harrison's essay, “Doing Christian Ethics” in *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 30-17. In this essay she suggests feminist ethics offer a helpful corrective traditional deontological and theological ethics by rejecting a need for external moral authority and taking seriously experience as a primary source for moral deliberation.

³⁰ For a history of this “turn” see Lewis “Ethnography, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics.”

normative theological insights.³¹ This offers validity to the questions raised above concerning formation within this multiracial congregation. Vigen's argument becomes a foundational framework from which to engage these curiosities: how does being in a multiracial congregation shape people of faith in particular ways? How does one's engagement with difference within the context of a multiracial congregation shape her understanding of God, self, and other? How do practices within a multiracial setting shape one's moral imagination and one's commitment (intentionally or unintentionally) to the transformation of society into a more just and equal world? Peter R. Gathje states, "Christian virtue ethics focuses upon the moral formation of persons within a community of faith that takes place through practice of the community's visions."³² Vigen's attention to communities of formation offers the impetus for engaging questions about how congregants at Parkside are practicing the community's vision of inclusion and diversity, and how is this forming them to participate in the world in particular ways.

Second, Vigen suggests that a new function for the role of experience in ethics is necessary. Experience as a source for ethics, she argues, has been used as a tool to help ethicists craft full and accurate portrayals of human experiences by which to develop moral and ethical claims. However, a more complex function for experience is necessary. Drawing on the work of Susan L. Secker, Margaret Farley, and Christian Scharen, Vigen argues that experience can and should also function as an ethical authority, a type of truth claim.³³ Vigen advances a move from experience as a resource for description to experience as a resource for pre(or pro)scription in

³¹ Aana Marie Vigen, "Descriptive and Normative Ways for Understanding Human Nature," *God, Science, Sex and Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 245-247, 251.

³² Peter R. Gathje, "The Cost of Virtue" in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 209.

³³ Vigen, "Descriptive and Normative," 250.

ethical and moral reasoning.³⁴ This move is significant because it makes room for the lived experiences of members of Parkside to make meaningful contributions to normative ethical claims. It honors the wisdom within the congregation by moving from question of *how* multiracial congregations shape people into particular patterns of moral engagement to *what* these patterns of engagement tells us about normative ethical claims. That is, what can the experiences of congregants' at Parkside tell us about the nature of social engagement, transformation, justice, reconciliation, and hope?

This project, like the theories of theology and ethics that inform it, seeks to show that everyday people embody a theology and live an ethic, whether they understand this or not. It seeks to bring these theological and ethical commitments to conscious awareness in the hopes of offering this particular community, as well as the global Church, an analysis of the complexities of diversity and reconciliation through exploring the lived experiences of individuals in this particular community of faith and how they negotiate these complexities within and outside of the walls of this congregation.

A Word on Humility & Reflexivity

Two virtues, humility and honesty, seem particularly important for ethnographic work.³⁵ Humility is called on for one's willingness to authentically listen to and learn from the individuals and communities he or she studies. Honesty is necessary for the researcher's ability to critically assess her own biases and assumptions. There is no doubt that I sit in a precarious place, as a member and previous minister in the Parkside congregation seeking to do ethnographic research within the walls of my own community. It is a complicated endeavor to

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Other ethnographic researchers have noted these virtues. For an example see Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 17-20.

take off my ministerial hat for a few months and don the garb of an ethnographer. I come to the conversational interviews with my own opinions about the questions I ask to others, my own ideas about the probable responses I will hear, and my own experiences within the congregation floating in my head. Authentic listening and honest assessments of my own biases are hard work. They require critical self-reflection and a great degree of openness to my own malformations, revealed within the context of this congregation. Yet, I believe my strange positioning within the congregation may be more of a benefit than a liability.

My investment in this project has proved to be an advantage within my ethnographic investigations for three primary reasons: it has required honesty, it has allowed vulnerability, and it has provided energy and commitment. Doing this project within a community that I know (and that knows me) has meant that I have a deep level of accountability. It is assumed that what I mine from the lives and stories within Parkside and develop into a coherent theoretical offering will be read, not just by academics, but also by the people in the pews. This awareness has required uncompromising honesty to the stories I share and the way in which I share them. It compels a commitment to naming what is *actually* happening in this congregation in all of its density, and prevents collapsing complex ideas and multivalent opinions into one neat and tidy offering. Second, doing this research in a familiar context has enabled a deep level of vulnerability from those I have learned from. While I am sure that there have been times within interviews that the conversation has been maimed by an interviewee's unwillingness to tell me the depth of their opinion about a particular topic, I believe those times have been far surpassed by the accounts of open and honest sharing that comes from a history of relationship I share with many of those I have interviewed. That is, my identity as a member of the congregation reveals my own stake in many issues concerning the life of the congregation, and ironically this

knowledge seemed to encourage vulnerability. Interviewers did not feel as though they were talking to someone who was unaffected by the struggles within the life of the community, but someone who shares these struggles and desires change. I was often taken aback by participants' willingness to be personal, vulnerable, open, and engage hard questions. Lastly, my commitment to this particular community of faith has been a great source of energy when this project has felt discouraging. There were moments when I felt as though I might burst if I were to hear another complaint about worship or other frustrations within the community. Yet my deep desire to see good within this community kept me moving forward and encouraged me with renewed fervor to name the growing edges within the congregation as much as its' gifts and successes.³⁶

The questions that drive this project are not my questions alone. These questions arose in conversations I had with community members in the hallway between worship and Sunday school, wonderings that I heard voiced by newcomers interacting with this community for the first time, and issues that bubbled up in debates over worship. These are not my questions alone. These are community questions. As such, this work is more than an interesting intellectual project or theological inquiry of and personal interest. This work is an offering to a living community of faith, seeking to live more fully into the work of God in their lives, and in the world.

³⁶ For an example of others who have noticed the somewhat thin line between ethnography and ministry, and how each may be able to inform the other, see Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

PART II: PARKSIDE, A THICK DESCRIPTION

In this chapter I provide a thick description of the congregation of Parkside Church. I will begin with an extensive sketch of the congregation's neighborhood, City Park, in order to situate Parkside within this complex community. Then, I will offer a description of the congregation itself, including its historical identity and its current composition.

The Complexity of City Park: Sketching the Neighborhood Community

Understanding the congregation of Parkside, in all of its complexity, requires a basic understanding of the history and structure of the neighborhood in which the congregation resides. City Park, composed of over 130 acres of flourishing green space, is one of the oldest parks in Atlanta, the major southern city in which the congregation of Parkside is located. City Park sits less than a mile and a half from the city's center, and was developed in 1882 with a generous donation of land from one of Atlanta's most famous railroad engineers.³⁷ Shortly after Atlanta's acquisition of the land, homes began to be constructed on all four sides of the park's perimeter, and by the mid 1890's, City Park had come to be a thriving neighborhood with architecturally distinct homes built by local craftsmen and filled with middle and upper-class white families.³⁸ The total area of the neighborhood is around three square miles, around half a mile to the north and the south of the park itself, and three quarters of a mile to the east and west. Yet during the development of the City Park neighborhood, the farmland surrounding the community was also being subdivided for further residential development, extending the geographical boundaries of City Park to include smaller neighborhoods within walking distance of the park itself. On the

³⁷ Grant Park Neighborhood Association, "A Brief Overview of Grant Park's History," GrantPark.org, <http://grantpark.org/history> (accessed February, 2014).

³⁸ Ibid.

eastern perimeter were a number of similar white, middle class communities, and to the south and west, there were predominately black communities, with segregated white sections.³⁹ While these neighborhoods were distinct when they were first established, over the years the lines between them have begun to blur, and most residents now refer to them all as a part of “City Park,” or Southeast City more broadly.⁴⁰

The neighborhoods of Southeast City thrived through the decades that followed the turn of the century. Trolley and rail lines provided access to jobs downtown and bolstered the local economies within the community. Into the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the rise of the automobile brought the first wave of suburbanization, and many of Southeast City’s wealthiest residents moved farther away from the city center, leaving City Park and its surrounding neighborhoods for the suburbs.⁴¹ While the community of City Park remained largely white and middle-class through the 1940s and 1950s, another wave of departure significantly shifted the demographics of the neighborhood in the 1960s: white flight. Under the Fair Housing Act, part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, many middle-class black families began to move into the previously white communities of Southeast City.⁴² De-segregation prompted white families to flee City Park, and other in-town neighborhoods, causing multidimensional racial tension within the community. The economic cost of white flight was significant. Housing values plummeted

³⁹ Larry Keating, “Atlanta: Peoplestown—Resilience and Tenacity Verses Institutional Hostility” in *Rebuilding Urban Neighborhoods: Achievements, Opportunities, and Limits* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1999), 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 34.

⁴² Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 164-165.

within the neighborhoods of Southeast City, and local businesses closed. Crime rose within the neighborhoods, and by the time the crack epidemic of the 1980s hit Atlanta, City Park's sprawling green space had transformed into a common locale for drug deals and prostitution. The two roads that led through the center of the park made access easy and policing seldom, and so, by the end of the 1980s, City Park itself and its surrounding neighborhood had deteriorated significantly, as well as the other neighborhoods in Southeast City. Racial demographics shifted sharply from the beginning of white flight to the end of the 1980s. From 1950 to 1970, City Park went from 97% white residents and less than 3% black residents, to around 75% white residents, and 20% black residents. By 1990, whites made up just over 40% of the neighborhood population, while the percentage of black residence swelled to around 55%.⁴³

Gentrification began to occur across the country in the 1970s and 1980s, and hit Atlanta in the early 1990s, as the city prepared to host the 1996 Summer Olympic Games.⁴⁴ During this time, City Park, less than two miles from the Olympic Stadium, endured yet another wave of change. In efforts to clean up the park itself in preparation for the Olympics, blockades were constructed to obstruct vehicle traffic through the streets within the park's interior in order to reduce local drug activity and drug-related crime. Middle-class white families from suburban white neighborhoods began to move back into City Park and the larger Southeast City community, and low-income families, the majority who were black, were forced out. This

⁴³ These statistics come from *U.S Census of Population and Housing 1950, 1970, 1990, 2010*, combining Georgia census tracts 49, 50, 53, and accessed through Social Explorer, <http://www.socialexplorer.com.proxy.library.emory.edu> (accessed Spring 2014).

