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American God Story: Creating Shared Cultural Context with Popular Television

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Churches in America are declining in membership[1] as they watch their impact and significance in the broader context of American culture erode. In a well-intentioned effort to remain faithful to the gospel, in a world that seems increasingly estranged from it, churches have eschewed active engagement with the popular culture[2] and, subsequently, increasingly have difficulties bridging the cultural divide between unchurched populations and their own members. The political views, spiritual practices, and cultural consumption of persons who are active and engaged church members increasingly diverge from those of mainstream America.[3] This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for unchurched people to feel welcome and invited to join in the body of Christ. Churches may want to provide meaningful service and outreach to their communities, but they lack the shared cultural touchpoints and frameworks with unchurched populations that would enable rich and meaningful dialogue and welcome. There is a "growing disconnect between how the church continues to speak formally concerning spiritual experience and how those who are not Christians speak of that same reality."[4]

Without change, churches will continue to decline in numbers of attendees, cultural impact, and prominence in national dialogues. While some churches might rightly fear capitulation to culture in ways that diminishes their fealty to the gospel,

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[1] Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 312; Stewart M. Hoover. and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 3.

[2] Tim Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?* (Knoxville, TN: Power Publishing, 2008), 72.

[3] Ibid., 82.

[4] Robert K. Johnston, "Can Watching a Movie be a Spiritual Experience?" in *Religion and Popular Culture in America,* eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, third edition, 2017), 386.

willful ignorance of popular cultural trends and narratives make the church impotent rather than pure.[5] Churches have recently embraced the idea that they, and their message, are countercultural. While there is something innately countercultural about the message of Christ, it is a message tied to the character of America, a nation broadly intended to take its culture from the traditions and folkways of Protestant Christians.

The church has a responsibility to go and make disciples[6] that supersedes any desire to be theologically pure or culturally insular. Churches that have recognized the importance of meaningful outreach and dialogue with their broader, secular communities are showing some signs of growth,[7] but none seem to have unlocked a formula for broad cultural engagement and the successful creation of a common cultural language between churched and unchurched populations. The mediums across which churches now have opportunities to make disciples also lend themselves to an embrace of engagement with popular culture. For example, a major growth area for churches exists through social media and web presence – mediums dominated by popular, secular culture. Churches that once could conduct outreach only through scheduled, location-bound services and through the direct, personal outreach of members now have opportunities to build communities exclusively or principally online. Evangelism can be mediated by virtual

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[5] Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church*, 198.

[6] Matthew 28:19. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version.

[7] See e.g. Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 151-52; Stanley, *Deep & Wide.*

venues[8] that are dominated by the popular media culture and not innately hospitable to traditional forms of ministry.

Models exist, internationally, for churches that, in response to the unique contours of their communities, have found new ways to be relevant and helpful to their people. For example, the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the oldest Christian communities in existence, is intimately linked to the cause of Armenian statehood[9] and the cultural and social memory of its people.[10] Specifically, the church marks events like the day of remembrance for the Armenian genocide with as much, if not more, fanfare than traditional Christian holidays like Easter.[11] The church has, by deeply engaging the cultural anxieties and narratives of its community, co-opted the vast majority of the Armenian people, and continues to show signs of resilience and growth.

Given America's unique current cultural moment, one of decline for the church, but one of great opportunity for the urban, emerging, and experimental churches, this project seeks to offer practical insights into the creation of a shared cultural language for churched and unchurched populations that facilitates the creation of disciples.

[8] Matt Murdoch and Jim Davies, "Spiritual and Affective Responses to a Physical Church and Corresponding Virtual Model," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 20, no. 11 (2017): 702-8.

[9] Kimitaka Matsuzato and Stepan Danielyan,"Faith or Tradition: the Armenian Apostolic Church and Community-Building in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh," *Religion, State and Society* 41, no.1 (2013): 18-34; Konrad Siekierski. "One Nation, One Faith, One Church. The Armenian Apostolic Church and Ethno-Religion in Post-Soviet Armenia" Adgadjanian, Alexander, ed. *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity, Politics and Popular Practice* (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2014).

[10] Siekierski," One Nation, One Faith," 10.

[11] Ibid., 18.

Ministry Context

Sola Caritas is a five-year-old church located on the near west side of Cleveland, Ohio. Its members are younger than those of most peer churches, but it otherwise reflects a great diversity of ages, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural locations. The church is a member of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC). The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches gives broad autonomy to its constituent churches, and there is a great deal of space for divergence in religious practice across the churches within the denomination. While the denomination is a very progressive one, Sola Caritas represents one of the most conservative churches in the denomination. Sola Caritas employs high liturgy in many of its services and opts for traditional hymns rather than praise music. The church has a number of programs around popular cultural movements. Programming includes courses in design and writing, as well as a book club and small groups that enjoy activities such as movies and theater.

Sola Caritas is proudly a voting constituent congregation of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. Beyond the conventional church aspects of the ministry, Sola Caritas' membership is much more politically conservative than the rest of the denomination. While many MCC churches have virtually no political diversity, and at times use their influence to push for progressive candidates and liberal agenda items, Sola Caritas has a mixture of politically conservative and politically liberal members. More of its politically vocal members are Republicans than Democrats, and it is the only congregation in the denomination where this is the case.

Sola Caritas's ministries are concentrated on Cleveland's near west side. Most ministries occur within the 44113-zip code. This zip code, comprising two neighborhoods, Tremont and Ohio City, is one of the fastest gentrifying areas in Cleveland. Houses that sold for tens of thousands of dollars ten years ago are suddenly worth between $300,000 and $400,000. At the same time, longtime residents who have not yet been displaced struggle with poverty and with meeting their basic needs. Many of these residents are losing access to rental property or, if they own their property, are selling it without much of a plan, excited to suddenly find themselves in possession of valuable assets. Thus, the neighborhood is changing population quickly while also churning through residents who settle within driving distance as well as attracting people from across the region to its eateries and social gathering points.

Sola Caritas has committed to working to slow the cultural change of the neighborhood. The church is intentional in supporting local vendors and businesses, even when such decisions necessitate greater economic costs. Sola Caritas has been purchasing property and renovating it for use as transitional housing. In going about that work, the church has, occasionally, purchased properties that are tenant-occupied. When such properties are purchased, tenants are allowed to remain living in the homes as long as they wish, with rent increased no faster than inflationary trends. Sola Caritas has served as an advocate and partner for neighbors in the midst of a changing neighborhood. Pastoral staff and volunteers campaigned against the demolition and destruction of a two-hundred-year-old barn. While this effort was not successful, the church was instrumental in extracting concessions from developers that ensured relative non-disturbance of the neighborhood, its people, and its tree-scape. The church also makes its parking available

to other community partners, upon request, when the church does not have activities in session. These decisions have earned Sola Caritas a reputation for being a good neighbor and part of the community.

Sola Caritas is a youthful congregation. It has a mix of racial demographics, social backgrounds, and family structures. The core congregation is about thirty members, but every year, hundreds of people receive housing, grant aid, food, and various other services through Sola Caritas. Thus, the stakeholders of Sola Caritas are diverse and reflective of the vibrant neighborhood and city in which the ministry is situated. Compared to peer churches in the area, Sola Caritas is more diverse in age, having both young children and elderly members. Sola Caritas is also more racially diverse that regional peer churches, drawing significant numbers of members from Anglo-Saxon, Black, and Puerto Rican communities. Family structures in the congregation are usually large and unconventional, with persons choosing to build lives with families of choice as often as families of birth.

Sola Caritas is broadly involved in the community. The church partners with other area churches for feeding ministries, clothing ministries, and some social ministries. The church is the owner of a robust housing program, which owns a number of facilities while working with charitably-minded community members to provide additional housing. Sola Caritas operates a grant program that gives micro-grants, up to $500, to persons in need, particularly young people. The church has always placed direct service to the community at the forefront of its ministry, and there are a number of extremely engaged volunteers who are only peripheral members of the Sola Caritas worshipping community. Indeed, Sola Caritas has always prioritized doing the work of service over the practice of

worship. Because of this conscious choice, there are several “not quite members” of the church who are involved in the work of the church without actually taking the plunge into new member courses and the process of initiating adult confirmation.

As such, Sola Caritas churns through a number of stakeholders and persons served every year. These persons have drastically divergent levels of theological and scriptural literacy, and wildly varied past experiences of church. Sola Caritas has served people who are active members of non-Christian religions, long-time Christians looking for a new spiritual home, persons who are seeking answers about God, and people who have never given their spiritual life much thought. A wide swath of people is drawn in by the many practical ministries that the church performs, and the church has an opportunity to be in relationship with a high number of unchurched people relative to its present size.

Problem Presented

While some Protestant American church traditions acculturated popular culture into their ministries, a growing chasm is emerging between the culture of evangelical religious communities and that of the mainstream American cultural imaginary. This divide raises the barrier to entry into the ministry of Sola Caritas Church of Cleveland, Ohio for community members with little or no church background.

Scripture counsels Christians not to be “of this world,”[12] but still demands that Christians go out into the world to make disciples of all nations.[13] American culture has consistently been shaped by Christian tradition. Indeed, the Hays Code, which long governed production in Hollywood, was named for a Christian minister who helped

[12] Romans 12:2.

[13] Matthew 28:19.

implement it. As the political and cultural influence of Christianity waned, Christians responded by limiting their consumption, and awareness, of popular culture. Christians have boycotted popular trends in fashion, music, and media arts. This lack of engagement and awareness isolated Christians in a way that limits their ability to effectively minister to unchurched communities. The problem is that the lack of a shared culture language[14] limits opportunities for members of Sola Caritas to have substantive conversations[15] with presently unchurched members of the community. Genuine human connection necessarily requires that those persons who are connecting have something about which to connect. For example, they might have a shared love of a particular sport, music group, book, or movie. As the media and entertainment becomes increasingly politically balkanized, persons with an evangelical worldview often find themselves on the outside looking into the mainstream culture. Trapped in a countercultural bubble, churches, and their members, may lack the common touchpoints needed to effectively connect with, and minister to, the everyday people of their communities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN thesis is to lower the barrier to entry into the life of the church, for unchurched populations by actively working to develop a shared cultural language between members of Sola Caritas and unchurched populations. Television, the most accessible and pervasive medium in America, provides a viable vehicle for actively cultivating a shared canon of cultural references.

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[14] For the purposes of this paper, shared cultural language will mean a shared canon of cultural references derived from literature, film, television, and other media culture.

[15] Substantive conversations are conversations, grounded in deep, personal, human connection around topics such as eternal destiny, lived ethics, and thriving.

Helping church members better understand, and engage, the popular culture will help them serve as more welcoming, and accessible, faith mentors to presently unchurched populations. A shared cultural language will create more opportunities for organic human connection across the churched/unchurched divide and result in easier integration of unchurched populations into the ministries of Sola Caritas.

Basic Assumptions

There are four assumptions associated with this thesis project. The first assumption is that a cultural divide exists between church communities and the secular communities that surround them. This divide is manifested in different patterns of cultural consumption and, subsequently, different cultural touchpoints and language.

Second, this study assumes that churches have something of value to offer persons who are presently unchurched. For the study to assume that there is positive benefit in creating a shared cultural language that lowers the barrier of entry for unchurched persons, it must assume that churches have something worthwhile to share with persons not presently engaging them.

The third assumption is that a shared cultural language can be created in a way that glorifies God and allows the church to engage popular culture with integrity. Much popular culture is rightly seen as objectionable by many church communities. Churches need to maintain their spiritual integrity when they are using media culture.

Finally, this study assumes that limited media touchpoints, for example, one or two television programs, are sufficiently broad in their appeal that they can meaningfully inform and enliven the cultural language of a faith community. Churches cannot engage all of popular media culture in a quest to create a shared language. Thus, they must be

able to find a select number of media objects to engage that can form the basis of a shared cultural language.

Definitions

For the purposes of this project, members of Sola Caritas will not include all stakeholder members qualified, under the bylaws of Sola Caritas, to vote in the elections of the corporation of the church. Rather, members will include only those persons, meeting the above voting member criteria, who also participate in the worshipping community of the church more than half of the weeks in a given calendar year. Unchurched persons will be defined as those persons who are not regular attendees, or active members, of Sola Caritas or any other faith community. For the purposes of this study, active members of faith traditions other than Christianity will not be considered "unchurched" persons.

Popular culture has been defined as "some sort of shared cultural values of a populace, or at least a set of issues around which negotiations and conflicts over meaning occur in a populace. . . ."[16] Defining what is pop culture may have to do with the method of transmission. Popular culture "most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, through mass media (television, radio, movies, books, magazines, and cyber-communication. . .[p]opular culture is marked by its larger audience."[17] For the purposes of this study, popular media culture will be limited to television programs carried by a popular television channel or prominent streaming services (e.g. Netflix). For a program

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[16] John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

[17] Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, third edition, 2017).

to be included in this work, it must have run for at least two seasons to be considered "popular."

Theological terms will be defined expansively for the purposes of this project. The Christian view of salvation will be taken to mean belief in an afterlife and belief in Jesus, as the Christ, as the path to heaven. Communion will be spoken of using conventional Lutheran theological understandings of communion, but for participants may be interpreted broadly as the sharing of Christ's body and blood at the table in a worshipful context.

Limitations

Many factors limit the scope of this project. First, the paper is not a comprehensive study on bridging the divide between churched and unchurched populations using popular culture precisely because the unique geographical and social locations of different churches, and their communities, will subtly change the cultural zeitgeist in which any church/community division is located. While many churches want to bridge the divide between their members and their broader communities, churches have different theologies, traditions, missions, and membership that will make the degree to which a culturally grounded intervention is viable different.

This study includes a representative of an inner-city church plant with a membership of fewer than one hundred active members. The project examines a broadly diverse, urban community with theologies and a denominational affiliation that encourage experimentation and engagement with the popular culture. This study is not engaging large churches, suburban churches, culturally homogenous churches, theologically repressive churches, or long-established churches, even though such

communities may experience similar cultural divisions between their church bodies and the communities that surround them. The study may not provide useful information for churches in theologically regressive traditions.

Delimitations

The first delimitation was to not interview all persons who felt a deeper relational affiliation to either the Sola Caritas community or the secular community outside of the church. As briefly mentioned in the definitions section, survey respondents will only be invited to participate if they clearly fall into specified definitions of churched or unchurched persons. A clear demarcation can thus be drawn between people within and without the church community.

The second delimitation is to not interview all persons outside of Sola Caritas church. The church defines its mission as one that brings the changing news of Christ to the world, but obviously, for the purposes of this study, an examination of cultural divides between the church membership and people across the world would be less than helpful. Among persons who interact with Sola Caritas church, this study will only invite persons from within the community, defined as those who make their primary residence within fifteen miles of the zip code in which most Sola Caritas properties and activities are located, 44113. Persons, either members or unchurched visitors, living beyond that bound will not so participate. Some peer churches view the world as their mission field, facilitated primarily through web offerings and online communities. Sola Caritas maintains that, while such services are effective for infirm persons, or persons without nearby geographic access to a church, they should not generally be a substitute for active, in person, engagement with a church community. The church's commitment to this belief

further necessitates that participation be limited to persons living within a reasonable distance of the church's geographical footprint.

Third, the study will not use all popular cultural items in creating a shared language between the church and the surrounding community. While popular music, literature, and art, and other cultural objects are doubtless valuable items that might be employed by some other communities, they do not have the broad appeal within Sola Caritas' context that would make them obvious fits for ministry. Popular cultural objects that will be engaged in this study will be confined to narrative-driven television programs. "Films, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspective. . . ."[18] Reality programming will not be included, neither will news programming, sports programming, game shows, or other non-narrative programming. Scripture takes a narrative form, more similar to a television drama than to, for example, a baseball game. Thus, the study will accept as a design principle that the richest discussions will arise from narrative media objects and, additionally, that such narrative media objects will best prepare unchurched persons for deeper engagement with scripture.

Thesis Statement

If Sola Caritas fosters a shared cultural language with unchurched populations, by engaging popular media culture, specifically mainstream television programming, as a tool for delivery of faith formation and new membership classes, unchurched populations will be able to more easily integrate into the life of the church.

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[18] Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (San Francisco: Westwood Press, 1995), vii.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Many recent works discuss the intersection of religion and popular culture. Authors have examined theological elements in popular culture[19] and have considered the use of popular culture in religion.[20] However, markedly fewer works discuss the efficacy of using popular culture, and specifically TV shows, to evangelize the unchurched. This thesis draws from several scholarly and popular sources while finding its grounding in scripture. The project examines the life of a specific faith community, Sola Caritas, in Cleveland, Ohio, and surveys from that congregation contribute to the findings of the paper. The following pages briefly examine the sources engaged for this project.

The Intersection of Religion and Popular Culture

Since the 1970s, writers have been exploring the intersection of popular culture and religion. While study began in earnest in the last half-century, one of the first references to this intersection occurred much earlier -- in 1911 -- when "Congregational minister Herbert Jump was hailing 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture,' encouraging the use of the new medium by churches as a tool for evangelism . . . ."[21] Jump's vision is still awaiting realization, but he prophetically grasped the potential of a medium that could be leveraged for reframing and resharing narrative, much in the way

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[19] See e.g. Feltmate, David, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in the Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (New York: NYU Press, 2017) (religious themes in TV cartoons); Robert K. Johnston "Can Watching a Movie be a Spiritual Experience?" in *Religion and Popular Culture in America,* eds. Forbes and Mahan (theological themes in films).