⁴⁴ For more on Gentrification in Atlanta and the effects of the 1996 Olympic Games see Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 140-154. And Shaila Dewan, "Gentrification Changing the Face of New Atlanta," *New York Times*, March 11, 2006.

demographic shift occurred for a number of political, economic, and social reasons. Politically, a decrease in affordable housing due to a reduction of city funds for redistributive initiatives under the Reagan Administration combined with the development of new tax abatement programs that encouraged economic development in urban neighborhoods, contributed significantly to the displacement of low-income families out of urban neighborhoods, and new business and the restoration of middle-class housing within them.⁴⁵ Economically, the increasing gap between job growth and housing supply led to a swell in housing costs and, therefore, property taxes, displacing low-income home owners who could not afford the increased taxation.⁴⁶ Social and demographic motivations also accompanied gentrification. Ebenezer O. Aka states, “The search for cultural diversity is one of the key factors that inspires and increases the migration of upper-income groups to inner-city neighborhoods.”⁴⁷ Like other major cities, gentrification in Atlanta occurred largely along racial lines, as young white professionals and families moved into urban neighborhoods in order to be closer to the city, and in the hopes of encountering cultural variety. However, like the economic and political factors that prompted gentrification, this social impetus also perpetuated displacement of lower-income families, the majority of which were African American. This can be seen in the demographic shifts in the city of Atlanta during this period. By the end of the 1990s, the City of Atlanta’s white population had grown by 13 percent, while

⁴⁵ Ebenezer O. Aka, Jr, “Gentrification and Socioeconomic Impacts of Neighborhood Integration and Diversification in Atlanta, GA,” *National Social Science Perspectives*, 41.2 (2009), 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

the black population decreased by 3 percent, marking the trend of whites flowing into urban neighborhoods, while blacks were often forced to move away.⁴⁸

The political, economic, and social factors of gentrification not only shifted the demographics of the city of Atlanta as a whole, but also significantly reshaped the demographic landscape of City Park and Southeast City. In 2000, City Park's residents were about 50% black and 50% white, but by the end of 2010, the thoroughly racially mixed neighborhood was majority white (58%), and the number of black families had decreased to 36%, revealing the significant displacement of African Americans from the neighborhood.⁴⁹ While this injustice should not be diminished, it should be noted that City Park has maintained a much higher level of diversity compared to many other neighborhoods throughout the city of Atlanta, most of which have returned to largely white, middle class communities after gentrification.⁵⁰ And closer look at the neighborhood reveals that City Park continues to be a richly diverse community that values its lack of uniformity.

Driving through the streets that line the immediate perimeter of the park, one might assume that the neighborhood of City Park is nearly all middle to upper-middle class, and majority white. These streets are composed of newly renovated single-family homes, some small

⁴⁸ Robert Stewart Varner (2010), *Inside the Perimeter: Urban Development in Atlanta since the 1996 Olympic Games* (Doctoral Dissertation), Laney School of Graduate Studies at Emory University, 92-94.

⁴⁹ These statistics come from *U.S Census of Population and Housing 2000, 2010*, combining Georgia census tracts 49, 50, 53, and accessed through Social Explorer, <http://www.socialexplorer.com.proxy.library.emory.edu> (accessed Spring 2014).

⁵⁰ Census data for neighborhoods in other parts of Atlanta that experienced significant levels of white flight shows that gentrification has returned these neighborhoods to majority white communities. See *U.S Census of Population and Housing 1990, 2010*, for Glenwood Park (census tract 209), South Candler Park (census tracts 205, 206), and Kirkwood (census tracts 207, 208).

1920s bungalows and others large, two-story Victorian era-mansions, ranging from \$250,000 to \$450,000.⁵¹ The homes have well-groomed lawns and shiny cars parked out front. White families with young children occupy the majority of these homes, with the occasional Latino, Asian, or Black family sprinkled throughout. A few small apartment buildings and single-family-homes-turned-duplex can be found, largely inhabited by college students and young professionals. However, as one moves away from the park's immediate perimeter, the landscape begins to shift. Renovated houses become sparse, and share the streets with old, un-renovated homes in various levels of disrepair. New apartment buildings share space with Section-8 housing complexes. Since garages are a rarity in the neighborhood, one can see shiny Mercedes-Benzes parked next to battered Oldsmobiles on the tree-lined streets that sprawl out from the park's immediate perimeter. The neighborhood is highly pedestrian, and a quick walk through its streets shows the obvious racial and ethnic diversity of the community. Black and white bodies share the sidewalks, the bus stop benches, and the public space of the park itself. Wandering through local businesses and restaurants reveals the same—from the yoga studio on west side to the local market on the east side, a multiplicity of color and culture abounds.

While a few pockets of the neighborhood remain somewhat segregated, most are thoroughly mixed income and mixed race. Expanding the barriers of the neighborhood from the official lines that denote City Park to the natural barriers that most residents understand to define the neighborhood's perimeter creates a significant difference in the demographic landscape. If one looks only at the official perimeters of City Park, white residents make up 58% of the population and black residents make up only 36%. Yet if we look at the demographic

⁵¹ See "Grant Park Home Prices and Values," Zillow Real Estate Network. <http://www.zillow.com/grant-park-atlanta-ga/home-values/> (accessed March 2014).

composition of the neighborhood more broadly,⁵² it shows that white residents make up only 47% of the community and black residents make up 45%, more accurately revealing the rich diversity of the neighborhood.⁵³ Moreover, the socio-economic status of families living within the neighborhood also spans a surprisingly wide spectrum. Twenty-eight percent of families have a household income of \$25,000 or less a year, just above the national poverty line for a family of four, and below the poverty line for a family of five.⁵⁴ On the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum, the same percentage of families (28%) have a household income of over \$100,000 a year, more than double the median income for Georgians in 2010. Moreover, a solid 6% of families have a household income of over even \$200,000 a year.⁵⁵ These statistics demonstrate the incredibly broad range of socio-economic diversity within the neighborhood.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the rich diversity in City Park, particularly socio-economically, has been sought after and is highly valued within the community. Two events, both of which occurred within the context of City Park Neighborhood Association Meetings,

⁵² I mentioned previously that the neighborhood of City Park has, in some ways, swallowed up the previously distinct neighborhoods surrounding it. By extending this landscape to include these smaller neighborhoods, which defines the community by its geographical boundaries (Capital Boulevard to the west, Memorial Blvd to the north, Moreland Avenue to the east and McDonough Boulevard to the south), extends the geography less than half a mile to the east and south, and less than a quarter of a mile north and west. Yet, in doing so, we get a very different picture of the demographic make-up of the neighborhood.

⁵³ These statistics come from *U.S. Census of Population and Housing 2000, 2010*, combining Georgia census tracts 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 64, 69, and accessed through Social Explorer, <http://www.socialexplorer.com.proxy.library.emory.edu> (accessed Spring 2014).

⁵⁴ According to the Institute for Research on Poverty, the national poverty line for a family of four in 2010 was \$22,113 and for a family of five is \$16,023. "Poverty Thresholds and Guidelines, U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Threshold," Institute for Research on Poverty, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/faqs/faq1.htm> (accessed March 2014).

⁵⁵ Statistics on median family income in the state of Georgia come from "State and Country Quick Facts: Georgia," United States Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13000.html> (accessed March 2014).

embody the neighborhood's commitment to socio-economic diversity. The first occurred in 2005, when a prominent Atlanta businessman bought an old Victorian mansion on the west side of the neighborhood, near the community's Orthodox Church. St. John's Church, an old red-brick building with golden crosses sparkling on the door, has an active food ministry, "Loaves and Fish," that serves meals five days a week to the homeless men and women who take up shelter in the park during the warm summer months. The businessman found the presence of homeless individuals and families meandering around the west side of the neighborhood everyday greatly disturbing, and so raised a motion to close down the Loaves and Fish. There was such vocal, adamant rejection of this idea by the rest of the neighborhood residents present that the issue was shut down within the meeting and was never even brought to a vote. Within a few months, the man sold his home. One man, a community member who is active at Parkside, reflected on this encounter by saying, "It just shows the way we work in this community, what we care about. We want this to be a place that is welcoming to all kinds of people, whether you are homeless or you are a millionaire, we don't care. But we won't welcome you if you are unable to welcome others who are different from you. We aren't tolerant of intolerance." The second example displays a similar sentiment. The same year, as new townhomes and condominiums were being built on the neighborhoods southeast side near a section of government owned apartments, contractors for the project submitted approval for plans to make the new construction gated, concerned about crime from the low-income complex. When the neighborhood association found out about the intention to gate the new development, they were infuriated. The neighborhood association rallied community residents to protest the new development, resulting in an encounter between the contractors and the community that led to a compromise: low fences would surround some of the development to mark its boundaries, but no

gates would be erected that would limit access into or out of the complex. One neighborhood resident, a young African American woman who lived in the housing project beside the new development at the time and advocated with the neighborhood association stated thoughtfully, “That situation reminds me that the community sees us, sees me, as a part of the neighborhood, not as some separate part to be ashamed of. We are all a part of the community and we all deserve respect.”