[20] See e.g. Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bake Book House, 1991) (televangelism); Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Salvation on the Small Screen?: 24 Hours of Christian Television* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008) (Christian television programming); Tim Stevens. *Pop goes the Church* (using the music of Linkin Park and the Beatles to engage with God).

[21] Lyden and Mazur, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, 80.

that the written word and printing press revolutionized the, once oral, traditions that became scripture.

In their comprehensive book,[22] Lyden and Mazur consider the intersection of popular culture and religion across many media, including comics, sports, film, graphic novels, food, fashion, journalism, and social media. They do not confine their consideration of religion exclusively to Christianity. Instead, they also consider Hinduism, Buddhism, Paganism, and Islam. In their collection of essays,[23] which has become a standard textbook on the intersection of religion with pop culture, Forbes and Mahan evaluate the intersection of religion and popular culture on four levels: religion's influence on popular culture, popular culture's influence on religion, popular culture as a type of religion, and the necessity of dialogue between popular culture and religion.[24] Of particular interest in this textbook is Robert K. Johnston's essay, "Can Watching a Movie be a Spiritual Experience?"[25] Indeed, many experiences outside of conventional worship and religious activity are described in this work as having spiritual significance. Emphasis is placed on the experience of the spiritual experience as well as community and conversations sparked. Movies and television can be effective vehicles for spiritual experiences framed as such.

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[22] Lyden and Mazur, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture.*

[23] Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*.

[24] Ibid. Forbes notes four ways of examining the intersection of religion with pop culture "religion in popular culture; poplar culture in religion; popular culture as religion; and religion and popular culture in dialogue."

[25] Robert K. Johnston, "Can Watching a Movie be a Spiritual Experience?" in Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America.*

Joylon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage collect essays which explore wide-ranging topics on the intersection of media and religion including religious[26] conflict in the Nigerian media,[27] Islam and American news reporting,[28] visual piety,[29] internet religion,[30] and the impact of electronic media on religion.[31] Mitchell and Marriage believe that religious groups can and should "educate themselves to develop media literacy skills that will ensure the media is not solely responsible for the formation of cultural or religious identity."[32] Examining religion's continued vitality in media culture,[33] Adam Possamai[34] considers the re-appropriation of religion by, among others, comics, computer games, and Star Wars fans. Possamai names this type of religion hyper-real religion, which he defines as "a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/ or a source of beliefs for everyday life."[35] As Gordon Lynch clarifies, "[u]nderstanding religion and the sacred as culture, and through culture, forms an important future pathway for the study of

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[26] Jolyon P. Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, eds. *Mediating Religion: Studies in Media, Religion and Culture* (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

[27] Ibid., 47.

[28] Ibid., 73.

[29] Ibid., 107.

[30] Ibid., 229.

[31] Ibid., 271.

[32] Ibid., 4.

[33] Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament.* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007).

[34] Interestingly, Possamai writes his nonfiction in English and his fiction in French.

[35] Ibid., 20.

religion."[36] Or, as Turner articulates, "family, friends, work and popular culture (or leisure activities in general) are where the rubber of our theology hits the road of our ordinary lives."[37]

Religion's Merger with Media Culture

One writer, Stewart M. Hoover, has made a career of analyzing the intersection of religion with popular culture.[38] Hoover, currently a professor at University of Colorado, Boulder, has set for himself a goal of "ongoing scholarly inquiry into meaning-making among media audiences."[39] In one of his earliest books, a collection of essays published in 1997, Hoover and co-author Knut Lundby seek to triangulate theories of religion, culture, and media.[40] Hoover and Lundby's book originated following a 1993 conference on "Media, Religion, and Culture" held in Uppsala, Sweden.[41]

In his 2006 book,[42] Hoover notes that many metaphors have been used to describe the media.[43] Hoover wondered how consumption of media influenced Christians.

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[36] Gordon Lynch, *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 163.

[37] Steve Turner, *Popcultured: Thinking Christianly about Style, Media, Entertainment* (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 2013). 7.

[38] See e.g. Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age (Media, Religion and Culture)* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006); Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997); Stewart M. Hoover, *The Media and Religious Authority* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016); Stewart M. Hoover and Curtis D. Coats, *Does God Make the Man?: Media, Religion and the Crisis of Masculinity* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

[39] Hoover and Coats, *Does God Make the Man*, vii.

[40] Hoover and Lundby, *Rethinking Media,* 3.

[41] Ibid., 11.

[42] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age.*

Believing that Evangelicals are generally more attuned to media than are those of other religions.[44] Hoover interviewed several families about the music they listened to and the television programs they watched.[45] Many interviewee parents were primarily concerned about their children's consumption of media,[46] wanting to protect their children from viewing programs, which contained violence or lax morals. Following extensive interviews, Hoover concluded that many Christian families are in a state of constant negotiation between their religion and the broader media culture.[47]

Hoover further examined this area with co-author Lynn Schofield Clark,[48] noting that the media and religion were once viewed as very distinct entities.[49] More recent scholarship, however, has begun to acknowledge the myriad "interconnections" between media and religion.[50] Religion necessarily reflects the summed values of a society's culture, and as such inextricably merges with each context's media and artistic canon.

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[43] "Are they an 'environment'? a 'vast wasteland'? 'the fourth estate'? 'the cultural environment'? the 'family hearth'? 'Satanic'? 'technologies of freedom'? 'technologies of domination or hegemony'? 'the video altar'?" Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 45.

[44] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 150.

[45] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 151-175. Popular culture consumed by the interviewees included, among others, music by singer Babyface, the cartoon *The Simpsons,* and the TV shows *Survivor*, *Married with Children, ER,* and *X-files.*

[46] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 175.

[47] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 165.

[48] Hoover and Clark, *Practicing Religion*.

[49] Hoover and Clark, *Practicing Religion,* 2.

Media Speaks to Pressing Socio-religious Questions

In their 2015 book,[51] Hoover and co-author Curtis Coats consider media's role in influencing gender. Using interviews, observations, and focus groups, Hoover and Coats sought to determine how the media, particular medium of television, influences American masculinity.[52] Hoover and Coats asked subjects to watch television shows such as *MacGyver, Grey's Anatomy* and *The Office* and to describe how the shows portrayed various topics, among them work.[53] Hoover and Coats were particularly concerned with the concepts of evangelical masculinity and "headship."[54] One of their most striking findings was that "Evangelical and Ecumenical men do, in fact, think differently from each other about gender."[55] The authors also concluded that "[s]ecular media appear to be at the center of the articulation of masculinity today, and in much more salient ways than religion or even family of origin."[56] Although Hoover's and Coats' findings are very interesting, they were concerned solely with how the TV shows portrayed masculinity. They did not use their observations to determine how or whether the TV shows increased the viewers' religious beliefs or experience of communities of faith. Nor did the paper fully examine how television could be leveraged to facilitate discussions between churched and unchurched persons on pressing issues such as gender roles and familial connectedness. Another writer, David Feltmate, considers religion's and popular culture's

[51] Hoover and Curtis D. Coats, *Does God Make the Man*.

[52] Ibid., 1.

[53] Ibid., 97-99.

[54] Ibid., 160-61.

[55] Ibid., 162.

[56] Ibid., 164.

intersection with humor on TV shows such as *The Simpsons.*[57] Although Feltmate's work is interesting from a popular culture standpoint, Feltmate does not explore the efficacy of using TV shows to evangelize the unchurched.

Using Popular Media to Transmit Religious Messages

There is a "growing disconnect between how the church continues to speak formally concerning spiritual experience and how those who are not Christians speak of that same reality."[58] Using popular culture to transmit religion may help to bridge this disconnect. Several books consider the role of popular media as a method of religious transmission. Thinking has not developed significantly since Quentin J. Schultze concluded in his work that televangelism attracts viewers and listeners due to its "apparent spiritual vitality, social and personal relevance, and spontaneity."[59] Schultze is concerned, however, with the influence of televangelism on the American consumer. In a chapter entitled "The Greening of the Gospel," Schultze reveals that he wrote to nearly one hundred radio and television preachers asking for disclosure of their finances. The responses he received were not what he expected.[60] Schultze's work, although focusing on finances, shows a stark contrast between the leaders and values of local parishes and

[57] See e.g. David Feltmate, "The Humourous Reproduction of Religious Prejudice: 'Cults' and Religious Humour in The Simpsons, South Park, and King of the Hill*," The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 24, no. 2 (2012): 201-16; David Feltmate, "It's Funny Because It's True? 'The Simpsons,' Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013): 222-48; David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in the Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

[58] Johnston, *Can Watching a Movie,* 386.

[59] Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bake Book House, 1991),155.

[60] "The vast majority of the letters … were designed to raise funds by peddling membership in the ministry, hawking various kinds or religious products such as books and tapes, and directly soliciting contributions" Schultze, 153-54.

those of televangelism ministries that, for many Americans, serve as their primary interface with organized Christian religion. Schultze drew attention to this contrast but did not offer insights into how local parishes might work to overcome false perceptions of their teachings and values among unchurched people in their local communities. There was also no insight into how media culture, or television, might be redeployed by faith communities to provide authentic ministry.

In her 2008 book, Nadia Bolz-Weber considers how the medium of television transmits religion. The author of a blog entitled *Sarcastic Lutheran,* Bolz-Weber decided to watch twenty-four consecutive hours of Trinity Broadcasting Network.[61] In one twenty-four period, Bolz-Weber explored all the religious programming available to her. Her concerns echo those of Schulze. Bolz-Weber was disturbed by TBN's marketing techniques, which encouraged her and all their listeners to send them money as "love gifts."[62] For each program, Bolz-Weber analyzed how many Bible passages were read, how God was portrayed, and what was being marketed to viewers. While watching the programming, Bolz-Weber tallied up all the items that were offered to the consumers; they totaled $7909.62.[63] Schulze's and Bolz-Weber's books are useful for showing the geographic reach and potential influence of religious programming. However, neither book explores the efficacy of using popular programming to witness to unchurched persons.

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[61] Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Salvation on the Small Screen: 24 Hours of Christian Television.* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008), 3.

[62] "For your love gift … we'll save souls … the Christian Sudanese will be fed, we'll convert Muslims and reform criminals and God will make you rich" Bolz-Weber, *Salvation on the Small Screen*, 125.

[63] Bolz-Weber, *Salvation on the Small Screen* 161.

Religious Themes in Popular Culture

Religious themes and the quest for God are prevalent throughout popular culture.[64] In popular culture, religious themes can be overt or implicit.[65] Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt[66] note that "films can and do perform religious and iconoclastic functions in American society."[67] According to Martin and Ostwalt, "[f]ilms, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspectives. . . .[68] There are biblical images and biblical allegories throughout popular culture. Many films, for example, portray God or godlike figures, however, "[r]epresentations of God the Father in contemporary films tend to be less about accuracy of scripture and/or doctrine and more about a general faith or belief."[69] Additionally, recent films show a "shift from a doctrinal orthodoxy based on the theology of the trinity to a popular conception which places the person and personality of Jesus Christ as the godhead. . . ."[70] Portrayals of other biblical figures also abound. In *Screening the Sacred,* Martin and Oswalt point out the parallels between Rocky and various biblical characters: "Just as Christ consorted with a prostitute named Mary Magdelene [sic], Rocky advises a

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[64] Examples include music, such as "U2's 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking for' and Lady Gaga's 'Judas'" as well as cartoons such as *The Simpsons.* Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America,*1.

[65] Some "implicit theological themes in film [include] love, meaning, forgiveness, sin, and death and resurrection." Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America,* 14.

[66] Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred*.

[67] Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred,* vii.

[68] Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred*, vii.

[69] Santana, Richard W. and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016), 92.

[70] Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture,* 91. "Where older films engage the jealous and cranky God of the Hebrew Bible, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* represents a signal engagement with the precepts of Christ as sacrifice." Santana and Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture,* 98.

girl named Marie to stop being promiscuous; like a Good Samaritan, he rescues a bum from the street; finally, like a scapegoat savior or human sacrifice, he suffers physical violence in order to redeem the hopes of the common people."[71] While identifying the way that fundamental biblical stories and themes have been reshared through popular media, this work does not provide meaningful insight into how the movies might be deployed in the congregational setting. As such, there is not enough discussion of how movies and television could be used to foster bridge-building between churched and unchurched persons.

Pop Culture and Religious Curiosity

Several writers are starting to see that the consumption of popular culture may express a desire for religion. Robert K. Johnston recounts a study he conducted with some of his students. Johnston had has students describe "the most personally compelling spiritual experience they had while watching a movie. . . ."[72] For Johnston, receiving spiritual messages while watching films is akin "to how, in Proverbs 30 and 31, the sayings of the non-Israelites Agur and King Lemuel's mother are discovered by God's people to be God's relation to them. . . ."[73] Johnston explores religious themes in films further in a 2013 essay.[74] According to Johnston, watching films may be one of few places where one has time to reflect on religion. "Given our busy lives, many today take

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[71] Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred,* 1.

[72] Johnston, *Can Watching a Film*, 374.

[73] Johnston *Can Watching a Film*, 384.

[74] Johnston, Robert K., "The Film Viewer and Natural Theology: God's 'Presence' at the Movies" in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 595-610.

scant time to reflect on life's meaning, except in places like the Cineplex."[75] Johnston also draws analogies between watching a movie and going to church.[76] Although Johnston is interested in how his students can "find God" at the movies, he does not expressly or intentionally use films to evangelize to the unchurched. Johnston also does not invite students to have broad discussions on the themes of the films. Rather, the students examine God in the immediate context of the narrative presented through the film screened.

Tim Stevens emphasizes, "all truth is God's truth, regardless of the source."[77] Stevens recounts that, while listening to the song "Numb" by Linkin Park, he was reminded of the prophet Jeremiah.[78]

Pop Culture's Influence on and Usefulness for Religion

Like Johnston, other scholars have also examined pop culture's usefulness in communicating religious themes. According to Michael Real, "Television and other mass media provide ideal educational forums for improving health attitudes and practices."[79] Similarly, Campbell and Wagner"[80] recount a meeting of the American Academy of Religion where, in a panel discussion entitled "Born Digital and Born Again Digital,"

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[75] Johnston, "The Film Viewer and Natural Theology*,"* 596.

[76] "[T]he Cineplex functions almost like a cathedral: people come expecting something; the room is darkened; you pay your money; you give over your attention. . . the music sets the mood. . . ." Johnston, "The Film Viewer and Natural Theology," 608-09.

[77] Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 87.

[78] "Their words remind me of the cry of Jeremiah; 'These are bad times for me. . . . God is piling on the pain.'" Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 87.

[79] Michael R. Real, *Mass-Mediated Culture* (London: Pearson College Div., 1977), 137.

[80] Heidi A. Campbell, Rachel Wagner et al. "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention in Gaming." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.* 84, 3, 2016.

they investigated intersections of "religion, video games, and digital media."[81]As Hoover and Lundby note, however, many studies "contemplate relations between media and religion in terms of an antagonistic dualism, where the media are seen as a threat to 'authentic' religion … ."[82] Steve Turner cautions that "if Christ is Lord of all our lives, then there must be a Christian way to enjoy and make pop culture."[83] There remains a great deal of ambiguity across these works on the faith-formative value of media culture, and there is not a direct challenge to organized religion's general distrust of popular media culture.

Using Pop Culture to Evangelize

Although many of the above works discuss the intersection between religion and pop culture, far fewer works have explored the feasibility or efficacy of using popular culture as an evangelization tool. In her article, Rachel Wagner examines the effectiveness of using video games to teach religion. [84] Wagner explains that she wanted to explore "how gaming can work *like* religion."[85] According to Wagner, gaming is akin to religion in that gaming "invites the player to experience a world outside themselves and to believe in rules of life and its value outside of the 'rules' of mortal experienced reality."[86]

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[81] Campbell, Wagner, *et al.,* "Gaming Religionworlds," 7.

[82] Hoover, and Lundby, *Rethinking Media,* 9.

[83] Turner, *Popcultured,* 18.

[84] Rachel Wagner, "Gaming Religion? Teaching Religious Studies with Videogames." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 25, no. 1 (2014): 101-11.

[85] Wagner, "Gaming Religion,"101.

[86] Wagner, "Gaming Religion," 103.

Tim Stevens uses the television program *Desperate Housewives*,[87] as well as songs by the Beatles, to evangelize. According to Stevens, the Beatles "sang about human longing for love, change, justice, and revolution. And this Jesus we serve has answers to the longings about which the Beatles sang."[88] Stevens is quick to make the following distinction: "We didn't use Beatles music because we believed it pointed people to Jesus. We used it so we could connect to our community … and use the Bible to point people to Jesus."[89] And Stevens' approach worked. He was able to evangelize the unchurched by starting with the Beatles' music.[90]

Theological Themes in American Horror Story

Scholars diverge on what constitutes the shared American cultural cannon and where the popular culture and religion diverge. Camille Paglia's[91] work has shifted cultural imaginaries of gender, work, personhood, and the intersection of the human condition with theological and popular cultures. *Provocations,* Paglia's collection of essays, builds on her lifelong work, which views religion as the truest expression of a society's culture[92] and critically analyzes emerging themes and trends in the American cultural imaginary.[93] This foundational cultural work underpins the paper's understanding

[87] Stevens led a multi-week Bible study on marriage and parenting where he showed clips from the television show, *Desperate Housewives,* to facilitate discussion. Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 157-58.