While these stories do not adequately make sense of how the neighborhood has managed to retain such a wide span of socio-economic status despite inflation and other economic realities, they do communicate clearly the character of the community itself. The community of City Park is committed to inclusivity and respect. Residents of all types, black and white, rich and poor, value the diversity within the community, and value their shared commitments to inclusion. However, these deep community commitments do not mean the absence of racial and socio-economic conflict within the neighborhood. Gentrification has left painful wounds, especially for black families within the community who saw friends and family members forced out of their homes for financial, economic, or discriminatory reasons, and replaced by middle class white families.⁵⁶ The complex history of race and class in the neighborhood has left significant racial and class tensions, and the need for dialogue, understanding, reparations and healing is clear. There are a number of organizations in the community that provide spaces for these activities to occur, both formally and informally. Parkside Church is one of these important spaces.

⁵⁶ White certainly not all middle class families that moved into the neighborhood during this time were white, it is noteworthy that most Parkside parishioners and City Park residents articulate this time of transition in the neighborhood as racial.

*Parkside Church:
History and Transformation for “The Church on the Corner”*

The congregation of Parkside Church was founded in 1871, just a few years after the civil war, by a number of white, Baptist families, looking to establish a Sunday school for their children. The first few decades of the congregation’s existence saw two relocations and two name changes, but by the early 1920s, the members had decided to make their permanent home in the newly developing community of City Park, and name themselves after one of the major streets in the neighborhood. They bought a section of land across from the northeastern corner of the park, and spent the next two decades building a red brick Sunday school building, an expansive Sanctuary, and a thriving white, middle-class Southern Baptist congregation.⁵⁷

The congregation flourished in the vibrant City Park neighborhood for nearly fifty years, and at its peak in the late 1940s, the congregation had grown to nearly 1,500 members.⁵⁸ But when white flight significantly changed the racial and cultural landscape of the neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s, the congregation suffered. Affluent white congregants moved out of the neighborhood and into the suburbs, and while less affluent parishioners couldn’t afford to relocate, they began to fear the neighborhood that surrounded them, which had quickly morphed into a racially mixed community and had declines significantly socio-economically. As crime escalated and businesses shut down, the congregation of Parkside turned inward, fearful of what lay beyond their doors. At first, parishioners who had moved away commuted back for services each Sunday. The church had put new locks on the front doors to insure their safety, and opened them for a few hours each Sunday morning so that the congregation could worship. But as time

⁵⁷ These details come from an unpublished history of the congregation from 1870-1985, written by a parishioner, Mrs. L.E. Smith, and used with permission of Rev Dwight Adams and Rev. Dr. Tony Lankford.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

passed, the congregation dwindled. Through the 1980s and 1990s, elderly members passed away, and those that were left found reasons to relocate to congregations closer to their suburban homes: the drive into the city each week was taxing, or the new minister's sermons weren't "biblical" enough. By 2000, the congregation had been reduced to eight members, all above the age of sixty. There was no weekly programming, no pastor, and the massive brick building was in complete disrepair. But the eight members that remained at Parkside refused to let the church die. All of them had stayed in the neighborhood through the past forty years of transition, from de-segregation and white flight to the beginnings of gentrification. And they had a new sense of purpose and hope.

The influx of middle class families to the neighborhood and the initiation of revitalization efforts throughout City Park and Southeast City had given the small, elderly congregation of Parkside a glimpse of what could be. The members who remained in the congregation had witnessed waves of transition sweep across the community and were familiar with the wounds left in its wake. They heard stories from neighbors of the injustice gentrification had caused, yet they also saw promise in the rise of new business in the neighborhood, and the sharp decrease in crime. Most of them were lifetime residents of the neighborhood, and lifetime members of the congregation, and with these commitments in mind, they made an intentional decision to keep the doors of the church open as long as possible, hoping the church could be a resource to the new community that was forming outside their doors. Unable to pay any full-time staff, they hired a seminary student, Chris Patterson, from the local Baptist seminary to come preach each week. When the opportunity arose for the congregation and their preacher to apply for a grant to help revitalize the congregation, they committed to bringing Chris on full-time for the next three years, to see what might happen in the life of their church. This season brought the opportunity

for soul-searching, and with the help of their young minister, the congregation began to cast a new vision for themselves. They began to believe that they could become a church whose doors were open to the community, a congregation that “looked like its neighborhood” by reflecting the racial and socio-economic makeup of City Park, and becoming a space in their community where difference is welcome and celebrated, where healing could be found.

In the ten years that followed Chris’ hire in 2004, the congregation of Parkside has grown from eight to over 100 members. They have expanded their staff, begun a multiplicity of new programs, and managed to become a stable, multiracial congregation. In many ways, this congregation has lived into its dream of becoming a place marked by diversity, hope, and healing. Below is a thick description of the congregation as it currently exists, including a sketch of who leads the congregation (staff), who participates in the congregation, (congregational demographics), and what kinds of activities the congregation engages in (programming)

Leadership: Parkside’s Staff

As the congregation of Parkside grew, they began to make additions to their staff. In 2007, the still majority white congregation made the intentional decision to hire an African American as their associate minister who worked primarily with youth, outreach, and music. Since this time, the staff has continued to expand, primarily through part-time, bi-vocational positions. Currently, the staff of Parkside includes one full-time minister, Pastor Chris, who was hired in 2004 at the beginning of the congregation’s revitalization, and three part-time ministers. Chris is a white man in his mid-thirties, thin with dark hair and glasses. As the only full-time staff, Chris assumes primary responsibility for preaching and Christian education ministries within the congregation, as well as building community partnerships in the neighborhood. The associate minister, Jermaine, was hired in 2007. Jermaine is a bi-vocational black man in his

early thirties who spends his days as a banker and his evenings and weekends working at Parkside primarily in the areas of youth ministry, worship, and preaching. Leanne, a white woman in her late-twenties, is the Children's Minister at Parkside. Leanne also works extensively with the congregation's Women's Ministry and provides administrative support when necessary. Leanne is also bi-vocational, working primarily as licensed family therapist whose counseling practice shares space in Parkside's building and serves many City Park residents due to her flexible sliding-scale pricing. Thomas, a twenty-something black man who is finishing his Master of Divinity degree at a prestigious nearby seminary, is the congregation's current Minister of Music. He is at Parkside on a six-month interim basis. In 2005, at the advising of Pastor Chris, the congregation moved their denominational affiliation from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), a majority white, moderate Baptist convention. As a result, the congregation partnered with the CBF to hire two CBF urban missionaries to serve as community ministers for City Park and run the majority of community out-reach and social service programs at Parkside, including an afterschool program, a housing ministry for groups coming to Atlanta for urban immersion experiences, and a clothes closet. Both community ministers are white and in their mid thirties. All of Parkside's staff, including both community ministers, hold the standard professional degree for ministry, a Master of Divinity, making them a highly educated team.⁵⁹ Yet, the bi-vocational nature of the staff at Parkside provides a unique dimension of leadership in which the ministry staff members are deeply in touch with the realities of the world and the needs of the local community.

⁵⁹ Two of the five staff members are in their final semester of this degree.

Congregation: Parkside's Members

Parkside's congregation is thoroughly diverse, racially, socio-economically, and generationally. The racial make-up of Parkside's Sunday morning services changes from week to week, but averages around 55% to 60% white parishioners and 40% to 45% black parishioners. This is a slight difference from the make-up of the neighborhood (47% black residents and 45% white residents), a variance that can be accounted for by Parkside's location on the immediate perimeter of the park, which is majority white, as well as its history as a white Baptist congregation. Congregants span a wide range of socio-economic statuses as well. The congregation is made up of thoroughly middle-class families, both white and black, as well as individuals and families on more extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum. The majority of the congregation, somewhere near 60%, is composed of middle-class families, both blue-collar workers and professions—social workers, nurses, secretaries, and handy-men. On the top end of the socio-economic spectrum, around 20% to 25% of Parkside's congregation is made up of upper-middle class professionals, lawyers, engineers, accountants, and medical specialists. Most, but not all, of this portion of the congregation are white members. The remaining 15% to 20% of the congregation are families who are less financially stable, both white and black families, working minimum-wage jobs part-time, retired, or living on disability or a similar form of government aid. Generationally, the congregation is also thoroughly diverse. The largest age group, members between the ages of 35-50, make up around 35% of the congregation. Children below the age of 18 make up a quarter of the congregation, those in their twenties and early thirties make up around 20% of the congregation, and those over the age of 50 represent 20% of the congregation. Despite this rich diversity racially, socio-economically, and generationally, the majority of members of Parkside do share one thing in common: geography. The vast majority of

Parkside's regulars, around 85%, live within the neighborhood of City Park, defined by the community's natural boundaries (see above), and most of the remaining 15% live only a few miles outside of these boundaries. This is a unique and significant mark of the congregation of Parkside. This geographical commonality is what holds this diverse congregation together, and gives congregants a sense of common value and shared commitment.

Activities: Parkside's Programs

Over the past ten years, with the growth of the congregation and its staff, Parkside's programming has expanded far beyond Sunday morning worship and Sunday school. Programs at Parkside cover a broad range of activities, yet they rarely fit easily into distinct categories. For my purposes, I have organized Parkside's programs into four general types and described them in brief detail below: Worship, Christian Education, Community Events and Programs.

Worship is Parkside's largest community gathering of the week. Attendance varies widely, ranging anywhere from 40 to nearly 100 congregants. Worship at Parkside includes elements typical to Christian worship: music, scripture reading, a children's moment, preaching, offering, and occasionally communion. Typically, the order of worship follows a predictable pattern:

- (1) Welcome and opening prayer, offered by the associate pastor or other staff members
- (2) 2-3 songs
- (3) Announcements & Children's Moment
- (4) 1-2 songs
- (3) Scripture Reading, offered by a congregant
- (4) Sermon
- (5) Musical Reflection or Special Music
- (6) Offertory Prayer (from a congregant) and Offering
- (7) Benediction (song, prayer, or blessing)

This liturgical rhythm provides cohesion for Parkside's service, since individual elements vary widely from week to week. The music, for example, is incredibly diverse at Parkside. Song

selection covers a broad range of genres and styles including Contemporary Christian, Contemporary Gospel, Indie Folk, and Traditional hymns, and occasionally a classical piece or African spiritual. The tone of worship is typically Praise and Worship, but the leadership configuration for worship changes each week, giving different services different tones. Sometimes worship is led by the music minister, other times by a praise team, and yet other times by individuals or couples from the congregation who are musically inclined. However, the music minister is central to coordinating song choices, and while musical selections may sway more toward one genre or another some weeks, the goal is to span a wide range of genres while still drawing primarily from the congregations own “canon” of music.⁶⁰ Similarly, while sermons are primarily delivered by pastor Chris, who preaches in a traditional teaching style and speaks mostly from memory, other ministers with drastically different styles also fill the pulpit regularly. The associate minister, for example, blends the energetic call and response style of preaching usually found in black congregations with a more relaxed style prevalent among mega-church ministers. With varied styles of preaching and diversity in the music, worship at Parkside looks different from week to week.

Christian education at Parkside happens weekly on Sunday morning, in the form of Community Groups for adults, and Sunday school classes for children. Community groups are age-based, and meet after the service each Sunday for about an hour. There are four, one for teens, one for adults under thirty, one for young families (ages 30-60), and one for older adults. Each group typically has between 5 and 20 congregants in attendance and is led by a lay leader,

⁶⁰ Over the past six months, the congregation has been working hard to develop their own canon of music that might help them to find a shared identity within the deep diversity of the community. Currently, this “canon” holds fourteen songs, three in the genre of Contemporary Christian, five in the genre of Contemporary Gospel, three in the genre of Folk Christian, and two hymns.

who facilitates a discussion on the sermon text for that week. Community Groups also spend a good deal of time, between 15-40 minutes each week, sharing community concerns and prayer requests. This weekly rhythm of Christian education is supplemented by other activities, such as a monthly church-wide bible study on Wednesday night bible, which includes dessert and discussion of text surrounding recent sermons. Also, Theology on Tap is a program in which the Young Adult Community Group gathers at a neighborhood pub to discuss a different theological question each month. Other topical small groups arise occasionally on the basis of interest, including book groups or groups on spiritual practices, meet at parishioners' homes.

Community-wide events at Parkside occur regularly, sometimes offered to the community by the congregation, other times organized by community organizations but taking place within the church. These activities include a community-wide Easter egg hunt in the spring, Fall Festival in autumn, Movies on the Green and Vacation Bible School in the summer, and other monthly and bi-monthly activities, such as Puppets and Pajamas and Parents' Night Out. Between 30% and 50% of the individuals and families who participate in these events are community residents, folks who live in the neighborhood but who do not attend Parkside. Also included in the category of community wide-events are the external organizations that use Parkside's facilities weekly, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Boy Scouts of America, The Children's Garden Preschool, and various other activities, which cause the church to function much like a community center for the neighborhood. Parkside's community programs also include a number of social service offerings, primarily run by the congregation's community ministers. These programs include an after school program that serves students from elementary school to high school in academic and extra-curricular activities three days a week, SAT prep courses for high school juniors and seniors, a clothes closet, group counseling for children and

youth, and Lydia's House, a ministry created in 2005 to house youth groups and college students coming to the city for service-projects and urban immersion experiences.

This list of church activities and programs is not exhaustive, but it does provide a sketch of the congregational life at Parkside. Parkside is a community that worships together, studies scripture together, prays together, and serves their community together. In the next chapter, we will explore what we can learn from this congregation's pattern of activities and the kind of community they cultivate.

PART III: MOVING BEYOND DESCRIPTION
AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF BLURRY BOUNDARIES AND RE/CONSIDERING RACIAL RECONCILIATION

The small Sunday school room was buzzing with activity on this particular Saturday morning. Two large round tables stood beside each other in the center of the room. One was spread with breakfast casseroles, cheese grits, sausage patties, biscuits, and an assortment of jellies. The other held a stack of paper cups and a jug of orange juice, and was surround by a circle of women sitting and standing around the table, chatting enthusiastically. They were an eclectic group: black and white, young and old. Some donned floral sundresses while others wore paint-stained t-shirts and gym-shorts. They spanned a broad range of ages, from twenty to nearly seventy-five. As new guests arrived and dropped their dishes off, the circle of women gradually expanded. Instead of making use of the smaller tables in the room, the women were determined to be “together,” and so squeezed more than a dozen chairs around a single table meant for eight. They smiled happily at one another, radiating warmth, as they clasped hands to offer a prayer for the feast in front of them. As the women filled their plates and complimented one another’s culinary skills, the conversation quickly turned to the neighborhood.

Evette, a no-frills black woman in her late fifties, tucked her long, small braids behind her ears, “Does anyone know what happened to the old town car on Sydney Street?” she asked, curious. Evette and her husband own a large, Victorian home on a lot that runs perpendicular to Parkside’s building, and the church and her home share an alleyway to Sydney Street, a main thoroughfare in the neighborhood. Bethany, pastor Chris’ wife, answered Evette’s inquiry in a sing-song voice that matched her small frame. She explained that the car was owned by a young couple living in the blue house across the street from the church. They had inherited the car a few weeks ago, when the man’s father died. Pastor Chris talked with them the day before, when

he noticed the tires on the car had been removed, and the man said they had been stolen the night before.

A string of sighs went around the table that held an unsurprised sort of tone. “Has anyone else heard anything?” Bethany inquired. A few women echoed Bethany’s story. Felicia had heard something similar while at the park with her daughter the day before, and Hannah had assumed the tires had been stolen when she’d walked by the old car, resting precariously on some cinderblocks, on her way into the church building that morning. Someone mentioned the recent spike in crime, and asked who had been able to attend the last neighborhood association meeting, and the conversation morphed seamlessly into a community organizing effort.

Questions flew across the table: *What are the latest crime statistics for the neighborhood? Has anything been done about the discriminatory practices of the neighborhood watch? Was there something the church could do for the young couple?* The women, as mothers and grandmothers in the neighborhood, were concerned about the recent uptick of crime in their neighborhood, but they were also concerned about the situation more broadly. They discussed the disturbing nature of their neighborhood safety patrol, which only monitors homes that can afford to pay the monthly fee for patrol. And they critiqued inconsistent police behavior that had recently accused black youth in the community for local crimes without proper evidence. “I feel like it’s our youth they are being attacked when that happens!” Hannah said, referring to the congregation’s small youth group composed of mostly young, black males from the communities surrounding the church. The conversation lingered here, as others expressed anger, concern for minority family members and friends, and for the community they care about so deeply. Before the exchange ended, the women had a plan in place for talking with the women’s groups at other churches in the neighborhood, and for making sure they had a representative to attend the upcoming

neighborhood association meeting to voice their concerns. And then, as quickly as it had arisen, the conversation faded, moving on to other topics as the women talked about their lives and filled their bellies.

This scene is not unusual for the congregation of Parkside. This story is one, among many, that displays the ways in which the lines between the congregational community at Parkside and the neighborhood community of City Park are blurred in the life of this congregation. Neighborhood concerns and congregational concerns merge in immediate ways at Parkside, bleeding into one another and simultaneously shaping the life of the church and the well-being of the neighborhood. These blurry boundaries are not inconsequential for Parkside. In fact, they are central to the identity of the congregation, providing an important source of energy, meaning, and purpose for congregational life. The blurry boundaries between “church” and “world” at Parkside teach us something interesting about this local congregation, but they also suggest something quite radical concerning the nature of the church in the twenty-first century, and about patterns of racial reconciliation within communities of faith. In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which Parkside’s blurry boundaries offer new questions for Protestant ecclesiology and consider the implications this new ecclesiology has for cultivating spaces for racial reconciliation within communities of faith. I will begin this section with a brief overview of ecclesiology, its historical roots and its current place in protestant theology, noting in particular the limits of recent approaches in protestant ecclesiology for twenty-first century contexts. I will describe the various ways that the boundaries between church and community are blurred for the congregation of Parkside, showing how they embody a different conception of “church” and offer new questions for ecclesiological thinking. Then, I will conclude by unpacking the ways in which an ecclesiology of blurry boundaries creates a new context for

racial reconciliation and justice, and offer further question for continued research in this area of study.

*Inherited Questions:
The History of Ecclesiology, The Reformation, and Now*

From the very beginning of Christianity, Christians have speculated about the nature and purpose of communities of faith. The New Testament itself provides numerous examples of the people of God working out what it means to be “the church,” from Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth explaining the nature of Christian community, to the Pastoral Epistles and their explication of the various church offices. Today, theologians call this discipline ecclesiology. The word ecclesiology comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning “assembly” and *logos* meaning, “discourse.” *Ekklesia* was originally a secular word that referred to a public assembly or gathering of people, but it was used by translators of the Greek Old Testament to render the Hebrew word “qahal,” whose root means, “voice,” and was translated in English as “church,”⁶¹ transforming the meaning of the word *ekklesia* into a particular *kind* of assembly, “an assembly of those who are called out (of the world), or called together (to worship).”⁶² Ecclesiology, then, is the study of this assembly, the study of the nature and purpose of the people of God in communities of faith.