[88] Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 150.

[89]Ibid.

[90] "The music of the Beatles enabled us to pull people in who wouldn't otherwise be listening." Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church,* 150.

[91] Although an avowed atheist, Paglia admires religion as "profound in its poetry, insight, and metaphysical sweep." Camille Paglia, *Provocations*: *Collected Essays* (New York, Pantheon Books, 2018), *x*.

[92] Paglia, *Provocations,* 567-71.

of the weight of cultural literacy and a shared cultural context. It reinforces the thesis that a shared cultural language, will better reach unchurched persons at Sola Caritas. Lane Fox uses *Pagans and Christians*[94] as a vehicle for historical engagement of the difference between overtly Christian and, more-popular culture centered, folk religions. Lane Fox looks at the inherent counter-cultural elements of Christianity while also pushing readers to consider the different ways present culture depicts each community. Like Paglia, Fox sees a linkage between popular cultural and counter-Christian sentiment. The work shows how pagan religions have leveraged culture for growth, and how Christianity must be careful when engaging popular culture. Lane Fox' work provides a warning for Sola Caritas about engaging in popular culture, but also examples for leveraging popular culture for church growth. *American Horror Story* is a multipart television series envisioned by noted television creator Ryan Murphy.[95] The program actively engages Christian and pagan tropes and questions of afterlife, thriving, and eternal destiny. The program will serve as the primary vehicle for creation of a shared cultural language for churched and unchurched populations at Sola Caritas.

American Horror Story Engages Live Socio-Religious Conversations

Major social trends continue to shape the cultural weight of works and the cultural work different media objects perform. D'Souza critically examines race in the American context and the cultural and religious implications of race in the lived experiences of Americans. He notes how African-American slaves adopted the Christians' belief in

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Robin Lane Fox. *Pagans and Christians.* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 1989).

[95] *See e.g. American Horror Story: Asylum*. FX. 2012-13; *American Horror Story: Coven*. FX. 2013-14; *American Horror Story: Freak Show.* FX. 2013-14.

salvation through Christ[96] but, as a result of their lives in America, identified more than whites did with the suffering Christ.[97] Race looming large in the present cultural imaginary, especially for an intentionally diverse community like Sola Caritas, D'Souza's work offers solutions for living in a multiracial society[98] and is helpful for churches in thinking through the racial implications of cultural engagement and the ways that decisions to, or not to, engage the popular culture have implications for the degree to which true racial inclusion can be achieved in the community. The third season of American Horror Story, *Coven,* perhaps best engages the intersection of race and religion. Pulling a Christian from 1700s Louisiana into the present time reveals views on race that are antithetical to modern Christian teaching. Examining the collision of religions, magic, and race points to a framework for how people of faith will inevitably move through presently roiling social issues, such as gender or race.

Fascination by and Distrust of Modern Media Culture

Irrespective of the precise constituent material of popular culture, scholars and Christian leaders agree that the popular culture does have implications for ministry and the ways that faith communities relate to the unchurched. Tim Stevens provides valuable insight into the anxiety that many churches feel as regards popular culture. While there is a desire to harness to reach and memetic draw of popular culture for ministry, there is also an understanding that popular culture is often a nefarious force that can undercut the messaging and values of churches. Stevens examines this tension and provides insight

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[96] Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Princples for a multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 95.

[97]Ibid., 96.

[98]Ibid., 525-35.

into how a church can balance the competing interests of retaining identity while engaging the culture. T.M. Moore[99] argues for the viability of culture in Christian contexts. Moore's work takes the view that popular culture exists necessarily apart from the culture of churches, but that there are at least elements of popular culture than can be harnessed for the work of God's kingdom. This work provides insight into leveraging fraught works for deployment in faith formation programming. In *American Church,* Shaw provides insight into how one major denomination, Roman Catholicism, was hurt by their efforts to better align with the popular culture. Shaw believes that aligning the church with the culture, rather than harnessing elements of the culture to help the church's ministry, is destructive.[100] Shaw also provides some insight into how the Catholic Church has successfully harnessed new mediums and cultural ways for effective ministry.[101] Shaw's aversion to some elements of popular culture seems like this work will not be particularly useful to Sola Caritas' plan. However, Shaw's attempts to reconcile elements of Christianity and popular culture may lead to a more effective ministry for Sola Caritas. Groothuis uses *Unmasking the New Age*[102] as a vehicle to make a strong argument against overly warm engagement between popular culture and religious communities. As opposed to other works included here which see value in engaging the popular culture, Groothuis sees the popular culture as but one of many arenas in America that seek to promote new religious ways of meaning making while

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[99] T. M. Moore, *Redeeming Pop Culture: A Kingdom Approach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003).

[100] Russell Shaw, *American Church: The Remarkable Rise, Meteoric Fall, and Uncertain Future of Catholicism in America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 200-203.

[101] Ibid. 196-97.

[102] Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Madison, WI: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, 1986).

diminishing the standing of Christianity. Although the book's publication date of 1986 makes some of Groothuis' antipathy to the new age seem dated, the work is helpful in that it shows cultural bias against Christianity[103] and encourages mindfulness about the degree to which anti-Christian or counter-Christian sentiment is embedded in the popular culture. By showing the underlying Christian meaning in pop culture programs such as *American Horror Story*, Sola Caritas may help unchurched persons to confront their cultural bias against Christianity. *American Horror Story* may help to fuel both fascination and distrust amongst conventional Christian groups of popular media culture. The show deals with themes of the occult and sexuality in ways that caused distress for Christians. It also portrays the Roman Catholic Church poorly in its second season, asylum. Still, the show is also at times deeply reverent towards Christian themes and traditions. It seems to take Christian ideas like afterlife and salvation for granted. And, it sparks discussions of faith for people who might not otherwise regularly engage in conventional Christian community.

Missing Divinity in Media Culture Reveals Longing

Present literature provides valuable insight into the interplay between popular culture and contemporary religious practice. Tim Stevens notes that "finding God in pop culture is easier than you think."[104] Stevens identifies seven themes found throughout popular culture which demonstrate unchurched persons' preoccupation with, and

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[103] Groothuis. *Unmasking the New Age*, 139-42.

[104] Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church*, 95.

unacknowledged longing for, God.[105] Biblical precedence bears witness to a Christianity whose people, though intentionally apart from the world in many regards, love the world, and their fellow humans, and are called to engage the world fully as they work to bring ever more people to full inclusion in the body of Christ. A gap exists in present literature regarding the deployment of popular media objects, specifically television series, as a tool for creating a shared cultural language for church members and their unchurched counterparts. As such, this paper will examine the deployment of popular television media objects as a framework for shared cultural language and tools for reducing the barrier to entry for unchurched persons into full inclusion in the work of a church community.

Theological Foundations

Throughout the Bible, one of the overarching tensions is that between separateness from and interaction with the world. While followers of Yahweh are often warned to avoid the world,[106] God's people are also commanded to treat all people with kindness.[107] In his great commission, Christ commands the apostles to make disciples of all nations.[108] This tension is not the result of an Old Testament/New Testament split. Rather, both concepts – the concept of separateness and the concept of interaction – permeate both the Old and New Testaments. While theoretical content engaging this

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[105] Themes identified by Stevens include "a fascination with eternity and the supernatural" and a "desire for purpose." Ibid., 96-97.

[106] Deuteronomy 7:3 (do not marry foreigners); Romans 12:2-3 (do not conform your mind to earthly things); Colossians 3:2 (do not set your mind on earthly things).

[107] Micah 6:8 (God requires his people to love kindness). God's people are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves in both the Old and New Testaments (Leviticus 19: 17-18; Matthew 12:31).

[108] Matthew 28:19-20.

topic seems sparse and, at times, severely lacking, there is a strong theological basis for a project that engages popular culture in the context of bringing persons presently outside the body of Christ into the beloved community. Both the broad witness of scripture, and the specific ministry of Jesus, show limited division between contextual popular culture and the practice of faith by God's people. Working to reintegrate broader society with spiritual care and discussion is, in many ways, more a return to Judeo-Christian roots than it is a new innovation.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel seem to limit the divisions between popular culture and religious practice. The most important social events of the year are all religious holidays. Great celebrations, such as those enjoyed after God's people win a major military victory, are consistently framed in the language of Thanksgiving to God for victory in battle. God's people view all popular media culture in their context through the lens of being part of a broader walk, as a people, with God and in his way.

The mediums chosen during this time, and the way godly sentiments are expressed, show the blurred line between popular media culture and religious thought. The book of Psalms is one of the most spiritually uplifting books included in the Bible, but its structure is more like a book of poems than like the narrative history that fills most of the rest of the Old Testament. The Song of Solomon is even more poetic and even less clearly aligned with a practical spiritual purpose. In her commentary on "Song of Songs," Marcia Falk notes "For centuries, both Jewish and Christian traditions justified the place of the Song of Songs in the canon by viewing it as a spiritual allegory."[109] Falk concludes that this view is untenable as the text of "Song of Songs" "is explicitly about human love

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[109] Marcia Falk, "Song of Songs," *Harper's Bible Commentary,* James L. Mays, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 525.

and nowhere mentions God."[110] Instead, its content seems to deal much more with romantic or erotic love than with divine expressions of fealty. Nonetheless, precisely because the society of the day did not go in for the false dichotomy between popular culture and religious expression, it is included in scripture.

The Old Testament also shows that prophets had a willingness to embrace popular narrative forms and production values when evangelizing. Moses comes to Egypt on God's behalf armed with a multitude of miracles and an interesting biographical story. His self-narrative is one of surviving an ethnic cleansing[111] and being raised in the house of Pharaoh.[112] He is not just some itinerant Hebrew. The power that God shows in Egypt through Moses could have been deployed in less theatrical ways. The people could have suddenly apparated into the Promised Land. God could have told the people to start walking and could have ensured that they did not encounter any resistance to their departure. Yet, God opts to act in a way that punishes Egypt for its long oppression of his people and creates emotionally compelling, theatrical, narrative that becomes essential to Judeo-Christian culture to this day. God's miracles, plagues, the Nile turning to blood, the Angel of Death, all serve to show the people both God's power and the impotency of the so-called gods of polytheistic Egypt. For the prophets, and presumably for God, narrative and symbolism are important, and meaning can be found in the theatrical narratives of scripture.

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[110] Ibid.

[111] Exodus 1:8.

[112] Exodus 2:10.

As God's people continue to grow and to come into their own as a nation, God continues to use prophets who employ narrative and popular media culture in evangelization. When Nathan needs to confront David about his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba,[113] Nathan does not initially address the matter directly. Instead, he offers David a parable about a rich man and a poor man. One has many sheep; the other has only one, deeply loved, lamb. In his commentary on II Samuel, David M. Gunn notes the play on words which exists in this parable.[114] The lamb "became to him like a 'daughter' (Heb. *bath*, as in Bathsheba!)." [115] Nathan moves through a narrative of deception and wrongdoing and invites David to judge the rich man who took the poor man's sheep. David, working through this story, condemns his own actions and then invites further conversation with Nathan and is able to realize the need to atone for his actions.

When Elijah needs to bring the people back to the one true God, he does not simply quietly go door to door or pray for a solution. Rather, he challenges the false prophets to perform a sacrifice on Mount Carmel.[116] All of the prophets, including Elijah, slaughtering sacrifices and inviting fire from the heavens serves as a means to attract a great crowd. Elijah is performing a kind of spectacle that adds to the entertainment value of his message. Elijah then goes on to make the task more challenging. He has the sacrifice and its wood covered in water.[117] He has a channel dug around the altar, and that

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[113] II Samuel 12.

[114] David M. Gunn, "II Samuel," *Harper's Bible Commentary,* James L. Mays, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 295.

[115] Ibid.

[116] I Kings 18: 16-45.

[117] II Kings 18: 33-35.

too is filled with water. He then invites down a fire so strong that it quickly consumes sacrifice, water, and altar. Elijah frames this additional challenge as something done so that the people might believe, but mechanically, he is creating a bigger and greater spectacle. He is making something more visually and narratively interesting so that the people will have a stronger emotional response to what he is doing. By creating entertainment, rather than just spreading a message, Elijah is able to, relatively quickly, return the people from their worship of false prophets and invite them back to the worship of God.[118]

Jesus, while never shown overly engrossed with the popular culture of his day, shows an awareness for the events and cultural memes that informed the time and place in which he was conducting his earthly ministry. Indeed, although scripture several times discusses the dangers of "being of the world"[119] or other glosses for worldliness, Jesus' ministry is distinctly interested in the popular cultural elements of his work. Scripture shows Jesus as someone who stands against the secular powers of the day. He proclaims a kind of empire that transcends the power of Rome. When he goes into the temple, he is offended by the commercialization of God's house and clears out the money changers and others who are abusing God's people.[120] Still, while Jesus stands against conventional power structures, he seems to be aligned with the culture of his moment. He uses the mediums of his time. He shares the narrative forms of his time. And, his

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[118] "And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God." II Kings 18:39.

[119] See *e.g.* Romans 12:2 ("do not conform to the pattern of this world"); James 4:4 (friendship to the world is hostility to God); I John 2:15 (do not love the things of this world); John 15:19 (you are no longer part of this world).

[120] John 2: 13-16; Matthew 21:12-17.

ministry, beyond being backed by divinity, is effective precisely because of its accessibility and popular appeal.

One of the most telling encounters between Christ and the world occurs at a dinner.[121] The Pharisees[122] are angry because Christ is dining with people who are "unclean" -- tax collectors[123] and sinners. As commentator John R. Donahue notes, Christ's "acceptance of [tax collectors] shattered fundamental religious convictions and social conventions of his contemporaries… ."[124] "For the Pharisee, righteousness came through ritual purity and separation from 'sinners.'"[125] Christ reproaches them and asks them to contemplate God's statement that he desires "mercy, not sacrifice."[126]

Jesus' miracles show a deep and abiding concern for the world and for the things addressed in popular media culture. As Andrew Byers[127] notes, at the time of Christ – unlike today – there was no great "chasm between the sacred and the secular."[128] Christ's first miracle, turning water into wine[129] at a wedding celebration, shows an appreciation for the celebratory and the frivolous. It is telling that Jesus becomes open to this moment

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[121] Matthew 9:10-11; Mark 2: 13-17.

[122] The word "Pharisees" comes "from an Aramaic word meaning 'the separated ones.'" John R. Donahue, "Mark" *Harper's Bible Commentary,* James L. Mays, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 983.

[123] Tax collectors were deemed "unclean" because they underwent "frequent contact with Gentiles." Ibid., 988.

[124] Ibid.

[125] "Why is it significant that Jesus ate with Sinners?" *Compelling Truth.* www.compellingtruth.org.

[126] Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13.

[127] Andrew Byers, *Theomedia: The Media of God in the Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

[128] Ibid., 24.

[129] John 2:1-11.

as the place of his first miracle. Initially, it is not clear that the wedding will serve as the site of the first miracle. Jesus tells his mother, who asks him to help, that "his time has not yet come."[130] But, Jesus is apparently persuaded by his eminently pragmatic mother that this moment is one deserving of his attention. The context of the wedding in his society is as a moment of great social capital and pressure. The family is expected to produce a worthy celebration, and running out of drinks during the party would undoubtedly be viewed as some kind of shortcoming for a host. Jesus steps in and makes the situation right, showing that enjoyment and well-executed moments of cultural celebration and joy are worthwhile.

Just as Jesus' choices in his own ministry show his vision for care, so too are the things he stands against instructive to the reader looking to understand the theological foundation of Jesus' work. Jesus lived in a society in which the religious elites were sequestered away from the common people and the common ways of living. The leaders of the Jewish faith in Jesus' day, much like some committed Christians in the present times, were culturally divorced from the popular secular culture of their day. Their expressions of faith lacked popular appeal and common-sense pragmatism. Jesus regularly challenges hypocritical faith leaders who favor fealty to the letter of the law[131] rather than engaging the people of the time and the culture that surrounds them. For example, when the disciples harvest a little food on a Sabbath day, Jesus refuses to castigate them.[132] For the religious elites, this is a sign that Jesus is not a true spiritual

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[130] John 2:4.

[131] See *e.g.* Matthew 12:34 ("brood of vipers"); Matthew 23:27 ("whitewashed tombs"); Matthew 7:5 (first remove the plank from your own eye).

[132] Mark 2:23.

authority. But, for the common people, this is yet one more source of evidence that Jesus practices a religion that makes sense for their contexts and embraces the common lived experiences of the people he has been called to redeem.

Importantly, Jesus also tries to make his teaching accessible. He does this by choosing venues, which are more accessible to people than is the synagogue. The observant scriptural reader will see Jesus teaching in gardens, roadways,[133] and boats.[134] Synagogues were a community meeting place, and Jesus did frequent these establishments, but they were but one small part of his ministry. Jesus used these spaces for his small, local teaching and preaching, but as he traveled the land and became more and more prominent, it became necessary to move to venues that could accommodate more participants. Jesus would, at times, be speaking to thousands of assembled people.[135] This would be a large crowd even in modern contexts, but in Jesus' time, given the much smaller population of Israel, the popular appeal necessary to attract thousands of followers is difficult to fathom.

Still, of these many people who came to listen to Jesus, many were not intimately involved in his ministry and his message. For the people who were just starting to become interested in Jesus' work, who came to see him speak without fully understanding what his ministry would be, the value of coming to Jesus appears to be entertainment. Jesus performed miracles from time to time and sometimes provided food. Jesus told stories and engaged narrative forms that were relatable and compelling. In a

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[133] Luke 24:13-35.