Until the late middle ages, ecclesiology was a diverse and multifaceted area of study, linked with both the presence of God in the world and the presence of God in the institutional church. The patristic fathers conceptualized the “church” in a variety of ways: as cosmic (Ignatius), as eschatological (Hippolytus), as the source for Salvation (Cyprian), or as both

⁶¹ Paul D.L. Avis, “Ecclesiology,” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister McGrath, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 127.

⁶² Ibid.

visible and invisible (Augustine).⁶³ Yet the unification of canon law in the West in the 12th century brought with it a more systematic approach to ecclesiology that defined the church primarily as an institution and sought to explicate the proper practices and structures for communities of faith.⁶⁴ From this time forward, the nature of ecclesiology largely became the study of the institutional church. It comes as no surprise, then, that matters of ecclesiology were central to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. The Reformers disliked the papal-centered ecclesiology that defined the church during their time, and so suggested alternative forms and structures for the church.⁶⁵ Yet, the alternatives proposed by the reformers remained largely within the same ecclesiological categories as their predecessors, which assumed the church was an institution and as such sought to define the proper role of clergy, practices, and theological commitments that should constitute and govern the church. Luther himself, in his treatise “On the Councils and the Church,” proposed seven “marks” of the church, in which he explicated the appropriate role of ministers, an orthodox understanding of the Bible, and defined

⁶³ Andre Birmele, “Ecclesiology,” *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste, (London: Routeledge, 2005), 467.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 469.

⁶⁵ Missional ecclesialogists have recently been pointing out the connection between the ecclesiology of the Reformation and Protestant ecclesiology (see Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 26-27), but they have not do so in great detail. For more on the role of Reformation ecclesiology and how it connects to the Protestant ecclesiology outlines here see Bernard P. Prusak “The Birth of Ecclesiology, Theology Responding to Crisis 1400-1900” in *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004), 229-269.

what constituted the sacraments, among other things.⁶⁶ Alan Roxburgh, a missional ecclesialogist sums up the central focus of the ecclesiology of the Reformers in this way:

Irrespective of the theological creativity that might have framed the Reformers, both Magisterial and Radical, as they thought about the nature of grace, the role of Scripture, or the human capacities to respond to God in faith, they assumed that the church should be at the center of culture and that the ‘right’ forms of teaching, liturgy, and ordering of ministry were of prominent importance.⁶⁷

For the Reformers, the church was at the center of society and understood as synonymous with God’s activity in the world, a social positioning that made questions related to the church as an institution crucial. The Reformers wanted to get the church “right,” since the church represented God and God’s community, as distinct from the world, and so the Reformers’ focus on church-order, including the proper form of the church, its clergy, its practices, and its teachings, was appropriate for their context. But is it appropriate for ours?

Protestant ecclesiology today is the heir to the ecclesiological concerns of the Reformation. From Karl Barth’s conception of the Church as the Herald of the Word, to Miroslav Volf’s model of the Church as the image of the Trinity or John Howard Yoder’s depiction of the Church as a redeemed community, these ecclesiologies span a broad range of theological commitments and biblical imagery, yet they share a number of assumptions that they have inherited from their Protestant predecessors.⁶⁸ Protestant ecclesiologies, in line with the

⁶⁶ see Martin Luther’s “On the Councils and the Church” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. Ed. William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 163-186.

⁶⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2011), 27.

⁶⁸ It is important to note that Jürgen Moltmann’s notion of the church as primarily *relational* is a noteworthy exception to this. See Graham Hill’s “Jürgen Moltmann: The Church as Messianic, Relational, *Koinonia*” in *Salt, Light, and City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 86-97.

concerns of the Reformers, have been primarily concerned with (1) the church as an institutional community (2) the church as distinct from the world and (3) the church as significantly linked with (or synonymous to) God's action in the world. Protestant ecclesiology, even into the twenty-first century, has been primarily focused on getting the church "right," centering on questions concerning the appropriate nature and form of the institutional church, and identifying this institution with God's people and as vessel of divine activity and presence. While I do not desire to minimize the importance of the institution of the church, the current state of the institutional church in the United States, and around the world, suggests that it is time for Protestant ecclesiology to find new questions to guide their conversation.

Since the early 1990s, the church as an institution has been on the decline throughout the West. Research from numerous polls shows the consistent decrease in membership and attendance in Protestant congregations across the United States in the last twenty years, as well as decline in interest in religion more generally within our country.⁶⁹ In 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that fewer than half of Americans claim a religious affiliation, down from two-thirds in 1970.⁷⁰ These statistics are startling, particularly if our ecclesiology associates God's activity in the world primarily with the institutional church. Does this mean that

⁶⁹ Media has been tracking this decline since the early 1990s, see Kenneth L. Woodward, "Dead End for the Mainline?" in *Newsweek*, August 8, 1993, <http://www.newsweek.com/dead-end-mainline-192610> (accessed March, 2014), current research and statistics from the Religion and Public Life Project by Pew Research. See "'Nones' on the Rise" PewResearch, Oct. 12, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (accessed April 2014), and Laurie Goodstein, "Percentage of Protestants in America in Steep Decline," *The New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/us/study-finds-that-percentage-of-protestant-americans-is-declining.html?_r=1& (accessed April, 2014).

⁷⁰ PewResearch, "'Nones' on the Rise," PewForum.org, Oct. 12, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (accessed April 2014).

if the institutional church dies, divine action in the world ceases with it? Certainly it does not. Yet, our approach to ecclesiology would suggest this. When we distill our study of the people of God down to one institution as “the house where God lives,” we lose sight of God’s activity in the world around us.⁷¹ Our approaches to ecclesiology have been trapped by the assumption we inherited from the Reformation, and our ecclesiological imaginations are limited by the questions that drove the Reformers.⁷² Yet the church as we know it is unraveling, suggesting it is time to find a new direction for ecclesiological thinking.

To be certain, there are a number of recent works in the field of ecclesiology that are attempting to find new ways to understand the nature and purpose of the church in the twenty-first century. From Lutheran theologian Sheryl M. Peterson’s offering *Who Is The Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* to Gary Bradock’s *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church Today*, the shelves are full of models of church and ecclesiological thinking for the largely unreligious context in which we now exist. Yet, few of these books move away from the traditional approaches and assumptions of ecclesiology named above. These texts inevitably fall into a church-centered approach that assumes that the goal must be to restore the church as an institution, brining it back to some imagined place of respect at the center of society. But what if we let go of this dream and began to look for God’s activity in the world around us, identifying a new way of thinking about ecclesiology for the current

⁷¹ “The House Where God Lives” is frequently cited as the institution of the church, and is even the title of a recent ecclesiological work: Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing Doctrine for the Church Today*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁷² For an overview of the dominant ecclesiological models used throughout the twentieth century, see Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church, Expanded Edition* (London: Doubleday, 1987). For a more explicit critique of historical models of ecclesiology in light of post-modernity, see Graham Hill’s *Salt, Light, and City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

religious climate. Again, Alan Roxburgh provides a helpful summary of this situation. He states, “When the church lay at the center of the conversation, it was relatively simple to name what God was up to, and we had endless books that defined and described what it meant to be the church. In this new space, where the church is not the central focus, how do we go about finding and addressing the new questions?”⁷³ The congregation of Parkside, with its fuzzy lines between church and world, provides one possibility of new questions that might become the focus for protestant ecclesiology in the twenty-first century.

*The Case of Parkside:
Finding God in the Blurry Boundaries*

The lines between congregational community and neighborhood community are indistinct for Parkside Church. Recall that the vast majority of Parkside’s members, around 85%, live in the community of Grant Park, and most of the remaining 15% live only a few miles outside of the neighborhood.⁷⁴ The geographical make-up of the congregation significantly shapes the internal self-understanding of the congregation, as well as the external relationship between the congregation and the neighborhood. Conversations about neighborhood happenings, like the one at the beginning of this chapter, occur frequently in Sunday school classes, church business meetings, and in the hallways after worship, as neighborhood concerns become congregational concerns. Church activities easily blur into neighborhood activities, and neighborhood happenings often take on religious and spiritual meaning. These blurry boundaries tell us something significant about the character of this congregation, and point us to new ways of thinking about ecclesiology, the nature of the church, and the nature of God’s activity in the

⁷³ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 118.

⁷⁴ This statistic was constructed with the broad conception of “City Park” outlined on pg. 29 (footnote 52) of this week, not by the neighborhoods’ actual physical boundaries.

world, for our context. Below I describe two “blurred boundaries” at Parkside and consider what claims they make about the nature of the church and God’s activity in the world.

Blurred Boundary #1
External Boundaries: From Church as Institution to Church as Neighborhood

The single most used word throughout all of the interviews I conducted with Parkside parishioners was “community.” This may not seem immediately significant. After all, many churches speak about the “community” within their congregation. Yet, Parkside parishioners used this term in quite a different way. For members at Parkside, “community” at once connotes the nature of relationships within the congregation, the nature of relationships outside of the congregation, but within the neighborhood, and also the physical demarcation of the neighborhood itself. Like the word *ekklesia*, which originally denoted a secular assembly but came to be synonymous with the assembly of believers, the word “community” used at Parkside is multifaceted, multilayered, and dynamic. It has a secular layer that references the physical neighborhood of City Park and the relationships within the neighborhood, as well as a religious layer that represents the community of the congregation. Yet the lines between these references are blurry, and the word “community” is often used to refer to both the community of the congregation and the community of the neighborhood simultaneously.