[134] Luke 5:3.

[135] Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44.

moment before superstar musicians, and in which theatrical performance was reserved for the elites, hearing Jesus speak was one of the few forms of entertainment outside the gore of Roman spectacle. Jesus was able to attract crowds because his ministry was composed of popular media culture events.

The medium which Christ uses for his discussions is also strikingly similar to cultural output of our time. Jesus' message is effective in part because it is delivered using stories.[136] "He did not say anything to them without using a parable."[137] According to Hamish Swanston, "Jesus has a reputation as a story-teller. He is known for his announcement of the Reign of God in stories of a merchant buying a pearl, a traveller being mugged on the road, a woman sweeping her floor."[138] Christ's use of parables enables him to tell stories that people will remember and from which they will be able to draw lessons after Jesus leaves them. Jesus is a raconteur. He tells stories that people will find compelling and with which they will relate. In a moment when oral tradition was the primary means of storytelling, Jesus was an attraction. One can see parallels between the role that Jesus served in his society and the role that mass media entertainers serve in our day and age. Jesus shared compelling narratives in ways that engaged and entertained. The messaging of these stories landed primarily because it was couched in the language of storytelling. Jesus opted for the medium, oral storytelling, that would be accessible to

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[136] One might argue that Christ's message was effective because he was the Son of God. However, as the Son of God incarnate, Christ utilized the occupations, tasks, and cultural media of his day to engage people to spiritual principles. *See e.g*. *The Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:1-23), *The Parable of the Lost Coin* (Luke 15: 8-10).

[137] Mark 4:34. See also Matthew 13:34 "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable."

[138] Hamish F.G. Swanston, "Christians Telling Stories," *New Blackfriars,* 73 no. 858 (March 1992): 155-164, 155.

the greatest number of people and impact them in the most emotional ways. Jesus wanted to change the way people thought of themselves and their lives, and he was able to do this through storytelling.

While the medium Christ chooses for his teaching shows an interest in the common people and their narrative forms, the content of these stories again shows parallels to popular media culture. The narratives chosen for the parables have broad cultural resonance and are distinctly accessible for those he is serving.[139] Only a fraction of Jesus' parables focus on the mystical aspects of faith. Rather, most of the parables feature completely human tropes and stories. The prodigal son[140] has an important spiritual argument about reconciliation and redemption, but is at face value a story of familial conflict and resolution. The story of the sower[141] is a spiritual story providing insight into how the word of God takes root, but it is, in its context, a story about farming delivered to a group of people living in a nearly exclusively agrarian society. The story of the talents[142] is a story about how Christians should go about using their spiritual gifts in the world, but it is couched in a narrative that could be translated in the modern context into one about a financial advisor or personal banker. Jesus' stories, much like popular media culture, speak to the particular hopes and anxieties of his cultural context. Jesus speaks in the popular cultural vernacular of his day through the popular cultural mediums of his day.

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[139] Christ's parables often involve the occupations of his listeners such as farming (Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20), fishing (Matthew 13:47-52) or tending sheep (Matthew 18:12-14, John 10:1-21).

[140] Luke 15:11-32.

[141] Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20.

[142] Matthew 25:14-30.

As Christ engaged with popular culture, so too did his disciples. The early Church often struggled with the tension between remaining separate from worldly concerns while interacting with the world for the purpose of creating disciples. This struggle is reflected in the debates over whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised[143] as well as whether Christians should eat food sacrificed to idols.[144] The issues facing early church Christians, as well as Christians today, are three-fold: first, should Christians engage with popular culture; second, can Christians use popular culture to evangelize the unchurched; third, *should* Christians use popular culture to evangelize the unchurched? One author who answers each of the above questions with a resounding "yes!" is Tim Stevens.[145] Stevens writes:

> Jesus spent his time with real people such as Peter, James, and John, the blue-collar workers; Martha, the over-extended homemaker; Matthew the IRS agent; and Simon, the political activist. He watched the popular culture of his day and wove it into his teaching. Jesus identified the needs of the people around him and started there as he taught.[146]

Across scripture, the line between popular culture and spiritual community is shown to be porous and permissive. People are able to be in relationship with one another, and with God, using the popular artistic and cultural mediums of their days. Ministry meets people where they are and is intentional in its accessibility. Jesus pushes religious practice to be even more accessible for common people. An intervention employing popular media culture builds on this ministry and follows its example.

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[143] Acts 15:5; Romans 2:17-29.

[144] I Corinthians 8:1-11.

[145] Stevens, *Pop Goes the Church.*

[146] Ibid., 19.

Theoretical Foundations

American churches have stumbled onto the inescapable fact that the divide between their communities and the broader culture is making effective ministry to the whole of society, in the ways modeled by Christ, impossible. As Andy Stanley notes, "It's a shame that the group that gathers in Jesus' name does such a poor job communicating on his behalf."[147] Consequently, churches have made a number of cultural decisions[148] in attempts to attract young people. In most situations, this has not involved changing the substance of the message shared, but instead changing the packaging of the Christian message.

Many churches have moved away from "high church" expressions of worship towards ostensibly more accessible, modern formats.[149] Pastors who once wore collars and ornate vestments now dress in Brooks Brothers suits or, in younger congregations, in H&M casual wear that would not look out of place in a vegan restaurant. Beloved hymns and liturgies, many of which have been in use for hundreds of years, have been replaced with contemporary music and instruments.[150] Amateur rock bands participate in many

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[147] Stanley, *Deep & Wide,* 172.

[148] These decisions can be dangerous. "There is a mindless embracing of culture that is worrisome to me. Too many leaders check their brains and hearts at the door and run after whatever is cool, whatever is trendy …." Ibid., 76.

[149] Which may be exactly what unchurched millennials do not want. See e.g. Eddie Kaufholz, "The Church Needs to Stop Pandering to Trends," *Relevant Magazine*. (April 14, 2015) relevantmagazine.com; "Designing Worship Spaces with Millennials in Mind." Nov. 5, 2014. Barna.com. "67% of millennials say a quiet church is more ideal than a loud one; 67% say classic is more ideal than trendy; 77% would chose a sanctuary over an auditorium." Kaufholz, "The Church Needs to Stop Pandering to Trends," 1.

[150] "[T]he effect of mass mediated culture on religion can be seen in the ways that worship has been shaped by media's tools and assumptions. Sanctuaries sprout projection screens, music for worship embraces modern pop forms, sermons get shorter and silence is harder to find." Elaine Graham. "'What we

churches' worship services, and original song writing is featured in individual churches and in Christian radio programming. Conventional church design is being replaced as new churches look for more utilitarian spaces. It is more important that a space be multipurpose than that it have stained glass windows and pews. It is more important to have a coffee shop in the back of the sanctuary than to have a high altar or a designated space for a large choir. Even the temporary worship space proposed to sit outside of the front doors of Notre Dame is a pastiche of minimalist Nordic designs. In dress, performance style, and space, churches are making choices that make them seem worldlier, more corporate, and less different than the lives of the people they encounter.

The production value of these alterations is almost never higher than what is being replaced; rather, the cultural argument made through such modifications of dress, music, and feel is one about the solemnity and import of the faith community. Churches are not asserting that church and the activities that happen there are somehow set apart. They are not arguing that churches are dealing in matter weighty and solemn and unique. Rather, churches are, by making their experiences seem analogous to sad music festivals and weak startups, saying that what they are doing is "not that different" that what other instructions and assemblies do in their communities. By muting difference purely through changing performance, churches are making it hard for people to understand why church is special, while also failing to reach unchurched people for meaningful engagement.[151]

Make of the World': The Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion" in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture,* ed. Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 53.

[151] It is important, when making changes in the church, to preserve what is holy. "[T]he Church should embrace the sacred other-worldliness of the faith. The way we present the message of Jesus needs to be like nothing of this world…. That's why the Church has always made this distinction between the sacred and profane**.**" "Pandering to Young People Does NOT Win them over to the Church, It Actually Pushes Them Away," *ChurchPop.* (Nov. 1, 2018). churchpop.com.

Indeed, Christianity's embrace of popular culture has been so consistently awkward that it is regularly mocked in the popular media culture. South Park dedicated an entire episode to Christian Rock music,[152] examining the ways in which Christian contemporary music often seemed more like parody of rock love songs more than genuine expressions of devotion or praise. The Simpsons depicts a prank in which an organist and the congregation are led through "In the Garden of Eden" by I. Ron Butterfly to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the juxtaposition of contemporary musical forms and the work of church.[153] Numerous other programs have examined the awkwardness of modern reforming pastors when they focus on performance rather than substance.

Tellingly, an example of a successful reformer is also found in the media culture. Dawn French's portrayal of The Reverend Geraldine Granger as the title character in "The Vicar of Dibley"[154] shows a path for a church leader, and consequently a church, to regain relevance in a community in part through making necessary changes. It is interesting that Granger's character is very interested in the work of the church, how it serves the community, how it ministers to the world, how it consistently preaches welcome and inclusion, while simultaneously making almost no changes to the performance of church in the parish of Dibley. Granger holds tradition in high esteem and, in the midst of creating a more vibrant and welcoming church, consistently errs on the side of traditional expressions of worship in an effort to make a solemn and sacred space that, precisely because of its tradition, feels like a welcoming home.

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[152] "Christian Rock Hard," *South Park*, Comedy Central. October 29, 2003.

[153] "Bart Sells his Soul," *The Simpsons.* Season 7 episode 4. Fox Broadcasting System. (Oct. 8, 1995).

[154] *The Vicar of Dibley.* BBC 1994-98.

Many actively-serving clergypersons have similarly been successful in promoting the best of tradition while ministering to a new and broader population. The Rev. Michael Piazza led the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas to unprecedented growth and success by melding self-consciously traditional, and even extreme high-church, worship with new and compelling theological messaging. Rev. Piazza and other leaders at the Cathedral of Hope customarily dressed in full, formal liturgical wear. The church boasts an estimable music ministry with a large choir, excellent orchestra, and specialized organ. The church was very traditional in its imagining of itself as a Cathedral and in its decision to invest heavily in a very formal worship space. In all aspects of performing church, the Cathedral of Hope is deliberately different from the world that surrounds it.

Yet, the Cathedral of Hope was also on the cutting edge of imagining the welcome of church and the way that churches should assemble broad communities. The Cathedral has consistently had a special ministry to queer persons and their families and, because of that ministry, has been called upon to meet needs that other area churches have historically found incompatible with their missions and aspirations. The church has actively sought opportunities to go out into the community and find areas for common ground and mutual service. The church invests heavily in the community through its "Dallas Hope Charities" arm, operates a day school, and seeks to meet the needs that arise among the people it serves.

As an extension of its efforts to create a community welcoming to, and accessible for, the unchurched community, Cathedral of Hope has featured a number of sermon series that center on popular cultural objects. Church has had sermon series employing popular movies and Broadway musicals. Last Advent, the church used popular Christmas

movies for its weekly midweek advent services. Using these narratives and texts, already broadly known in the popular imaginary, as departure points for conversations about God's nature and promises creates opportunities for a broad number of people, including community members who might have limited experience in church settings, to be in dialogue with the worshipping community and to form a relationship with the people of the church.

Metropolitan Community Church of Rehoboth similarly employs popular cultural objects as departure points in the context of sermons. The Rev. Elder Diane Fisher started her sermon "A Return to Faith in America" by inviting the congregation to join in watching the music video for "Faith" featuring Stevie Wonder and Ariana Grande. Fisher's sermon, examining the way that Americans are losing faith in one another, used the music video, in conversation with scripture, to invite the congregation to think about the ways that they might invite faith back into their communities. She suggested that having faith in one another means that people can count on one another for service, care, and mutual aid. Understanding faith as such, congregants might authentically live out their faith by living lives of proactive concern for the people in their communities and through assiduous service to the ordinary people, in their own contexts, who find themselves in need of spiritual care and financial resources.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA pastor and the founder of House for All Sinners and Saints, has attracted a number of people who might well have not been interested in a conventional church that is relatively traditional in its way of doing theology and of worshipping, yet is in many ways transgressive in its openness and welcome. The church does some unconventional things with programming, such as events featuring breweries

or motorcycling, but by and large the church is conventional in the ways that it expresses its mission and ministry. By inviting a broad assortment of people to be in community with one another, Bolz-Weber has succeeded in creating a church that is flouting national trends of decline.

Fourth Presbyterian Church, a vibrant mainline congregation in Chicago, intentionally describes itself as having high-church worship style juxtaposed with its progressive theology and concern for the world. The church is anything but insular, finding local and global areas for it to offer concrete support to those with less resources or power. It performs church in a very traditional way, but it works hard to be welcoming to a broad array of Christians and to do ministry in the unfussy and nimble way modeled through Jesus' own ministry. Fourth Presbyterian continues to grow in size and impact despite being in a denomination that has been struggling for decades with membership and direction. It shows that meaningful ministry is possible for churches willingness to boldly follow Christ's example to engage the popular culture in an ongoing and productive dialogue.

Even among theologically and politically conservative faith leaders such as Pat Robertson, a willingness to engage popular media narratives and stories allows claims of relevance for unchurched populations. Robertson uses the 700 Club as a broad forum for the events, cultural anxieties, pop-culture and media narratives of the day. The format of the show, including such things as a sort of televised advice column, pushes the ministry far outside of realm of conventional, solely scripturally-grounded Christian narrative and into broad engagement with popular cultural narratives that are arising and of interest to

viewers. Robertson is able to make his program speak to a population who might not easily access the content in a particularly theologically complex sermon or bible study.

While many congregations are using popular culture in the context of homiletics, such efforts make only one part of entering the life of the church more accessible. While such endeavors are commendable, and make church attendance less intimidating, they do not invite unchurched, or newly churched, persons to constructively contribute and actively engage in weighty conversations with the members of the church. Attending worship services, and learning from sermons, may well be a first step at assimilation into the congregation, but real inclusion in the body of Christ necessitates deeper relationship, greater vulnerability, and more significant exchanges of ideas. The model of ministry Christ employs is often one of preaching, but the most intimate moments with his followers usually arise from questions and exchange. If unchurched persons do not feel that they have been invited to be vulnerable, and do not have low risk opportunities for questioning and dialogue, they may well continue to be only surface-level participants in the work of the church.

This project will build on successful pop-cultural homiletic endeavors to create opportunities for vulnerability and dialogue, in the context of a small group discussion, for newly churched persons. Using pop cultural objects as the basis for such discussion makes an intimidating part of church life, small group scriptural study, an area that can be inviting and fun for long-standing members and unchurched persons alike. Pop cultural small group discussions use successful theoretical archetypes in a new way that will help unchurched persons move from observing the theological work of the church to actively participating in it.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Intervention Design

The intervention's purpose was to test the hypothesis that facilitated discussions of ideas of eternal significance, centered on accessible popular media culture, would reduce the barrier to entry for unchurched persons to actively participate in such conversations and to form genuine human connections with church members. A successful intervention would achieve the following objectives. First, it would foster discussions of topics of eternal significance, incorporating Christian theology, in ways that invite and encourage unchurched persons to actively participate, share and test ideas, and make known their own beliefs about spiritual questions. Second, the discussions, and accompanying time of fellowship, would invite genuine human connections to form between church and unchurched participants. At the conclusion of a successful intervention, churched and unchurched participants would have engaged in meaningful dialogue with one another about weighty questions of eternal significance while forming friendships and relationships of the type essential to full incorporation of unchurched persons into the life of the local parish.

Curated Object

The first task was to select a popular cultural item for use in the intervention. An ideal cultural object would be broadly accessible, broadly popular, and readily invite discussion of questions of eternal significance. Many novels achieve the second and third goals, but might not be practical for a bible study in a society in which reading is a less widespread practice. The pace of narrative progress required for meaningful weekly discussions would require greater time investment from participants with less stellar

reading abilities than would be ideal. Differences in reading ability, and in enjoyment of reading, make choosing a literary cultural object challenging. This, combined with the socio-economic realities of a diverse, inner-city congregation, meant that a written piece of media culture would not be selected. Choosing something already broadly popular, and ideally more popular with unchurched rather than Christian populations, is also essential to a successful intervention. Niche, faith-based, television programming might be more palatable to active church member audiences, but is not as accessible to unchurched persons as pure popular cultural content would be. Unchurched persons might view the programming as a direct attempt to evangelize, rather than as a departure point for broader discussion. Similarly, most faith-driven programming appeals unevenly across subgroups. One program considered, *Greenleaf,*[155] has deep appeal to African-American Christians and to secular community members, but would not be as accessible for the multi-racial, multi-faith background cohort envisioned for this specific intervention. Finally, the popular cultural object must be driven by narrative to be effective in inviting the types of discussion envisioned. Sports programming is accessible and broadly popular but uneven in its popularity across ages, genders, racial and other breakdowns. It also lacks the narrative needed to drive a meaningful discussion. Football, the most popular sport in Northeast Ohio, has entertainment and fellowship value, but does not invite discussions of eternity, afterlife, and theological mythology in the ways the intervention required. Thus, Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story*[156] was selected. This program,

[155] *Greenleaf* premiered in 2016 on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN). It recently completed its third season. The program follows the lives of a prominent Memphis family of evangelists as they work to grow and sustain a large church. It includes guest appearances from many prominent African-American actors and boasts a soundtrack replete with notable Gospel artists.

[156] *American Horror Story* premiered on FX in 2011.

while not a viable choice if the group had included minors, was well suited to Sola Caritas' context and target demographics. It met the criteria listed above and offered a starting point for a strong intervention.

The question of participants' ability also informed the medium chosen, on the assumption that although a vision or hearing-impaired person might not have the same experience of a television program as their sighted cohort members, one would, at least in theory, be able to participate. That said, this intervention was not constructed in a way that accommodated disabled persons. Sola Caritas is small enough that a reasonable cross section of members could be accessed without providing handicapped accommodations and indeed there has been only limited demand for such accommodations in the history of the church. Although ideal circumstances would have allowed for a medium and venue more suitable for persons of varied ability, pragmatic necessity led to the selection of a conventional television program and a facility that has only rudimentary access, and bathroom facility access, for persons of differing ability.

Venue

The second step was choosing a venue. The researcher elected to operate the intervention at a congregation where he served in a pastoral role and had a clear sense of the demographics of the church and broader community. Beyond selecting the ministry, there was a need to select a specific venue that would be well-suited to the needs of those persons participating in the project. The ministry location in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood was chosen because of its successful performance across a number of key dimensions. First, the venue selected needed to be able to accommodate 20 participants at a given time. This space had a fellowship area that could comfortably house the required number of people. Allowing some participants to call in, and being able to stream

television programs over the internet, required a facility with strong IT infrastructure. This location had the best video display capabilities, the fastest internet, and a rudimentary video and phone conferencing system. As such, it was well suited to the technological demands of the intervention. The building needed to have adequate bathroom facilities to host a larger number of people and met those demands. The intervention specifically outlines video watching and discussion times as moments of fellowship. Such fellowship and sense of belonging is facilitated by access to refreshments, and this facility had the kitchen capacity to deliver food and drink for participants. It was also important the facility be broadly accessible to participants. Located near two major interchanges, the facility is a relatively short drive for persons with cars, across the city of Cleveland. Ample parking, including reserved church parking, sits in front of the building to accommodate driving commuters. The church is within a mile of two stations from Cleveland's Rapid Rail system and is blocks away from major bus lines that connect to the transportation hubs of the region. The surrounding neighborhood is eminently walkable with sidewalks on every street, good nighttime illumination, and well-maintained streetscapes. Participants have a plethora of options for reaching the venue for viewings and discussions.

The location also was selected because it is proximal to other venues where participants might, after formal meetings, choose to continue their discussions and fellowship. The facility sits within blocks of two popular ice cream shops, dozens of bars, several award-winning restaurants, three parks, a library, and numerous coffee shops, retailers, and other compelling neutral spaces. Participants will not be formally required to seek out opportunities for fellowship outside of the course of the intervention, but

genuine human connections between churched and unchurched persons would tend to organically manifest in the form of social time spent outside of formal programming. Hearing from participants about ways that they connected, across churched and unchurched groups, independent of the formal programming will be a sign of the intervention's success.

Cohort

The cohort itself needed to reflect diversity across age, gender, race, and church affiliation for the intervention to be successful.[157] Both the church and the unchurched community members from which participants might be drawn were reasonably diverse pools. The potential volunteers varied in age, socio-economic background, gender, and race in a way that a reasonably-sized sample would provide insight into working on diverse communities and offer information useful to churches in a broad number of cultural contexts. Finding an appropriate number of people to represent the diversity of the groups, while also keeping the pool of volunteers small enough that it could allow for intimate dialogues in which all participants would have a chance to be heard, presented a challenge. A group smaller than five persons from each group seemed to undercut the viability of an intervention that reflected the diversity of the group or would be scalable across the Sola Caritas organization or larger church bodies. Churches are increasingly offering small group programming, but these small groups still usually contain ten or more participants, rather than a clutch of four to six persons. A particularly large group did not seem manageable for this intervention as less vocal participants might well be drowned out. As this intervention specifically desired to invite unchurched persons to

[157] See appendix for demographic information.

speak and contribute to complex conversations, a large group had a major flaw. Sola Caritas has long experienced situations in which unchurched persons, lacking confidence in their ability to contribute to conversation, have been spectators rather than participants in key discussions of the church. A large group ran the risk of replicating this paradigm, as a group of more than ten church participants would have no problem carrying the conversation for an hour once a week while unchurched participants sat meekly by. Thus, it was essential to ensure not only that the group remained relatively small and intimate, but that the number of church participants was equal to or less than the number of unchurched community participants.

Time Commitment

The time commitment required of participants, and the ways that they would be invited to contribute to discussions, needed to be carefully weighed to allow both maximum flexibility as well as participant adherence to the protocols of the intervention. At the core, participants needed to watch at least one episode of a television program weekly, which required approximately one hour of time, and participate in a one-hour weekly discussion. The time commitment on its face was not particularly onerous but finding a way to match that time across all participants would doubtless prove challenging, particularly if the group extended nearer to twenty, rather than ten, participants. Thus, design choices needed to be made to streamline participation as much as possible. First, the television program was made available to participants to watch remotely as well as during weekly viewings. For participants who had time availability and were seeking fellowship, or lacked access to broadband internet, Sola Caritas would host weekly viewings and provide light refreshments. For participants for whom

scheduling was a challenge, the option to watch the weekly programming wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted, provided some flexibility that allowed for participation. The weekly discussion needed, necessarily, to be in person. Although participants were not told that remote attendance was an option, the facility chosen did have capabilities for participants to join via video and/or audio conference in the event that emergent circumstances made in-person attendance challenging.

Recruiting a cohort presented several challenges. First, for both church members and unchurched community members, the lead researcher served in a direct or quasi pastoral role. It was thus not appropriate for the lead researcher to exert undue influence on potential volunteers to encourage their participation. The choice was made to pursue a predominantly passive recruitment strategy. Emails and verbal announcements inviting participation would be made by a member of Sola Caritas' board, rather than by the lead researcher pastor. This would provide a necessary degree of separation that allowed persons not immediately comfortable with participation in such an intervention to honor their boundaries and avoid placing themselves in an uncomfortable situation.

The wording around the "unchurched" cohort was also problematic as persons adjacent to the work of Sola Caritas viewed their status relative to church in very different ways. That cohort, as envisioned, would include people who were active participants in parts of Sola Caritas but who had never become members. It would also include people who were recent visitors as well as persons who participated in some social ministries but never in worship or church. It would also include Sola Caritas ministry volunteers who, although they had not attended regular worship services in decades, did think of themselves as church members of institutions to which they had

belonged in childhood or at some other point in the distant past. As such, the language needed to be respectful of the claimed identities of its target audience. Language around "community members who are not yet members of Sola Caritas" was chosen as the messaging given to participants as it broadly applied to the identities implicated while giving individuals the space to claim their own narratives of church affiliation. For clarity, designations of "member" and "nonmember" would be used in the context of this paper.

Practical Considerations

Confidentiality

Protecting confidentiality was essential for frank and honest feedback and participation. To that end, the intervention needed to be designed in a way that participants could be completely confident in the anonymous nature of their individual responses and shared feelings. Given that the conversations were going to challenge participants to discuss politics, religion, and other pressing societal issues, there needed to be complete erasure of any personal identifiers from what was said. To this end, the very design of the intervention encouraged participants to feel secure in their complete anonymity. Notes were taken in interviews, but were aggregated within a group rather than assigned to a specific person or interview. No recordings were made of sessions. Participants knew that only the primary investigator, a person whom they trusted, would have knowledge of what was said in interviews, and that this person would in no way record any responses at the level of the individual participant.

Tools, Instructions and Sound

In addition to aligning on the participant and facility needs for this intervention, it was necessary to plan out the tools needed to conduct the intervention. For discussion

sessions, the investigator needed a notepad and pen, but no other resources were required for the investigator individually. While the investigator would, from time to time, guide the discussion in real time, no handouts or sample questions were needed. Rather, the goal was to invite persons from the two groups to respond authentically to the program they had viewed. In so doing, participants were expected to share personal experiences of the program and of their reactions to it. Excessive construction of these sessions would be detrimental. A number of chairs consistent with the number of people in the final cohort would also be needed so that participants could comfortably sit for their discussion. The logistics of viewing the program was more complex. The church Netflix account was made available to participants so that they would have access to the program via streaming at times and locations of their choosing. While there was a desire to provide flexibility to participants, it was also essential that they view the program in a way that allowed for their full engagement with the material. Clear instructions needed to be provided to any participants who watched any episodes apart from the group. First, they were to watch the program alone, and they were not to discuss the program with anyone outside of the group. The project was looking for their experience of the program and their responses to theological questions invited by the program. Clouding their own reflections with reflections from others, outside of the group, would be detrimental to the process. Second, independent viewers were to strive to avoid distracting situations during their viewing. This was to say that they should watch the program in a room where nothing else was going on. They were not to watch the program while exercising, preparing a meal, or doing some other kind of work. They were ideally not to be using their phone during the program viewing. Participants who joined Sola Caritas for the

watch parties would be in a situation with no other distractions, so those persons who did not participate in the viewing sessions needed to have a similarly intentional viewing of the program. For viewing in the church, a large Smart TV was needed. Adequate sound was facilitated by lifting the TV to improve its acoustics. Seating was again needed.

Food

For all events, light refreshments were provided. Feeding has long been a core part of Christian ministry.[158] The Last Supper[159] is itself a feast, and times of fellowship have conventionally involved food. Finding appropriate food for the needs of this context was a challenge. Sola Caritas has always made a point of serving quality food at its social gatherings. Members had expressed that in past experiences of church, the quality of food provided to poor persons, both at social gatherings and at fundraisers, was uneven and often subpar. Sola Caritas understands the hospitality it shows in food ministry to be a reflection of the love of Christ. As such, two major goals guide the provision of refreshments. First, food is to be genuinely pleasant to eat and should provide enjoyment to the people who partake in it. As a rule, food that one would be ashamed to serve to one's family is never served in the context of any ministry at Sola Caritas. Second, food served needs to be healthy and nourishing and reflect the values of Sola Caritas. To that end, an effort is made to offer healthier options when they are available and to make socially and environmentally conscious decisions when sourcing products. A member once pointed out that there was something deeply ethically problematic about not purchasing meat because of the ethics of animal slaughter but instead eating produce

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[158] See e.g. Matthew 14:13-21 (Christ feeds the 5,000); Luke 24:30-32 (breaking bread at Emmaus); John 21: 9-10 (Christ serves apostles bread and fish); Acts 6:1 (daily food distributions).

[159] Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-39; John 13:1-17:26.

harvested by persons experiencing subhuman conditions. Thus, while many foods were offered, all were chosen with an eye towards local, sustainable, healthy, and ethical products.

The church has a young following, and many peer congregations regularly serve alcohol as part of their social ministry functions.[160] Sola Caritas has no particular theological objection to the consumption of alcohol, and members have suggested, particularly given the proximity of local artisanal purveyors of alcoholic libations, that the church should include such drinks in its fellowship offerings. However, the decision has consistently been made to avoid such alcoholic drinks because of the potential for them to lead persons recovering from substance abuse to relapse.[161] This has been deemed consistent with biblical teaching on no leading other members of the beloved community into situations that might place an undue temptation on them.[162] Drinks to be provided for these sessions included conventional sodas, Italian sparkling fruit sodas, juice, bottled water, and flavored sparkling water. The church has provided coffee during many past events, but as its good coffee machine is at another facility, no such drinks were provided at these sessions. Some members challenged the church to think more intentionally about its beverage offerings. Concern for God's creation is an important part of Sola Caritas' mission and the exclusive use of single serving, disposably packaged, beverages seemed inconsistent with the teaching to show especial concern for the

[160] "Bar Church" is a growing phenomenon that specifically targets younger and unchurched Christians. While critics view such ministry as gimmicky, its proponents argue that having church in such a context is consistent with Jesus' earthly ministry. "Church in a Bar?" The Christian Post. April 24, 2019 https://www.christianpost.com/voice/church-in-a-bar.html.

[161] See I Corinthians 8 (in making choices about food and drink, do not allow weaker persons to be led into sin).

[162] I Corinthians 8.

environment. In the future, the church will look at purchasing a SodaStream system that may have the potential to deliver a comparable level of beverages with lesser environmental impact. Additionally, all the non-water options were sweet. A diabetic member of the discussion group suggested that a future iteration of the cohort might serve unsweetened ice tea.

Food was a great challenge. Even with a relatively small cohort, the small and progressive congregation provided a number of dietary restrictions. The group included a vegan who could eat no animal products, a person on a paleo diet who could more or less only eat animal products, a diabetic member who tried to avoid sugar, a gluten-free couple who could not eat conventional grain-based products, and a number of challenging dietary preferences that did not rise to the level of formal restrictions. Accepting as fact that virtually no single offering would be accessible to all participants, the decision was made to consistently offer a number of snack options. Some participants would have relatively limited options, but at the same time, might well appreciate that an effort was made to ensure that they were provided an option.

While hot food is seen as more hospitable, the kitchen facilities and the frequency of the meetings made frequent preparation of hot food impractical. While more substantial foodstuffs would be offered from time to time, in general, the food that was offered was not overly prepared and more snack than meal. The church has access to a popcorn machine, which was used at each viewing. Popcorn was not offered during discussions as it is both a distracting and loud food and ill-suited to eating during conversations on issues of great importance. Chocolates from two local confectionaries were provided at all meetings. Most of them came from Malley's, a Cleveland institution,

and were complex and varied across weeks. As some contained nuts, caramel fillings, and other potential allergens, we shared the ingredients with our participants each week. Sugar-free chocolate wafers were provided by Sweet Designs. These wafers were primarily for the diabetic member of our group. Beef jerky was provided at every meeting so that our paleo participants would have something to eat, and a box of vegan snack bars was provided for our vegan members. Our gluten-free members recommended a kind of cookie that they enjoyed, and we provided these at all sessions. From time to time other chips, light snacks, and appetizers were shared with the group.

Information and Questions

Design then turned to finding the types of information that could be collected to assess the efficacy of the intervention. Placing individual, qualitative interviews before and after the intervention was determined as a way to both get honest feedback on participation and to have the opportunity to dynamically engage participants. A series of questions[163] was developed to capture key information from participants. Participants were first asked, "What is your relationship with Sola Caritas?" Broadly, this question would determine how participants would be grouped, as members or non-members, but as that information already existed, it provided additional information in that it provided insight into how people viewed their relationship with the church. Members would be invited to say a bit more about how they related to the congregation. The question invited them to share feelings as well as substance. Non-members had very broad latitude to define their own relationship with the church in ways that would show how they felt, or did not feel, connected to, and mutually invested in, the work of the congregation. Participants were then asked, "What is your experience of/what do you associate with

[163] The entire list of questions can be viewed in Appendix A.

organized religion/religious community membership?" The church had heard, anecdotally, that many unchurched community members had, or had family members who had had, deeply negative experiences with organized religion and churches. This question invited participants to share feelings about organized religion, but it also invited storytelling. Participants could share the stories, be they negative or positive, that they associated with the work of churches. For members, it would be interesting to see if this intervention became something that they thought of as the work of the church. For non-members, it would be interesting to see if the new narrative of participation and dialogue would replace any old narratives that participants had that might have been less positive.

The next question invited all participants to share a bit more about the religious community to which they felt most connected, "How connected do you feel to the people of the religious community with which you most often interact?" Sola Caritas hoped that its members would view it as the religious community with which they most often interacted and that members also shared feelings of deep connection. Still, they were open to hearing hard feedback. It was conceivable that some members might feel more connected to another church, spiritual movement, or source of religious guidance and instruction. It was also possible that members, despite naming Sola Caritas as the group with which they most often interacted, would feel less-than-connected to the church community. It was important to see how members actually felt in relation to the church and connectedness. It was also helpful to get a better understanding of how nonmembers felt, or did not feel, connected to existing organized faith communities. Sola Caritas wanted to look for two things among these respondents. First, if the faith community such respondents felt closest to was Sola Caritas, information on the connection they felt

would be helpful in seeing how to serve them more effectively. If unchurched persons described a closer connection to another faith community, Sola Caritas could gain insight into the areas of spiritual life that were not being engaged for this person and the ways that the church could be responsive to unmet needs in the broader community. If people reported that they had another faith community to which they felt very connected, Sola Caritas could at least hear about how other faith communities helped people feel connected and a sense of belonging. This information would be instructive as Sola Caritas looked at its own practices to find new ways to be more inclusive and connective.

To get a better understanding of how people engage the popular media culture, the next question invited information from respondents on the culture they regularly consumed. "Tell me about the culture you enjoy – music, television, sports, etc." This question was designed to look at two main things. First, the study was interested in the different ways that churched members and unchurched persons consume media culture. Did they consume radically different programming? Where there areas of meaningful overlap? The study wanted to see the degree to which different media contexts created barriers for a shared set of cultural cues for churched and unchurched persons. It also wanted to look at what areas of popular culture had the potential to serve as a shared cultural currency. Beyond surveying the cultural consumption patterns of churched and unchurched persons, the study was interested in capturing the types of popular culture, enjoyed by both groups, for future church interventions. What other pieces of media culture might make sense for use as a departure point for programming? While the selection for this study had already been chosen, future work could engage some of the other popular media responses shared by participants.