The interchangeable nature of the way congregants at Parkside use the word “community” displays a different way of understanding the nature of the church, not as distinct from the world, but as wrapped up in the world, as merged with the neighborhood itself. For Parkside, the church is not a distinct, institutional community, but a fluid, organic concept of relationships and activities rooted in a deep sense of place.⁷⁵ Hannah, a Parkside member who

⁷⁵ The concept of a sense of place has been arising throughout academic research. Here, the “sense of place” noted among Parkside’s members reflects bell hooks’ notion of place in her

lives just a few miles from the church, exemplifies this blurry boundary when she shares about visitors who come to the congregation. She states, “There are people who walk in from the neighborhood, because this is part of their community and they are part of the church’s community.” Neighborhood, here, denotes the physical neighborhood, while community is used to refer to both the congregational community and the neighborhood community simultaneously. Hannah’s statement says something profound, theologically, about the nature of the church. For Hannah, being a part of the neighborhood community means you’re a part of the church community, even if you aren’t a member of the congregaiton. This sentiment is common at Parkside, and suggests an ecclesiology quite different from traditional eccleisologies. While Protestant ecclesiology has focused on the church as an institution, distinct from the world, Parkside understands the church in a more mystical sense, as the community, church-as-neighborhood. At Parkside, neighbors are church members, church members are neighbors, and as such, the church becoms the neighborhood, and the neighborhood the church.

This notion of church-as-neighborhood also shows up in the ways that Parkside congregants understand what constitutes a “church” activity. When asked what programs they are involved in at Parkside, many members not only refer to what we would consider traditional church activities (worship, community group, etc.), they also refer to activities they participate in with other Parkside members that occur within the boundaries of the neighborhood but that are not explicitly church events. Leanne, the congregation’s children’s Minister and counselor at Parkside’s counseling center, mentions that she attends yoga at the local studio with other women from Parkside on Friday afternoons. She counts this among her church activities and

work *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (Lodon: Routeledge, 2009) in which one’s sense of place is connected to a physical piece of land (in this case, the neighborhood of City Park), but also to the culture of a particular community (here, the culture of the City Park community, with its commitment to inclusion and diversity).

says, “it is one of the most meaningful parts of my week, to connect with others, myself, and God.” Bethany, Pastor Chris’ wife, speaks of spending time with other mothers from the congregation while they wait to pick up their children from the public school a few blocks away from the church. She says this is one of the life-giving ways she participates in the congregation throughout the week. Hannah, the women mentioned earlier, explains that she and her husband “continue Sunday worship” by having lunch with someone from the church afterward. Sometimes they eat at a local restaurant, but in the summers they typically walk across the street into the park for the goodies at the Farmer’s Market, a common practice among Parkside members. She says these are not just planned outings, but also spontaneous times when people encounter their neighbors and fellow congregants: “So it’s sort of like we’re still having church when we see each other in the neighborhood or we’re participating in the community together, we might not call it a ‘church activity’ but it is still church for us.” Because of the geographical closeness of the congregation, everyday activities for the congregants at Parkside become infused with religious meaning. As congregants spend time with neighbors (literally) and, in doing so, spend time with one another, they create a neighborhood community alive with spiritual significance.

The reverse is also true. Not only does the congregation cultivate a mystical notion of “church” by entering into the community in meaningful ways, but also the ways in which the community becomes a part of the church make the church’s institutional boundaries unclear. Parkside’s building, which functions as a community center for the neighborhood, stands as a prime example of this. Parkside’s 35,000 square foot building shares space with a broad variety of non-profits and community organizations who have made Parkside their home, some with permanent rooms and others who congregate in spaces typically used by the congregation on

Sunday mornings. A preschool inhabits much of the building's first floor, serving twenty-five neighborhood kids in the mornings and afternoons on weekdays. A Boy Scout Troup occupies the sprawling loft space on the building's third-floor, and a small neighborhood-counseling center sits in the corner of the upper floor, comprised of a cozy waiting area and two small offices. Dance classes make use of the Parkside's children's wing a few evenings each week, and Alcoholics Anonymous uses two adult education classrooms three nights a week. In addition to these organizations, other groups use the space at Parkside periodically, such as the City Park Parents Network, which takes over the sanctuary once a month for their Puppets in Pajamas show for neighborhood kids. While each of the organizations are run independently of the congregation, their presence in the building is profound. The use of space in Parkside's building personifies the relationship between the congregation and the community, in which the two are intertwined, interdependent, and indistinct. In the fall, Parkside's lawn is filled with pumpkins being sold by the local Boy Scout Troup. During the week, children and families fill Parkside's chapel and sanctuary for ballet concerts, puppet shows, and other neighborhood activities. The building represents in a tangible way the blurry boundaries between church and neighborhood, and how the church, as an institution, is swallowed up by the neighborhood.

The blurry boundaries between the congregation and neighborhood at Parkside, found in the language used by the congregation and displayed in the practice and use of space in the congregation, suggest a new approach to ecclesiology. They suggest a way of thinking about church that is not institutional as much as it is organic, and a relationship between the church and the world that is not concerned with separation and distinction, but rather incorporation and ambiguity.

Blurred Boundary #2
Internal Boundaries: In-reach and Out-reach and 21st Century Ecclesiology

Parkside's programming exposes another layer of blurry lines between the congregation and the community. Not only are the external boundaries of what constitutes "church" broadened to incorporate the neighborhood, but also the internal dynamics of the congregation are blurry. Congregants are also neighborhood-dwellers, and as such, neighborhood issues naturally become part of the fabric of the congregation, theologically, ethically, and programmatically. Community concerns become congregational concerns and lead to the development of new programs. Sabrina, a black woman in her late forties who is actively involved in the community ministries of the church says it like this:

"Instead of sitting down and saying, 'Well, maybe we should bake some cookies and spread the word about Jesus, we [at Parkside] say, 'No, let's find out what the problems are here, and how can we face them head on... we finding out a kid down the street has no food or clothes, or their parents leave them alone half-the time... if I'm really living the life that the Word says I'm supposed to be living, then I can't turn my back on that. I've got to get out there and say; 'I'll do what I can do. I'll care for you. We, as a church, we'll care for you.'"

Similarly, Hannah explains:

"Being invested in the community is how we find out that you haven't had a meal all week or that it's the third day you've worn that shirt. Do you have another one? You do not? Okay, Let's get you one. So it's this way of, you know, engrossing ourselves in the community and seeing a need and filling a need."

It was this exact situation that led to the opening of the Parkside's Community Clothes Closet. During community group one Sunday, Felicia, a member of Parkside who lives in one of Grant Park's government-owned housing communities, expressed the need for affordable clothes: "Not just for me," she states, "but in general, there are just lots of folks coming around needing

affordable clothes.” Within a few months, Parkside had opened the Community Clothes Closet in response to this need, with Felicia as the primary manager.

The Community Clothes Closet is not the only community-based program that has bubbled up from the life and concerns of the congregation itself. In fact, most of Parkside’s community-based activities have developed in response to concerns and needs within the congregation and its community. The most comprehensive community programs Parkside has developed serve children and youth throughout the neighborhood. During the school year, Parkside hosts the Homework Hotspot, an after-school program that serves elementary through high school-aged kids three days a week. In the summer months, Parkside offers weeklong Leadership Camps for middle school and high school students, and a four-week Literacy Camp for elementary school children. A Backpack Bash and School Supply Drive marks the beginning of each school year, and Saturdays throughout the fall are designated for SAT test preparation for high school juniors and seniors. While these types of programs may not seem out of the ordinary for congregations in any urban environments, for Parkside, there is something slightly different occurring.

Around half of the volunteers that make these programs possible are Parkside parishioners, but so are nearly half of the receipts of these services. A handful of the elementary and middle school students who attend the after-school program come from families that are a part of the congregation. The percentage increases drastically when we look at the high school Homework Hot Spot. Nearly 75% of the high school students that make up the Homework Hotspot are also a part of Parkside’s youth group. Because the congregation is made up of community members, and because the community itself is diverse socio-economically, Parkside’s outreach efforts also become in-reach efforts, serving families in the neighborhood,

and families within the congregation. This significant overlap blurs the lines between the congregational and neighborhood community even more.

Parkside's congregational events have a similar shape, highlighting the blurry lines between the congregation and the community. While Parkside's outreach events are meant to serve the community and inevitably also serve the congregation, Parkside's congregational events are meant to serve the congregation but inevitably serve the community as well. Parkside has a number of congregational events each year, including a Fall Festival, an Easter Egg Hunt, and Movies on the Green in the summertime. These events are not exclusive to the congregation, but they are also not advertised primarily as outreach activities. Yet because the lines between the congregation and neighborhood are muddled, so too are the congregation's events, which inevitably attract a significant number of community members who are not affiliated with the congregation. Parkside's annual Christmas Eve service provides an insightful example. Since 2006, Parkside has had a small, candlelight Christmas Eve service, in which Pastor Chris ad-libs the story of Jesus birth while the kids from the congregation act it out. Each year, the number of kids that show up to the service a few hours early to practice grows, and more and more of the new additions are from neighborhood families not typically a part of the congregation. This congregational event, one that is explicitly religious, has somehow become a community celebration, with kids from all around the neighborhood involved. What was created as a congregational activity has become an outreach event, blurring the lines even more between the congregation and the neighborhood.

These programs make clear the blurry lines between in-reach and out-reach at Parkside, reflecting the messy internal dynamics of the congregation in which parishioners and neighbors become indistinguishable from one another. This expresses itself even in the roles of Parkside's

ministerial staff, who spend nearly as much time caring for community members who come through the door of the church as they do for parishioners. The blurry lines between in-reach and out-reach at Parkside says something important about the nature of ecclesiology in the twenty first century. Protestant Ecclesiology, to this point, has been primarily concerned with distinguishing the church from the world; yet, Parkside's situation finds life and purpose in the place where the church is most fused with the world. This has significant implications for the questions that drive ecclesiology in a primarily unreligious context.