Participants were then asked to describe their knowledge of religion. “How would you describe your knowledge of religion?” The question sought to elicit responses that examined both actual knowledge of religion and perceived knowledge of religion. Among church members, Sola Caritas wanted to understand how knowledgeable and confident members felt. How they understood the question, whether they took it to be an academic question about religion broadly, or a specific question about their own religion and faith practice, would in-and-of-itself be instructive. Sola Caritas tries to cultivate members who are broadly knowledgeable and competent across religion traditions. The theory of this knowledge cultivation is that church members will better be able to engage the broader community with an understanding of, and appreciation for, diverse perspectives and faith traditions. Sola Caritas hoped that members would respond affirmatively that they were knowledgeable about religion and that they would then expound upon that knowledge a bit further. Amongst unchurched community participants, the responses would be helpful to Sola Caritas in determining what needed to be shared and the degree to which community members might feel comfortable in conventional religious education programming. Community members who viewed themselves as very knowledgeable about religion might well be capable of holding their own in a discussion section composed predominantly of church members. Conversely, persons who self-identified as having limited knowledge of religion would likely be less comfortable in such an activity. This was essentially a different matter than actual knowledge of religion. A person who actually had detailed knowledge of Christianity would be able to comprehend and participate in a Sola Caritas Bible Study much more

effectively than an unchurched person with limited or no knowledge of the intricacies of Christian tradition or theology.

"How do you think about personhood, and what has shaped your ideas of who or what is a person?" This was by far the most specific question included in the questionnaire, and it centered on a major theme that would be discussed in the context of the weekly meetings. Personhood would be a focus of the series as it is a particularly live issue in the present cultural moment. The question deliberately leaves out a direct theological question, although in the context of the survey one might have trouble veering away from discussions grounded in religion, precisely because of all the pressing questions about personhood that transcend a neat classification as religious or non-religious. Society has for decades been wrestling with questions of human personhood as measured by ability, infirmity, or birth status. Persons of Christian faith stand on each side of each of these issues, and while the theology taught at Sola Caritas always advocates for more life and human thriving, there exist people of good faith with very different views of how personhood should be considered and handled. Society is wrestling with questions of personhood in the context of artificial intelligence.[164] Corporate personhood has created new avenues for money to be converted to speech and has fundamentally changed the American political system.[165] In all of these areas,

[164] Indeed, in the midst of this intervention a news story about a scientist, Dr. Peter Scott-Morgan, reminded a participant of the transformation from human to cyborg of a Kathy Bates character in *American Horror Story*. The line between human and machine is an increasingly fraught and presents an issue with which churches and people of faith must wrestle in the coming years. Tom Bevan and Shivall Best. "Terminally-ill Scientist Completes Transformation into 'World's First Full Cyborg." *Mirror.* 13 Nov. 2019. https://www.mirror.co.uk/tech/terminally-ill-scientist-transform-worlds.

[165] In the *Citizens United* case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that corporations could spend money on political advocacy as such spending was protected free speech under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Citizens United v. Federal Election Comm'n, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

personhood creates challenges and is a live issue even for people who do not use a distinctly theological lens as they negotiate the world.

Among church members, it would be interesting to see the degree to which theological arguments colored their discussions of this topic. Was faith the default lens for engaging this challenging topic? To what degree did the teachings of Sola Caritas on personhood inform the answers that were received? There was also a reasonable chance that answers during the second interview would be influenced by the perspectives of the unchurched persons who participated in the intervention. Would the changes across discussions push the thinking of church members in helpful and complex ways, or would the new perspectives confuse them or pull them away from the conventional views of the global Christian community? Among the unchurched population, it was interesting to see if faith, religion, Christian morality, or any similar source of guidance informed the responses that were received. There was also a desire to see what incoming thoughts the unchurched persons had on personhood and to see if those ideas changed over the course of the intervention and the degree to which responses did, or did not, become more similar to those of their churched peers.

The final question was similarly weighty, if more directly theological in its ambitions. “What happens when we die? Does it matter?” The question was deliberately posed as a binary because, anecdotally, many unchurched persons starting to become engaged with Sola Caritas had shared at various times that they were simultaneously unsure about what happens to humans after death but also were generally unconcerned by that lack of knowledge. While this struck many church members as odd, there was a desire to understand more about this common fusion of beliefs. Among church members,

it was interesting to see how many of their beliefs about life after death were informed by the teachings of the church and how many other sources of knowledge they drew upon as they created narratives about what happens after death. It was also valuable to learn more about how they valued life after death or whatever they believed happened beyond mortal life. To what degree did the details of what happened matter?

Among unchurched people, there was a desire to see more about what they knew, or thought they knew, about death and the hereafter. Some in the church hypothesized that, although such persons might identify secularly, their understandings of what happens after death might necessarily be informed by the prevailing Christian cultural narratives in the American context. The question invited participants to openly claim those beliefs and mythologies that they took as truth in creating their personal narratives of death, dying, and the hereafter. In leaving the question open-ended, an opportunity existed to gain uncommon insight into the beliefs of persons not associated with the work of the church. Secondly, there was interest in learning more about why people did, or did not, view as important opportunities to think through what happens at death. Learning why people were unconcerned with dying would be helpful in understanding how the church could better serve their needs without placing an undue emphasis on eternal salvation, which has long been the primary attraction of participation in Christian community.

As interviews would be one-on-one, and were very intentionally not recorded, transcribed, or coded to individuals; the sole source of data collection would be interviewer notes. These notes would be kept safe and private and not shared with anyone under any circumstances. While other methods of recordation and codification were

superficially compelling, their additive value was unclear and the risk to participant comfort and confidentiality were too great to justify the added collection of data. Voice recording would instantly tie the speaker to their words, should that recording ever be released. More worryingly, participants who knew they were being recorded might not feel as comfortable speaking freely as those who knew that only completely unlinked, handwritten notes, would be collected. Similarly, creating some kind of code linking individual participants to individual responses would need to be disclosed to participants who, again, might become skittish about complete transparency in the context of intervention interviews.

Analysis of the recorded notes would consist of a qualitative, narrative examination of the trends in the responses across each group. The same questions asked before and after the intervention would, if the intervention was successful, elicit different responses. Answers showing great connectivity across groups, and challenged and deepened thinking across groups, would show a successful intervention. Conversely, responses that showed no greater connectivity, or muddled, confused, or unaltered thinking, would show that the intervention had not achieved its desired results.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The qualitative data that comprised the output of this intervention was designed with assistance from the Rev. Edward Ingebretsen, Ph.D., S.J.[166] Father Ingebretsen has served as the Director of American Studies at Georgetown University where he was a full professor of English until his retirement. He also spent two decades as a parish priest in

[166] He has completed doctoral studies in English, Theology, and Philosophy and is an expert in media culture and its intersection with religious life. Father Ingebretsen served as a parish priest in Maryland for several decades and continues to serve as a supply preacher and religious education instructor.

Northern Virginia and continues in parish ministry at Washington D.C.'s Church of the Holy City. His understanding of the intricacies of academic research, and parish ministry, made him an invaluable resource in the context of this project.

The principal investigator and Father Ingebretsen worked together to analyze the content emerging from participant interviews. Of particular interest were themes that directly engaged the focus of the project and any feedback on a sense of community and belonging. Also, of interest were responses that dealt with questions of spiritual significance. *American Horror Story* invites broad reflections on eternity and spirituality and is complex enough in its internal theologies that no individual can feel completely at home in its cosmological framework. Inflicting this narrative unease on participants would force them to identify their own themes and meaning in the work and draw their own conclusions about its intentions and impact. The initial interviews would provide insight into the broad themes of spiritual understanding, and feelings of belonging, or lack thereof, among participants. The discussions over the course of the intervention would show the themes that were of most interest to the group crystalizing. It would be important to examine the ways themes bridged the divide between groups versus which themes, if any, seemed particularly more salient with one group or the other. A successful intervention would, by its conclusion, see relative uniformity in themes emerging in the responses shared by participants in their exit interviews.

In addition to thematic alignment, the principal investigator would look for areas of slippage to identify areas where responses were disparate, both across the two groups as well as within the church member and community member groups. Such slippage would provide insights in two key areas. First, it would provide a more nuanced view of

the diversity within the two sections. Second, it would show the degree to which a common language, or even a common understanding of the goal of this intervention, existed.

The study up to this point had not directly engaged how diverse the participants from each community were. Among the unchurched group, there were a variety of backgrounds. Some participants were lapsed Christians who, at some point in their lives, had been baptized and/or confirmed in Christian communities. Other participants in the unchurched group came from communities of faith that were not Christian in the conventional Trinitarian sense, but were, essentially, still active and participatory faith communities. This was not the experience of the youngest participants in the unchurched group. For these people, their families were already “post-Christian” during their childhoods. So while, to varying degrees, they had some knowledge of Christianity, neither a church, nor some other faith community, had ever been an essential part of their paths in the world. Instead, such participants were new to organized religion. So too were the participants’ relations with Sola Caritas different. Some volunteered for Sola Caritas direct services. Some were recipients of Sola Caritas direct services. Others had attended Sola Caritas social programs with a churched friend. These different backgrounds and ways of relating to the church provided different avenues and different pre-existing attitudes towards the church and its work. The church member group was similarly diverse in that members had very different views of the goals of church, church growth, and evangelism. Some Sola Caritas members hoped for the church to grow into a large community with large, vibrant, worship services and the ability to marshal artistic endeavors in the community and social justice activities on a global scale. Some members

were quite happy with a small local parish. Some members, coming from more evangelical traditions, wanted to see the church actively evangelizing to bring people to Christ. A minority of members viewed efforts by Christians to convert non-Christians as a vestige of imperialism. For these members, the emphasis of evangelical work was to be on living a good and compelling life which, if it attracted others to faith, would serve as a sufficient form of evangelism. These different understandings of what it meant to make disciples would doubtless inform the tenor of the discussion cohort.

While capturing the diversity of views within each of the respective groups was important, it was more vital to the study to get a sense of the differences between the churched and unchurched groups. This slippage in responses would show the different incoming assumptions of each group and provide valuable insight into how the intervention could achieve its aims. Indeed, some differentiation in results was not only expected, but necessary for the intervention to be effective. One assumed that there would be an incoming difference between persons within and without the church. Additionally, as the study sought to foster genuine human connection, and the robust exchange of ideas, between members of each group, it was vital to see the areas of commonality between the two groups. If indeed the groups were so disparate that they lacked any meaningful shared assumptions and cultural touchpoints, the project would likely struggle to achieve its aims over the course of the, relatively compact, 8-week intervention. As such, it was vital to see the areas of extreme disparate views from the onset to determine how to best foster discussion between and across the two groups.

The principal investigator identified some issues where he expected that participants would feel compelled to share their deeply held personal views. Specifically,

given the content of *American Horror Story*, it was expected that participants would have comments to share on questions of gender, different spiritualities, and American partisan politics. If these topics were not raised in the context of the weekly discussions, there would be a silence in the reported information that pointed to the intervention not inviting the kind of challenging reflection for which it had been intended. These particular topics were identified by the principal investigator and aligned as key to understanding of the television program after discussions with Father Ingebretsen. Some other themes, while deeply compelling, were not seen as ones that were so essential to a successful intervention that, if they were not a focus, they would represent a slippage. For example, *American Horror Story* deals extensively with the animal other and how it relates to humans. What beings are worthy of the consideration humans give to one another? Where is the line between human and animal? Among animals, where does one draw the line between the animals that serve humanity through their use and companionship versus the animals that are seen as merely wildlife or pests? At this particular cultural moment, there is an argument to be made that these questions are worthy of serious engagement by faith leaders and their congregations. What ethical obligations are placed on humans as God's cultivators of the world? What obligation is owed to animals, and how are humans meeting, or failing to meet, those obligations? Questions about environmental impact and humane treatment of useful animals would provide an interesting set of ethical quandaries for a group. This topic, like others that were set aside, would be welcome if they organically emerged in the context of group discussions, but they were not so essential that failing to realize their potential would undermine the efficacy of the intervention.

In addition to designing how participants would experience the intervention, it was vital to give some thought to how the results of the intervention would be organized when they were shared. The goal of sharing the results from this intervention was to provide useful information for other faith practitioners who were looking to leverage popular media culture to bridge divides between church members and the broader community. As such, it was key to make sure such other faith leaders understood the specific areas of exploration addressed in this intervention as well as the moments over the course of discussion where conversation proved particularly meaningful and transformative. The goal of providing this information in an efficient and accessible manner had to be weighed against the primary concern of protecting participant privacy and honoring the commitment of anonymity promised throughout the intervention.

The data would thus be organized across two different areas of informational reporting. First, in the context of interviews, data would be sorted by question. The first set of interviews provided a baseline to establish the incoming assumptions and feelings of participants. This information would show the diversity, but also any areas of general consensus, within each of the two groups. It would also show the broadly held differences in views between the churched and unchurched participants.

The concluding set of interviews would show how assumptions and feelings stood at the end of the intervention. Again, these findings would show the diversity in views within each group and across the two groups within the broader cohort. Comparing answers from before and after the intervention, in aggregate, would show how the intervention had succeeded, or not succeeded, in fostering genuine connection and intellectual exchange between participants of the two groups. The final results would be

particularly interesting since, in addition to showing themes that were held either within or across the two groups, it would show how the groups now did, or did not, share language and narrative touchpoints. For example, a successful intervention would likely conclude within some participants from each group using the same language to describe the same feelings or experiences, or feature participants from both groups pointing to the same stories from within the popular media shared as a way of understanding their thoughts and feelings about matters of spiritual importance.

Perhaps of more interest to other faith leaders looking to use media to build community, some anecdotes would also be shared. These anecdotes, taken from particularly strong conversations over the course of the discussion portions of the intervention, would look at the particular storylines that invited the strongest responses and, in so doing, fostered the best conversation. These anecdotes would show both how good conversations could be allowed to take shape, and would also provide some insight into the particular types of narratives within the context of a television program that seemed to spark the richest conversations.

The intervention design intentionally left space in the context of conversations for participants to drive the shape of conversations across sessions. In so doing, it left a lot of room for participants to self-identify the narratives from the media they found most compelling and the areas of theological exploration that they found most pressing. Still, this design simultaneously left open a lot of space for awkward silences and stilted, meaningless conversation. There was also a question around which topics participants would be willing to engage. Would participants discuss sensitive topics that were not normally part of polite discussion? *American Horror Story* invites discussions around

sexuality, race, and contemporary politics, but the intervention was specifically designed not to force any particular line of exploration on participants. The anecdotal evidence would share the degree to which the group elected to explore these and other topics, how participants reacted when others engaged them, and the degree to which such sensitive discussions seemed to invite, or dissuade, open and honest sharing. Providing other practitioners with insight into which media objects, and which conversations, were most effective could allow them to scale the project quickly with a relatively higher degree of confidence in a successful intervention.

American Horror Story, with its complex and interwoven plot lines, provides numerous different narrative and stylistic touchpoints that anecdotally evidence would help sift for efficacy. Did participants enjoy stories that focused on the supernatural as compared to those based in futuristic technology? Did participants identify more strongly with characters set in their own time than ones clearly placed in the past? Would participants be turned off by narratives including magic or excessive gore? Sharing anecdotes about how participants reacted to the stories would help faith leaders planning future interventions create more tailored offerings by employing the learnings of this particular project.

Reporting back information from the qualitative interviews, combined with anecdotes from the discussions, would give readers a sense of the stakes of what was being discussed and the way that people were handling sensitive conversations. It would walk the reader through the changes in group dynamics between the introductory and concluding interviews and provide insights into how to create a successful intervention, employing popular media culture, at one's home church.

Chapter 4 - Results

Pre-Intervention Interview Themes

The first question[167] posed to participants was "what is your relationship with Sola Caritas?" This question was designed to invite participants to reflect on their involvement with the parish on the terms that seemed most authentic to their experience. Answers clustered around several thematic areas: technical affiliation; sense of belonging; and connection to people.

For members, technical affiliation usually had two parts. First, they almost all mentioned that they were members of the church, or board members of the church. Secondly, they shared a bit more about their specific involvement in the work of the church. For example, one volunteer said that she was a member and "in charge of the website." Another mentioned that he was a "founding member" and "former board member." For the members, membership was key to their relationship to the church and gave a named identity to how they fit in and belonged within the structure of the church. Similarly, jobs within the life and ministries of the church allowed people to locate themselves more clearly as parts of the community with a particular role or responsibility.

Answers from members were usually couched in clear terms and were fairly concise. For nonmembers, the length of detail varied. For some nonmembers, affiliation with a particular ministry was key to their involvement in the study. Several participants named their connection in ways centered on a specific ministry such as "I help with the housing ministry" or "I am the community member on the grants committee." For these people, there was a clear role in many ways akin to the church members. Still, they identified more strongly with specific ministries than with the church as a whole. It was

[167] A complete list of the questions can be viewed in Appendix A.

particularly striking that many nonmembers identified their connection to Sola Caritas as one of partnership in ministry. For example, language sometimes used included “I got a grant from them once” or “they run a homeless shelter that I help out at.” For these people, Sola Caritas was a partner in service, but not a place that they identified as a church of which they were a part. Some nonmembers really struggled with this question, offering long and rambling answers that walked through how they heard about a specific ministry or their friendship with some member or another who had gotten them involved in some aspect of a ministry. For these participants, it was particularly clear that their relationship with Sola Caritas was not one that, on the technical dimension, was meaningfully similar to those of members.

Many participants also used this question as a place to share a bit more about their sense of belonging or place at Sola Caritas. Multiple members used “home church” to describe their relationship with Sola Caritas. Others used different possessives such as “my church.” Members had a sense of possession of the church and belonging at the church. They used similar language about specific ministries, small groups, and other sub-groups within the church that clearly conveyed a sense of belonging and place. For nonmembers, the answers were more varied. Some used similarly affectionate language to describe specific ministries. One former housing ministry recipient talked about a sense of home, in a way that was clearly particular to the housing ministry and not indicative of his experience of the broader parish. Other non-member participants clearly saw Sola Caritas as a force apart from themselves, with which they partnered in ministry, or that they interfaced within the community, but not one in any way connected to their

experience of the world or their self-definition. One succinctly said, “I’ve volunteered on some things with them and someone asked me to be in this focus group.”

Connections to people and the sense of human community was a key thematic part of answers for both church and unchurched participants. A church member talked about how “her people” were at the church and used the word “family” to describe the community she found at the church. Another member talked about his best friend being at the church and how he met people through the church when he moved to Cleveland from another city. The human relationships between members were clearly a key part of how they invested in the church, and their relationship to Sola Caritas was inextricably intertwined with their relationships with other members. For nonmembers, reference to people was more varied. For persons with tenuous connections to the church, the human dimension was vital since they talked about how a specific person had asked them to participate in the intervention or about a specific person in the church whom they knew. Among nonmembers with deeper connections to particular Sola Caritas ministries, one mentioned his connection to the “people in the guided meditation group,” and another talked about the greater Cleveland nonviolent communication group that occasionally meets in our facilities. For these people, human relationship was important to how they thought of Sola Caritas, but those human relationships were not always with actual Sola Caritas members or ministries.

The second question posed was, “What is your experience of/what do you associate with organized religion/religious community membership?” This question allowed people to share broadly, if they so chose, about their faith communities of origin, church affiliation of the moment, or sense of organized religion broadly.

For members, this question was confusing. Some needed clarification that this was not a logistical question about the "organization" within our church community. Answers diverged greatly. One member seized the question as an opportunity to share a modified version of his testimony, going through the various churches of which he had been a member over the years, the various places he had lived while serving in the military, and the way God had worked in his life, across these experiences, as he came to give his life to Christ. Another member differentiated Sola Caritas from organized religion more broadly. This member saw organized religion as largely negative and as often a force for evil in the world. He talked about large global phenomena like religious wars and about dysfunction within individual churches of which he had been a part. Sola Caritas, by contrast was a "good church" that "focused on the right things." Still, this member was deeply suspicious of organized religion broadly and of specific organized faith groups in particular. Among nonmembers, there was also wide variance. One nonmember talked about the experience of growing up in the Catholic church and attending Catholic grade schools. He reflected on how mean he found the nuns and on how poorly Catholic religious instruction answered some of his deep questions about religion and spirituality. He, and others, centered their experience of organized religion in deeply personal terms. Another nonmember, who volunteers with some Sola Caritas ministries, seemed to draw no distinction whatsoever between mainstream religious organizations and cults. In the same tangent, she talked about the Netflix program *Wild Wild Country*[168] and its immigration fraud; sex abuse in the Catholic church; the movie,

[168] *Wild Wild Country* documents the Rajneeshpuram community's activities from India to Oregon and raises interesting questions about religious pluralism in America and the divide between "religions" and "cults" in the American popular imaginary. *Wild, Wild Country.* Netflix, 2018. Television.

Spotlight;[169] and the ways that many local churches seem to spend more money "on themselves" than on helping people. She also singled out for opprobrium Ernest Angley of the nearby Grace Cathedral talking about his various financial misdeeds with the church restaurant as well as the alleged the sexual abuse of church staff.[170] She wondered why he was still a pastor and concluded that organized religion can protect bad people from the law. Overall, among the unchurched participants, views on organized religions ranged from negative to ambivalent. Among churched persons, organized religion was, at least in some cases, viewed favorably. All viewed the church organization of which they were a part favorably, and those nonmembers who viewed organized religion negatively seemed to see no contradiction with their participation in Sola Caritas programming.

Third, participants were asked, "How connected do you feel to the people of the religious community with which you most often interact?" This question was designed to look at the feelings of connectedness among members and to get a sense of the affiliations of nonmember participants.

Among members, responses were generally positive. Some members talked about specific people to whom they felt connected. Most said that they felt connected to the people in Sola Caritas and all members mentioned Sola Caritas as the religious

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[169] *Spotlight* dramatizes the *Boston Globe's* investigative journalism around sexual abuse in the Catholic church in Boston. The movie's narrative is particularly critical of the church's efforts to cover up abuse and use cash payouts to encourage victim silence. *Spotlight.* DVD. Directed by Tom McCarthy. Open Road Films, 2015.

[170] Angley ran afoul of the Federal Government by classifying persons who were, for all intents and purposes, employees at his Cathedral Buffet as volunteers. He is alleged to have pushed female members towards abortions and male members towards vasectomies so that they would not have children and would instead have more financial resources to contribute to the church. After being sued by a, decades younger, associate pastor for subjecting the subordinate to nude massages, Angley opined "I'm not a homosexual. God wouldn't use a homosexual like he uses me. He calls me his prophet, and indeed I am." Bob Dyer. "Falling from Grace Part 1: Ernest Angley's Grace Cathedral Rocked by Accusations Involving Abortions and Vasectomies." *Akron Beacon Journal.* Jan. 6, 2019. https://www.beaconjournal.com/akron/lifestyle/falling-from-grace-about-this-series

community to which they felt connected. Among members who expressed muted feelings of connectedness, it was unclear that they felt comfortable expressing “negative” opinions to the investigator given his role in the church. Still, all members could say something concrete about connectedness and some shared anecdotes. One, who had recently been hospitalized, talked about which members of the church had visited, called, or sent gifts. For this member, who did not have family locally, the church was able to provide important connections at a very fragile moment.

Responses among nonmembers were not what was anticipated and varied greatly. One nonmember said simply that he was not connected to any religious community. The interviewer paused before the next question to see if the participant would realize that Sola Caritas was a religious community and that he was actively participating in a project put together by a spiritual community. He did not. Another clearly misunderstood the question as only including religious communities in the sense of communities of nuns or priests. She made a few awkward comments about a community of nuns that she knew of in Cleveland before it was clarified that religious communities would include churches. A third identified a book club as the religious community to which she felt most connected. It is unclear that this book club focusses on particularly religious texts, but this participant said that she felt spiritually engaged with the book club. Only two nonmember participants saw Sola Caritas as the religious community to which they felt most connected. For these participants, the connection was to Sola Caritas as the religious community, but that connection was centered on the shared ministry on which they worked with the religious community. Irrespective of the religious community named by nonmembers, they did not share responses indicating the same level of connectedness as

did members of Sola Caritas. Nonmember responses suggested that the participants were not finding connection to a faith community in the same ways that members of Sola Caritas felt connected to Sola Caritas. Rather, they were finding differing levels of essentially different connection with whichever faith community most engaged them.

Fourth, participants were invited to share a bit about culture; "Tell me about culture you enjoy – music, television, sports, etc." It was quickly apparent that the latter half of this question was important since some participants seemed to be confused by a question about culture including music, television, and sports. One participant tried to cite some major Cleveland cultural institutions, such as the orchestra, before asking what was meant by culture and again being referred to the latter half of the question. Across groups, the individual participants had highly specific media cultural interests that showed only limited overlap. One participant reported watching primarily sports and some news. Another observed that she primarily watched reality television and, given the rigors of her work schedule, could only commit to a program or two per season. The one program that she watched fairly consistently was *The Bachelor*, and she spoke fondly of a tradition she had formed with friends that involved creating a yearly bracket for the program, with the person who got the furthest being treated to dinner by the other bracket participants.

With music, there was no particular commonality among members of each group or across the two groups. Tastes in music ranged from pop to classical to country. Most participants seemed to enjoy one or two genres of music regularly and, consequently, had few areas of overlap. Generally, members were more likely to listen to classic rock than nonmembers. Nonmembers were more likely to listen to young and urban artists.

However, the only participant who reported listening to almost exclusively classical music was also a nonmember. There did seem to be overlap in how members and nonmembers used music, irrespective of genre of music, in their daily lives. Both groups reported listening to music while driving and several members talked about music in the context of worship. Nonmembers did not associate music with religious practice. They were more likely to name work as a place where they listened to music. They were also more likely to mention music as something they enjoyed while working out. Only one church member talked about music in the context of physical activity while four out of five nonmembers associated music with working out or with dance.

Television tastes showed relatively more overlap, though there remained clear differentiation between church members and unchurched participants. Among the member participants, there was a bias towards programs on traditional television and away from many narrative-driven programs. Multiple members reported watching local news programs. Forty percent of participants in that cohort watched multiple local news programs and readily named local news anchors. Only one of the unchurched participants reported watching local news programs, and that person watched local news infrequently and only when something important of local interest was happening. The church member group also watched more broadcast television sitcoms, and two of the members reported the classic movie channel as a genre of choice. Members and nonmembers reported equal levels of interest in reality television programs, but the choices of programs they selected differed. Church members were more likely to enjoy broadcast reality programs, such as *The Bachelor* or *The Voice* while nonmembers were more likely to pick niche programs like *Temptation Island. The Apprentice* was remembered fondly by some members of

each group; however, a nonmember singled it out as a reality program that he did not enjoy. Unchurched members were more likely to think of streaming services, YouTube vlogs, and the like as "television" and apparently were also more likely to consume media through these channels. Some members of both groups reported that they watched sports regularly. Differences in sports, teams, and level (e.g. professional vs. collegiate) rendered limited agreement in programming interest. Multiple participants remarked that they watched the Cleveland Browns but were watching less faithfully given the present disappointing season. Many seemed to view the activity and ritual around sports, such as joining with friends and family, or eating particular foods, as integral to their enjoyment of watching sports.

To assess theological background, participants were asked, "How would you describe your knowledge of religion?" Some participants used this opportunity to talk about religion broadly and theoretically while some talked about their own experience of religion. Among members, most comments were clearly rooted in an understanding of conventional Christian religion. One participant talked about his path from Catholicism to Protestantism and his understanding of the differences between the two traditions. He shared some information about the things he missed from the Catholic tradition as well as factors -- namely open table communion and a more authentically loving ethos -- which drew him to Protestantism. He also mentioned other world religions and opined that most other religions were also trying to talk to God. Another participant just talked about her own faith journey and the ways that she had experienced God. For her, religion that was known was known through personal experience. She differentiated her faith and personal experience from the organization of religion and the church. Personal experience or faith

was between a person and God and always good. Religion, on the other hand, was humanity's imperfect effort to serve God in an organized way, and so it would always be tainted by "drama," and various other things which distract from and test faith. One member offered a very theoretical answer, where he talked about different religions grouped geographically. He provided a brief overview of world religions. He then talked about Christianity in America. Then he talked about cults in America, which he considered to included Jehovah's witnesses and "snake handlers." He then stated that Christian Scientists, Mormons, and Adventists all had beliefs like cults but were less controlling and were, therefore, a lot like churches. He concluded his remarks by noting that all people had some way of trying to engage the spiritual world and there are many religions, particularly among indigenous peoples, about which little is known and key information may be forever lost.

Unchurched members similarly offered a mix of introspective and externally focused answers. One unchurched member talked about the different religions that he had engaged. He talked about attending a bible study with some other men in his community many years before and about falling out of that practice. He shared that he did not think religion was as important in the modern time as it used to be, but said that he did feel bad that there was not as much ritual without religion. He thought it was good for society to have ways of marking marriages, births, and other significant events in a solemn and dignified public way. Without religion, there was not a clear way to do that. A woman walked through various world religions and their flaws. For example, she felt that Hinduism was too complicated, Christianity too judgmental, and Islam too repressive of women. She talked about her deep affinity for yoga and the way that she found spiritual

practice through yoga and the way that it was a religion. She also thought that humanism was a religion that would eventually become the predominant faith in developed countries, particularly as technology invited encounter with alien life and made human life less temporal.

Participants were then asked, “How do you think about personhood, and what has shaped your ideas of who or what is a person?” Answers varied as participants heard very different things in the question and constructed answers based on those inferences. One church member understood this to be a question about abortion. He shared a bit about his pro-life beliefs and the basis for those beliefs. He talked about various other pro-life beliefs adjacent to his opposition to abortion. He talked about all people being loved children of God as the basis for his understanding of why the details of a person matter. In general, the church member group used religious understandings of personhood to explain their views. People talked about people being created in God’s image or about the rights that people have that come from God. Some participants wanted to reflect on the ways that they differentiate personhood from other aspects of Christian teaching, such as gender complementarity.

Among the unchurched participants, answers were varied. One unchurched participant had an expansive view of personhood. He talked about how the ideas of personhood, both across humans and across species, is changing. Regarding humans, he discussed recent research into persons with altered consciousness. These persons, who once would have been categorized as a single group -- persons in a vegetative state -- are now much better understood. Scientists are able to look at brain activity of persons who are not externally responsive. Through testing, they are able to see if the person has some

level of consciousness. The participant had recently learned that a person who is not responding externally can undergo a brain scan during which they are asked to imagine walking through their home or playing tennis. Localized brain activity in response to these questions can confirm that the person is aware if not responsive. Also, interestingly, quality of life scores offered on surveys by persons who are, to varying degrees, "locked in" to their bodies do not differ meaningfully from persons who have complete bodily function. This participant emphasized that his understanding of personhood has changed as he has studied further and as science has advanced.

He was also very concerned with the distinction between human personhood and animal personhood. Animals were broadly considered persons for his purposes and he talked about the rights that animals were entitled to as animal persons. This participant was a vegetarian for predominantly ethical reasons and was greatly concerned about the treatment of animals and the ways that animals might assert their rights against bad actions by humans. He was fully supportive of extending animals presently guaranteed human constitutional rights or amending the United States Constitution to specify the personhood and rights of animals. For this participant, while all animals were persons, they were not all equal. There was a hierarchy of personhood dictated by intelligence, function, and emotional experience. This meant that, while poor treatment of all animals was grounds for concern, abuse of sophisticated animals was more worrying and more deserving of activism and legal recourse.

Broadly, the unchurched cohort looked to diverse sources of wisdom when defining personhood. One member of the unchurched group thought that asserting the importance of personhood, particularly a view of personhood that was human centric,

was just a form of species driven selfishness. In his view, personhood was less important than community or life more broadly. The unchurched group did not generally view the experience of being a person, or a human person, as something that necessarily implicated God or religious discussion. They did view questions around personhood as ethical questions, but did not directly associate those ethics with either religious ethics or religious tradition.

Finally, participants were asked "What happens when we die? Does it matter?" For church members, there was a surprising diversity of views on what happens when we die. Some were very interested in the technical timing of death and afterlife. One walked through how the body goes to sleep in God and wakes up at the final judgement. But, she was quick to note that this is not experienced as a multistep process or a long purgatorial wait. Rather, time works such that the body has no sensation until such time as the final judgement comes. Another was very interested in the physical body, emphasizing the way that all bodies would be reconstituted for the final judgement so that all people could, as bodied, stand before Christ. Others were less clear on what the afterlife would look like. One talked about how Christians would stand before God, but suggested that there is not enough information in scripture to provided concrete detail to what being forever in the presence of God would be experienced as. Multiple members of the churched group said that Christians do not know very much about what happens to people who are not Christians. One emphasized that persons who are separated from Christ will not be with him in the afterlife as an extension of a cosmic choice to reject Christ. Still, that member noted that it was not immediately clear that this would be experienced as an oppressive experience precisely because it mirrored decisions in

earthly life. Another wanted to leave open the possibility that no one is beyond redemption and God can, at any point, find new and additional ways to be reconciled to his creations. Among church members, there was unanimity on the importance of the afterlife. For some, the importance of the afterlife was rooted in faith and involvement in the church. Such involvement made sense precisely because it led to afterlife with friends, family, and God. Others thought it mattered because it was an eternal destiny and they would have to live with the afterlife to which they were assigned regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant their earthly lives turned out to be.

Unchurched members had less clear views on what happened when we die. One said simply that he did not know. One said she did not know and could not know, nor could anyone else, though we could create comforting stories and there was nothing wrong with choosing a story if it helped one lead a more ethical and comfortable life. Others talked about the idea of heaven as a compelling one, but not one in which they necessarily believed. Only one seemed confident that there was an afterlife of any sort, but he did not feel that he had sufficient information to describe what that afterlife would be. This group generally agreed that what happened after we die did not particularly matter, whether it was living in another place, being reincarnated, or ceasing to exist. The consensus was that if there was anything beyond this life, it was beyond human capacity to understand and did not have meaningful implications for human life lived on earth.

Post-Intervention Interview Themes

At the conclusion of the intervention, participants were again interviewed with the same questions. Changes in answers suggest that, while individuals retained their belief structures, they found areas for understanding and cooperation.

When asked again about their relationship with Sola Caritas, most participants, including both church members and nonmembers, mentioned the cohort experience as key to their experience of the organization. For church members, there were responses similar to those given at the start of the intervention; they continued to focus on specific titles, volunteer roles, and church membership. The answers were slightly nuanced by an increased use of descriptors of belonging and community. The biggest change in answer among the members came from a member who talked about how Sola Caritas is a place he comes to shape and refine his beliefs. He discussed the ways that he enjoyed opportunities to learn more about how other people think and how he can increase in faith by testing his beliefs. Within the discussion of challenges to his beliefs, he discussed the cohort and the ways that it had been a fulfilling intellectual process as well as a place to find community and conversation.