*New Questions for Ecclesiology:
The Church with Blurry Boundaries*

There is no doubt that Parkside finds the blurred boundaries between the congregation and community to be a source of life and energy, for both congregation members and community members. But perhaps what is more important is that, for the congregation of Parkside, the blurred boundaries are the places that parishioners most frequently encounter God. When you ask Parkside congregants where they feel God's presence in the life of the congregation, they don't point to worship or bible study activities, they point to the blurriest places, where church and world overlap in meaningful ways. Thomas, a twenty five year old white man and a local graduate student names tutoring in after-school as the time he feels closest to God. Felicia, the black woman mentioned above who helps run the clothes closet named this activity as the most spiritual time in her week. Sabrina speaks of working with the kids at Vacation Bible School, and Hannah mentions Fall Festival, "when we are all together, neighbors and friends, eating and talking, our kids playing across the street in the Park, that," she says, "is when I feel the presence of God." Others mention stuffing backpacks for the annual Back-to-School Bash, and then handing them out to family and friends, or various conversations in Community Groups, particularly those that are immediately connected to community concerns. "It feels like we are

doing something that matters when we talk about the stuff going on in the neighborhood, and God is in that,” Sabrina says.

Parkside as a congregation finds its life and purpose in the blurry, permeable boundaries between the congregational community and the neighborhood community. And this is also where they encounter God. This suggests a new framework for Protestant theology in a twenty-first century context. Rather than focusing on questions related to the church as an institution and how to maintain the institutional church, perhaps ecclesiology would benefit from taking a few steps back, and beginning with a different question: Where is God at work in the world and how can local congregations participate in this ongoing, divine activity in meaningful ways? New, “missional” ecclesiologies have begun to recognize this same movement. They have moved from closed-system organizational theories to open-system perspectives and, in doing so, have begun to recognize the importance of the relationship between a congregation and its environment.⁷⁶ Some, like Alan Roxburgh, have begun to argue the very notion of ecclesiology that Parkside embodies. In his important work, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Roxburgh, like Parkside, suggests that the decline of the institutional church suggests a new framework for ecclesiology that moves from church-centered questions concerning the appropriate nature and practice of the church, to missiological questions, asking where God’s presence is at work in local communities and how communities of Christians can join in. Roxburgh states, “Among God’s ordinary people, there is a deepening sense that God is still up to something, even as the institutional church unravels, God’s spirit is at work in our communities... if we are to discover what God is up to, we must re-enter the local, and there we will discover again how to be

⁷⁶ For more on this move in missional ecclesiology, see Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: MI, Baker Books, 2007), 136-149.

thriving local churches.”⁷⁷ Like the ecclesiology embodied in the community of Parkside, Roxburgh is pointing to new way of thinking about church that does not dismiss the importance of local congregations, but does disassociate God’s activity with the institutional church and, instead, looks for God’s movement in the local community. This new angle of looking at the church suggests a new starting point for ecclesiological thinking that begins with the nature of God’s activity in the world rather than the nature of the church itself. The missional ecclesiology embodied at Parkside asserts that in order for local congregations to thrive, they need to look outside their walls, into their communities, and see where God is and join in God’s activity.

Roxburgh, and others in his field, note the extensive biblical precedent for this notion of missional ecclesiology. They point us to the story of David in 2 Samuel 7, who wants to build God a house, in the form of a temple. In this story, God refuses David’s desire, choosing instead to reside in the mobility of the tabernacle, in which God’s presence cannot be relegated to one building or one city, but is understood to move easily throughout the world. The incarnation, as well, points us to a God who is present in unexpected forms and places. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase version of the Bible, *The Message*, translates the famous text, John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” as “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” This rendering highlights the radical nature of God coming to earth, breaking the boundaries that limits God’s presence to the temple, and becoming a part of the fabric of our everyday lives, in our communities, in our neighborhoods.⁷⁸ The Bible is full of stories in which

⁷⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Joining God in the Local: What We Do,” video on the missional network.com, <http://www.themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/resources/articles/92-leadership/279-joining-with-god-in-the-local-what-we-do> (accessed April 2014).

⁷⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, “The Missiological Challenge in the West: Becoming the ‘Other,’” Lecture, Inaugural World Missions Lecture Series, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, GA, February 4, 2014.

God breaks the boundaries we set for divinity and shows up in unexpected places, in unusual forms. Perhaps ecclesiology can learn from these stories, and from the newly developing areas of research in “missional” ecclesiology. Parkside’s blurry boundaries provide one example of the ways in which congregations can thrive when they look outside their walls and encounter God in the world.

Reconsidering Stolen Tires

The theology embodied in the congregation of Parkside makes a significant contribution to the way we think about models of ecclesiology in the twenty-first century. The congregation decidedly raises new questions for ecclesiological thinking general. Yet, this is not the only thing an ecclesiology of blurry boundaries offers. This new ecclesiology, embodied in the congregation of Parkside, makes possible another theological insight, a new way of thinking about racial reconciliation and racial justice within a congregational context. Let’s reconsider for a moment the story at the beginning of this chapter.

Think back to the conversation at the Women’s Brunch over the stolen tires, a conversation that morphed easily into a community organizing effort. In order to understand what Parkside’s blurry boundaries suggest about reconciliation, we must probe further into the density of the context of this conversation, making explicit what was once implicit, making clear what was left to the imagination in the initial description of the situation. This conversation took place among a racially and socio-economically diverse group of women, in a neighborhood marked by a complex history of race relations. The women at the table came to the conversation from many different perspectives, with many different experiences in mind. Some of the women were black, some were white, some were young, some were old, some were thoroughly middle class, some lived in section-8 housing, some had lived in the neighborhood for more than twenty

years, and others had only recently moved in. The inherited histories and racialized experiences these women carried, shaped their views concerning neighborhood crime, racism, poverty, and safety. Women of color felt personally threatened by the racism among police in the neighborhood and voiced concern for their families, particularly their husbands and sons. Yet, other women, particularly those coming from upper middle class white families, felt protected by police presence. Some women, mostly those who were poor, felt the tires were stolen because of the poor economy while others, both white and black, thought that might be a prank by neighborhood youth. There was a deep sense among women, both minority and white, who had lived in the neighborhood for a long period of time that the community was becoming too “uppity,” losing its neighborhood feel. Yet, those who had more recently moved in, mostly upper middle class black and white women, felt the recent spike in crime might be suggestive of a new season of neighborhood decline.

Making explicit the presence of black and white bodies in this context, and their hidden inheritances and their incorporation of racialized experiences, helps to illuminate the complexity of the conversation.⁷⁹ This is not just a conversation concerning tires stolen off an old car down the street from the church, this conversation is exposing much deeper wounds concerning race, class, prejudice, anger, dislocation, and racism. In this way, the conversation during Women’s Brunch at Parkside is not just seeking to solve the problem of the stolen tires, but to engage the larger problems of inequality and social obliviousness. Taking this density of bodies and experiences into account raises the distinct histories of privilege and discrimination to the surface, and helps us to understand that this conversation, at the blurry boundaries of Parkside, offers a place for transformation and reconciliation. In the process of hearing one another’s stories, the

⁷⁹ Recall Fulkerson’s widened notion of bodily contributions to theology in Part I of this work, see pages 12-13.

women grow to understand one another, to incorporate others' experiences and perspectives due to differences in race and class, into their own perspectives. Their "habituated sense of normal" is upended, expanded, and reconfigured.⁸⁰ These conversations then, which occur frequently within the blurry boundaries of the congregation, become pathways to transformation, healing, and reconciliation. The ecclesiology of blurry boundaries makes possible concrete experiences of racial reconciliation within congregational life, and offers new insights for current frameworks of racial reconciliation in congregations.

*Racial Justice and Models of Reconciliation:
Considering the Current State of the Field*

Extensive research and writing has been done in recent years on the relationship between race and religion generally, and racial justice and congregational life in particular. There is a growing apprehension among scholars traditional approaches to racial reconciliation, and a strong consensus is forming within religious scholarship that multiracial congregations offer a unique place for racial reconciliation and transformation to occur. Yet models of what these communities look like and the context of this transformation are scarce.⁸¹ In these concluding pages, I hope to briefly construct current critiques of the traditional models of reconciliation, and then consider how the blurry-boundary ecclesiology of Parkside offers a new way of thinking about racial reconciliation within communities of faith.

Traditional approaches to racism, racial justice, and reconciliation generally fall into one of two categories, individualist approaches or structural approaches, each leading to drastically different solutions for the problem of race relations in American society. Individualist models,

⁸⁰ Recall that the language of "habituated sense of normal" comes also from Fulkerson's work in which she suggests that encounters with "other" reshape one's sense of what constitutes "normal." See particularly Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 15.

⁸¹ A noteworthy exception is Emerson and Woo, *People of the Dream* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

sometimes referred to as interpersonal models, generally see the problem of racial injustice as perpetuated by the individual decisions of minority group members and propose solutions to the problem of race that encourage interracial contact and friendships, taking a stance of “colorblindness” or adopting ideals of Anglo-conformity. Structural, or institutional approaches, identify the problem of racial inequality as unequal distribution of power, and take the form of multiculturalism or white responsibility, seeking to remedy the problem of racial inequality through institutional social reforms.⁸² Models for racial reconciliation in congregations, like their secular counterparts, have historically fallen into these two categories as well, focusing either primarily on cultivating interpersonal relationships between races or primarily on social and political reform. There is a growing sense among theologians, pastors and scholars of race relations, however, that these models fall short of contributing to positive race relations, both as congregational models for racial reconciliation and as models for society at large. George Yancey, Michael O. Emerson, Michael Battle, Tony Campolo and Karen Chai Kim all offer significant critiques of the individualist and structural approaches that primarily concerned with where these models locate responsibility for racial justice and reconciliation.⁸³ These scholars suggest that individualist models locate the responsibility with individuals, particularly individuals in the minority group who must change their personal behavior in order for racial

⁸² For more detailed descriptions of these two models see Brenda Salter McNeil and Rich Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2004), 47-50 and George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 20-24.

⁸³ See Emerson and Yancey’s *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligation Approach*, George Yancey’s *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, Campolo and Michael Battle’s *The Church Enslaved: A Spirituality of Racial Reconciliation*.

inequality to be overcome.⁸⁴ Structural models, on the other hand, place responsibility primarily in the hands of the majority group, who must take action to insure future justice for minority group members due to the previous injustice that has been done.⁸⁵ Both of these approaches, scholars suggest, fall short of actually cultivating reconciliation, because they fail to recognize that reconciliation involves mutual responsibility and transformation.

In contrast to these two approaches to racial reconciliation, scholars have begun to suggest a third way, often referred to as the mutual obligations approach, to conceive of racial justice and reconciliation. George Yancey in his book *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, explains that this model envisions a society where the goal is not just reparations, but the healing of damaged relationships, where reconciliation has both personal and structural implications involving the acknowledgement of painful histories, forgiveness, political action, individual responsibility, and recognition of the sin of both majority group and minority group members in perpetuating poor race relations.⁸⁶ Yancey, like others in his field, points toward multiracial congregations one important location in which a mutual obligations approach can flourish, and rightfully so. As we saw in the story of Parkside above, and as we will explore further below, congregations offer a unique opportunity for transformation that has both interpersonal and structural elements. The women in our story were transformed through their intimate mixed race friendships that reshaped their perspective, but their conversation also led them to political actions within a public institution through the congregation as they engaged

⁸⁴ Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 26-28.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 26-28, 39-40 (critique of colorblindness approach), 46-48 (critic of Anglo-conformity approach), 61-63 (critique of multiculturalism approach), 69-73 (critique of white responsibility approach).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 138-144, and Emerson, *Transcending Racial Barriers*, 130-138.

together in upcoming neighborhood association meeting. The blurry boundaries at Parkside helped to bridge the public-private divide, combining interpersonal and structure transformation and cultivating racial reconciliation.⁸⁷ Yet, despite the construction of the mutual obligations approach and the advancing of its validity within congregations, very little work has been done to consider how multiracial congregations may or may not embody a mutual obligations approach, and what this approach requires theologically or ecclesialogically.⁸⁸ Transformation and racial reconciliation in the blurry boundaries at Parkside embodies many of concepts inherent in the mutual obligations approach, but it also advances this area of research by suggesting a particular theological lens by which we might begin to make sense of a mutual obligations approach in congregation life. In these final paragraphs, I will explore briefly the concrete content of “transformation” and “reconciliation” at Parkside in order to show Parkside’s resonance with the mutual obligation model, and then point to a theological framework for racial reconciliation embodied in this community of faith: the way of the family.

*Testimonials of Transformation:
How Blurry Boundaries Offer Opportunities for Transformation*

Parkside, though a multiracial congregation, does not have any formal programming related to race relations or racial reconciliation. Parishioners and staff have a diverse range of views on why Parkside does not have any programming concerning these topics and whether or not their lack of programming on these issues is a good thing. Yet when you ask parishioners of

⁸⁷ Emerson and Yancey suggest five conditions that enable congregations to be places for reconciliation, many of which we see at Parkside: (1) non-superficial contact, (2) contact that is cooperative instead of competitive, (3) contact that is not coerced, (4) contact supported by relevant figures of authority, (5) contact between social equals (*Transcending Racial Barriers*, 74).

⁸⁸ A noteworthy exception Kathleen Garces-Foley ethnographic work, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

both races if their conceptions of race have been transformed because of their involvement with the congregation, they unanimously give an enthusiastic, “Yes!” Story after story attests not only to the transformation of *perceptions* of race (and racial stereotypes) due to involvement in the congregation, but also consciousness-raising, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In many ways, Parkside embodies the best of the mutual obligations approach, by offering parishioners a place to engage in conversations about race and class in ways that nuance their understanding of the role of individual and structural responsibility in racial justice and cultivate personal transformation and engagement. Through their experiences at Parkside, congregants grow to realize the depth of different people’s experiences, both personally and historically, and also the depths of their shared humanity—the longings, passions, concerns, and desires that animate human life. Parishioners at Parkside who are white grow to be aware of the color of their skin, and the privileges that come with it. Hannah says being a part of the congregation prompts her to pray more.

“I worry more. And I pray more. I mean, I put my kid in a hoodie when it’s cold outside and I’ll probably still be doing that when he’s 14. But when I see the guys in our youth group who are African-American wear hoodies, I get scared for them and I think: Will you please be home before it gets dark, because someone’s going to see you in a hoodie and see your dark skin and worry about themselves. And that’s not fair.”

Black parishioners also speak of their understanding of race being transformed, and of Parkside becoming a place where they can begin to experience healing from the wounds racism has left.

Jermaine, the congregation’s associate pastor says it this way:

“The neighborhood where I grew up, it’s not black and white people hanging together. It’s a country town in Georgia, you know, and we’ve had a lot of racial issues...Being at [Parkside] has opened me up...I realize that we’re not that different at all. People struggling no matter the color of their skin... You know, sometimes we don’t speak because we assume certain things... here, you learn not to assume anything. We have different pasts and different quirks and jerks... but

ultimately we're human, and there is something healing in coming to see that. I can learn to forgive, and to love. Over the years I've grown to see, as a minister, that we all need the same thing and that's love and understanding."

Blurry boundaries at Parkside force parishoners to enage in conversations concering race and class biases, stereoetypes, structural injustice, and personal exeperiences, in way they might not otherwise. And the intimate nature of the congregaitonal community allows these conversations to be marked by openness and honesty, and become spaces for racial reconciliation. These conversations, at the blurry boundaries, produce a concept of "sticky justice" in which the personal, social, and political become tangled and love for someone who is different makes justice materialize in new ways.⁸⁹ For Hannah, experiences at Parkside enabled her to develop a real sense of white priveledge, and prompted reflection on the structural nature of racism as it relates to crime. She now authentically relates to racial discrimination from a new vantage point, becasue of her love for friends within the congregaiton who might be discinminated against. Jermaine's expeirneces at Parkside have cultivated a deep sense of shared humanity and have bolstered his sense of personal repsosnibility to build bridges, speak up, and avoid stereotypical assumptions. Hannah and Jermain, as well as other, tell stories of transformaiton in which they begin to recognize the complexities of injustice and their personal responsibility in racial justice, whether they are black or white.

*Church as Family?:
Questions to Conclude the Conversation*

Transformation within the congregaion of Parkside resonates with the values inherent to the mutual obligaitons approach, but it also pushes this model further, pointing to question for

⁸⁹ The notion of "Sticky Justice" comes from Catherine Keller's chapter "Sticky Justice: Com/passion in Process" in her work *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 111-131. Sticky justice, for Keller, reflects the expansion of one's notion of justice that comes from agapic love for "other."

further consideration for scholars within the field. While, in general, congregants don't speak about these conversations in explicitly theological ways, they do frequently refer to conversations on race and class as sustainable due to the sense of "family" within the congregation. When parishoners call Parkside a family, they are not referring to a "church family" as we might traditionally think. Rather, they are drawing on the complex and intimate experiences of family life marked by complexity, hurt, healing, belonging, rejection, and commitment. Tanni, a black woman in her early thirties explained to me that the hard conversations concerning race and class that take place at Parkside do not always end well. When I asked her why she continued to come she explained, "I just feel like they're family, and so, you know, when your family makes mistakes you forgive them and you go back, and you figure out a way forward." Leanne, Parkside's children's minister echoes this sentiment, and states explicitly its ramifications for reconciliation:

"I think really, at Parkside, it goes back to the informal nature of the culture here. It's not that we don't see race, but when you begin to see this community as your family, that's very different, very healing.... You feel deeply connected to people, and you really begin to believe that everybody is your brother and sister, that everybody is a child of God, and you live that out. I mean, there's no question that that's restoring what has been broken by racism in some way."

This notion of family echoed throughout my interviews at Parkside, and points us toward further questions to be considered by scholars who are thinking critically about congregations as a venue for racial reconciliation. At Parkside, it seems that an ecclesiology of blurry boundaries in a neighborhood that is racially and socio-economically diverse suggests a new way of thinking about racial justice in congregations: the way of family. Scholars in various disciplines of theology have employed the metaphor of the family to draw connections between interdependence, love, justice, but what might it look like, theologically and ecclesologically, to

think of the multiracial congregation as family?⁹⁰ How does the metaphor of family nuance the mutual obligations approach to reconciliation, or perhaps even provide a theological frame for it? What are the limits of thinking about racial reconciliation within the category of family? What theological and Biblical resources connect reconciliation, diversity, and family? What further ethnographic investigations are required to support the findings at Parkside? To be sure, these questions cannot be answered here, but they merit further consideration. These musings remind us of the ways in which the congregation of Parkside embodies a concrete model for racial reconciliation within communities of faith, and suggests a point of departure for further study in this field of research.

⁹⁰ Catherine Keller draws on the metaphor of the family in her chapter “Sticky Justice” described above. She also draws on James Cone’s use of the family metaphor in his work *Risk of Faith*, in which he states “the human family is as important as the Black family, because we will either learn to live together with others, or we will perish together, in his work.” Catherine Keller and Cone both suggest that relationships in family life expose interdependence and, in doing so, broaden notions of justice and care to include others, and regenerate the common life. See Keller, *On the Mystery*, 115-117.

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