Among nonmembers, the changes in answers were more pronounced. One long-time volunteer who was, nonetheless, not a member, used the language of “my church” to describe Sola Caritas. This participant is not technically a member of Sola Caritas, but it appears that she may join the church as a member in the coming months. While some nonmembers still grounded their relationship with Sola Caritas in the particular ministry with which they had originally interfaced, all now used language that made clear a relationship with the entire church rather than with only one specific ministry. This change suggested that nonmembers felt a deeper, or at least different, connection to the broader Sola Caritas community than they had felt when they started participating in the intervention.

Both groups also shared different feelings about Sola Caritas in the context of the post-intervention interviews. For members, responses showed a greater tendency to talk about feelings related to the place. One participant talked about finding a church home at Sola Caritas that had eluded her at past churches. Another talked about the feelings he had about the people at Sola Caritas and the family that he had cultivated there. Another, whose mother had died during the course of the intervention, talked about the support he received from the church during his grief and the way that he would always associate his mother with the church which had provided a memorial remembrance for her.

Nonmembers similarly shared feelings of comfort with Sola Caritas. One talked about a place where they felt like they could make friends as an adult, and talked about how few other places afford opportunities for adults to make friends. This person talked about his challenges finding community with local performing arts groups and a volunteer organization. By comparison, he felt like Sola Caritas was a place where he had connected well with other people and now had people on whom he could depend. It was also striking that nonmembers now talked consistently about Sola Caritas members while discussing their relationship with the church. While some also discussed affiliated volunteers and ministries, all reported some connection to Sola Caritas members or church programming, consistently stemming from their participation in the discussion cohort.

When revisiting experiences of religious communities and thoughts on membership in organized religion, responses in both groups changed. Answers among the church members were relatively subtle in their alterations. The core of their answers did not change, but several now also mentioned their cohort experience as part of their

experience of being a member of the church. Some responses also showed that their understanding of church membership was now more outward-looking than it had been in the original interview. Two different participants mentioned some variant of the idea of being part of a church that had a responsibility to meet and puzzle through issues with people in the community. Participation in organized religion for these members now included more than holding membership in, and volunteering with, a church. Not it included a responsibility to be a member of the church actively engaging the broader world.

For nonmembers, views changed more dramatically. All now mentioned their experience in the cohort as a core experience that informed their view of organized religious organizations. Even those who continued to report negative feelings or distrust towards some forms of organized religion were now much more muted in their concerns and shared relative comfort with engaging with religious communities. Nonmembers also shared more detail about the work of Sola Caritas in explaining their experiences with organized religion. Several mentioned ministries of the church that they had not participated in before the cohort and several shared things they had learned about organized religion, and Sola Caritas in particular, as they framed their answers. Some also spoke to particular historical things about Sola Caritas and its broader denomination. For example, nonmembers talked about the church as a locus for advocacy efforts in favor of vulnerable populations. They talked about how churches have historically served as conveners of essential medical services for persons who could not access appropriate care, and they talked about the ways that the church met other key emotional needs for people it served. Two different participants reflected back different details from an

anecdote shared by a member during one discussion group about the reason for the laying on of hands during communion in the Metropolitan Community Church. The MCC had many members impacted by the AIDS crisis and for these people who might have no other physical touch in their lives, the laying on of hands affirmed their humanity and reminded them of God's loving embrace of his beloved children.

Answers about connectedness changed for both members and nonmembers. Members consistently mentioned Sola Caritas as the religious community to which they felt closest. Answers subsequent to the intervention were more hopeful than answers offered before the intervention and focused less on the logistics of being a part of a church and more on the feelings and people that participants associated with the church. Members talked more about Sola Caritas as a church than about the specific ministries with which they were involved. They also talked about other participants in the cohort as people to whom they felt connected and in most cases talked more about connectedness to fellow cohort members than to members who had served in a particular ministry with which they were involved. Members also talked about feeling connected to cohort members who were not members of the church. They now considered community members who were part of the cohort, but not members of the church, to be a form of connection to Sola Caritas and its people.

Among nonmembers, responses also shifted towards more connection with Sola Caritas. All but one nonmember now considered Sola Caritas to be the religious community to which they were most connected. Nonmembers talked about the relationships that they had with members of the cohort and the way that they had enjoyed fellowship and conversation with the church members. One nonmember reflected on the

ride offered to her by a member of the church after one session. She enjoyed their discussion on the way home and the ride that was offered as she did not want to walk on a rainy night. Other nonmembers talked about things that they learned, completely aside from religion, from members of the church. One discussed learning about the nuances of fine tequila from a member when a small group got a snack at a taqueria in the neighborhood after a session. Although this activity happened totally outside of the structured program, and had no religious significance whatsoever, it still contributed to the nonmember's feeling of connectedness to the church.

Responses about culture were broadly similar both before and after the cohort. Some exchange of culture between church members and nonmembers occurred and all formed opinions on *American Horror Story* over the course of the intervention. The most prominent exchange was that a nonmember encouraged the whole cohort to listen to Kanye West's new album after attending a Sunday Service event at Howard University. Members all listened to the album and several reported enjoying it. One member enjoyed some of Kanye West's older music which he explored subsequent to this introduction. He reported finding the song ”Jesus Walks” particularly meaningful. Some of the church members started watching programs on streaming services, such as Netflix, after being introduced to the platform as part of the intervention. It was not clear if this change was one of sharing of culture across groups or one of technological access. Nonmembers were largely dismissive of the media culture consumed by church members. They were unimpressed by Christian rock music and actively disliked the broadcast programming that older church members watched. The one exception was that one younger member

started watching Channel 3 W-KYC local news after a member talked about how attractive he found one of the news anchors.

Opinions on *American Horror Story* differed across groups. There was agreement that the show was fast-moving and complex and not the most accessible choice for the work we attempted to undertake. Some participants noted that they felt they had uneven access to the series compared to participants who were familiar with the show. Participants in both groups appreciated being able to enjoy the program as a cohort because of the many levels of cultural references contained in the show. Young actors and music were familiar to the younger participants of the cohort while experienced performers and historical cultural references allowed older participants of the cohort to sharing insights and meaning with the younger members of the group. Different participants understanding different aspects of the program facilitated broad sharing.

Among church members, the response to *American Horror Story* was at times shocked and sometimes bemused. One member felt the show was too gory, and the violence in it made her uncomfortable. Another member remarked that he was a mused that such a worldly show, where people engaged in various vices freely, was part of an activity at the church. The consensus was that, although a minority of members might watch or enjoy this show in their private lives, they would have been hesitant to admit such consumption in the context of a church group, and they certainly would not have suggested it as the basis of a cohort discussion. They also understood the program to be purely a work of fiction and clearly differentiated their own beliefs from the storylines in the show. For example, a member talked about how the show's portrayal of some people lingering on earth after death was antithetical to her understanding of the afterlife and

judgment. Another pushed back on the idea of witches being a force for good and cited her biblical understanding of witchcraft as the basis for concern about a television program that seemed to glorify the occult.

Among nonmembers, reactions were muted. Enjoyment of the program was uneven between nonmembers, but complaints focused more on storylines and genre than on the morally objectionable aspects of the program that church members noted. One participant particularly enjoyed seeing Jessica Lange in a prominent role in the program, while another talked about the eclectic soundtrack as something he enjoyed. Nonmembers generally related to the program as a way to locate their beliefs rather than singling out certain aspects of its mythology to differentiate a Christian theology. For example, a man in the nonmember cohort talked about how he was descended from the witches at Salem. He was very interested in the way that the killing of witches was portrayed in the show and the way that the program emphasized that killing generally had more to do with a desire for power and wealth than a genuine moral opposition to the practice of magic. A woman nonmember talked about her experiences of being in places where she felt an evil or ghostly presence. She contrasted houses, churches, and cities where she felt light and comfortable presences from those where she felt evil or dark presences. For the nonmembers, themes in *American Horror Story* allowed them space to articulate various beliefs without drawing stark comparisons or clear differentiation.

Among members, answers on religion were less introspective than they had been in the initial interview, and members talked about the things that they knew about Christianity, other religions, and beliefs about spiritual life and practice that they did not associate with any particular religion. Several members talked about ideas that

nonmembers had shared in the discussion, such as the idea of reincarnation. Members did not seem to have particular or specific knowledge of more world religions subsequent to the intervention, but the way that they talked about belief systems outside of Christianity was generally less focused on difference and judgment of quality. For example, in the second round of interviews, no participants focused on the flaws in other world religions, or other Christian denominations, and the word cult came up very infrequently.

Nonmembers generally made Christianity a greater focus of their answers in the second interview and broadly showed more knowledge of Christianity. One nonmember, who did not seem to have any understanding of differentiations between Christian groups prior to the intervention, spoke a bit about how her own beliefs were more similar to progressive Protestant beliefs than what she had understood Christians to believe. She was particularly gratified to hear that there were Christians who shared her concern for vulnerable populations and her desire to see greater empowerment for women. Another nonmember, who had previously had very little to say about this question, now offered some extended remarks about things he had learned about religion. Namely, he learned that there was a lot more diversity of religion and religious views than he had previously thought. And, he understood things about Christianity that had confused him before, like communion, baptism, and why churches were more than mere wedding venues.

Responses to personhood were, because of the proximity of the interview to the intervention, deeply colored by *American Horror Story*. Participants from each group used analogies from the show to respond to this question. Among members, answers were generally more philosophical and nuanced than they had been prior to the intervention. Rather than talking about specific policy issues, members seemed

comfortable talking about the characteristics of persons and the ways that technology is challenging human understanding of personhood. One member reflected on a comment from a nonmember about the organ trade in which China executes prisoners and sells their organs for transplantation. She talked about how the modern moment changed the ways we think about people because people can be kept alive through parts of other people that are acquired through involuntary means. She was also interested in the ways that human life, or something a lot like it, can increasingly exist beyond the bounds of a healthy human body because of technological strides. Church members held human life in very high esteem both before and after the intervention, but the intervention invited them to think about the implications of human life in a changing world, and gave them space to meander through puzzling ethical dilemmas on their own terms.

Nonmembers were clearly influenced by members in their thinking about personhood. While nonmembers retained a broader understanding of personhood than members, human life seemed to rise in their estimations and there was a general movement towards favoring preservation of human life and a desire to see persons live lives of dignity. One nonmember still vehemently protested that animals were persons and that the ethical arc of humanity would eventually extend broad personhood rights to nonhuman creatures. Interestingly, he used tools from group discussions to bolster his argument. A member had earlier pushed him on the idea of animals as persons and asked for his thoughts on the Genesis creation story. He suggested a theology in which Christ, who is God, lowers himself to humanity to make humanity have the life and rights of God. Humanity's calling, having been charged with serving as gardeners in Eden, is to give all creatures the dignified lives due to persons. Most nonmembers talked about the

importance of protecting human life and one, who had previously seemed to take a dim view of personhood, talked about how Terri Schiavo's death would have been unethical with today's technology and testing. All nonmembers suggested that the broadest possible definitions of personhood should be employed by the United States, and several saw any governmental attempts to limit personhood as inherently suspect, as with past efforts to limit personhood on the basis of race or gender.

Members' beliefs on what happens after death were largely unchanged. Some volunteered that they did not believe that various scenarios suggested in *American Horror Story* were accurate. By and large, they continued to hold fairly conventional Christian views on the afterlife and why it matters.

Nonmembers' views shifted over the course of the intervention. While none shifted from a non-Christian to a definitively Christian view of salvation, all discussed Christian understandings of the afterlife either as consistent with their own beliefs or as plausible as one possibility in their belief system. One nonmember talked about how he hoped that Christians were right because he wanted his friends in the cohort to see their faith realized. The change in response was more pronounced on the question of the importance of the afterlife. All now agreed that there was at least some merit to discussions of the afterlife and, while nonmembers generally did not view the afterlife as important as did church members, multiple nonmembers reported a desire to learn more about what different groups believe about the afterlife. One said that it was very important for her to figure out what she believed about the afterlife and said she would be taking on a reading project to get more perspectives. This group also touched on *American Horror Story*, but primarily in the context of providing some more nuance to

their answers. For example, one woman talked about how she wished that the afterlife was just another try at life on earth, but that she feared that for many people it was something horrible, much worth than the vision of a "personal hell" depicted in the program.

Formative anecdotes

Reincarnation

American Horror Story is an unusual multi-season television show in that every season has a new storyline with new characters while retaining the same troupe of actors. This decision seems to point to some kind of relatedness between characters or some kind of reincarnation. Indeed, the show also shows many characters drifting between living, dead, and purgatorial states, and narrates a world in which life is both transient and infinite. The various ambiguities around life and its limits in the show's world sparked a conversation in one of the early discussion groups about reincarnation. One of the nonmembers talked about how many different traditions have an idea of reincarnation. She said that she had read a Greek mythology where only people who had lived perfect lives three times in a row got to live on the best island in Hades. She also talked about how she had learned about Hindu reincarnation while attending a wedding in India and staying for a month several years before. She noted that she did not believe that humans could be reincarnated as other kinds of animals, but that she absolutely believed in multiple human lives.

Another nonmember, who was very interested in animal rights and consistently viewed animals as persons, disagreed that humans could not be reincarnated as animals. He said that he did not believe in reincarnation, but he could imagine a world in which there was reincarnation. That said, if there were reincarnation, it certainly crossed across

species because humans could not understand the breadth of lived experiences if only human lives were lived.

Before this tangent became a side conversation between these two nonmembers, the investigator invited a member to share his perspective on reincarnation. He said that he did not believe in reincarnation and believed that there was eternal life but it was not human life and was in heaven. Another member remarked that eternal life was human life and that the ultimate goal of human experience is eternal life with Jesus.

The woman who first talked about reincarnation asked the group broadly about how they encountered different people in terms of their spiritual maturity. She said that she sometimes met people who felt like they were "new souls" and others that presented as "old souls." She said that sometimes she meets people and realizes "you're new here." By that, she meant that they were on a first or early life. Surprisingly, several people from both the member and nonmember groups found this reflection resonant and said that there is something to a spiritual age of souls that they encounter.

Selling a Soul

After watching "Sojourn," an episode from *American Horror Story Apocalypse*,[171] a member wanted the group to discuss the idea of selling one's soul. In the episode, several characters are portrayed selling their souls. Two tech entrepreneurs have sold their souls and in exchange have great wealth, access to drugs, and sex with celebrities. They opine that everyone who is successful in Silicon Valley has sold their souls to the devil. The show goes on to show an entire church of Satanists and introduces a woman who apparently has sold her soul for a comfortable, if modest, apartment and a

[171] "Sojourn" originally aired on FX on Halloween of 2018. Murphy, Ryan et al. (Writer), & Buecker, Bradly (Director). (October 31, 2018). Sojourn. [8] In Murphy, Ryan and Brad Falchuk (Producer), *American Horror Story: Apocalypse*. FX.

full cable package. Souls, it seems, can be bought with relative ease. The season also features an offer made to a woman to sell her friend's souls to a demonic figure in exchange for stopping the apocalypse of humanity. She declines, humanity is ruined, and most of her friends die. Yet, it is ultimately her resistance to this evil deal that saves the world.

Participants wanted to talk both about selling one's own soul and about giving up the soul of someone else. Many participants were amused by the comment about success in America requiring a transaction with the devil. This resonated with them, and one nonmember wanted to talk about various evil acts perpetrated by powerful organizations in the United States. A member steered the conversation towards the banality of evil, focusing on the woman who sold her soul for cable. He noted that many people select evil rather than good, and reject God, for almost nothing. He suggested that the lesson most people should take from the program was not one about powerful evil in society, but one about the ways that everyday life can involve sales of souls if care is not taken.

The group was also very interested in the idea of selling one's friends' souls. They felt that the lesson from the show was that one should always do the right thing even when there seems to be utilitarian value in a shortcut. A nonmember talked about the importance of loyalty even in the face of great adversity.

A Personal Hell

The show has a scene where a number of characters are trapped in hell.[172] For each one, hell is personal. A prominent actress finds herself waiting on an endless line of returns at a shabby and crowded department store. Customers are mean and difficult, they

[172] Murphy, Ryan et al. (Writer), & Buecker, Bradly (Director). (October 10, 2018). Boy Wonder. [5] In Murphy, Ryan and Brad Falchuk (Producer), *American Horror Story: Apocalypse*. FX.

know she "used to be famous," and her boss pokes her with a cattle prod whenever she is slow. Other characters find similarly customized bleak fates.

A discussion arose about the nature of hell. A member talked about her belief that hell was just a separation from God. Another member talked about how he assumed that being separated from God meant being separated from everything. If God created everything, then without God, nothing could exist. Thus, hell must be stopping existence and disappearing into the void. Another member said he thought only the good things would be withheld, so hell was a place of all the bad things, which meant a world without God. The woman who started the conversation chimed in again, asserting that she believed there might well be many good and comfortable things in hell, just not God. Hell was not about punishment in and of itself, but about punishing people who had lived without God on earth with an eternal separation from God.

A nonmember said she did not think much about hell and thought the show was doing something clever with making hell personalized. She noticed that hell could not make any sense without being personalized since different people would have radically different likes and dislikes. She further opined that hell must be a place from which people can leave if God is as loving as members said he is.

Childlike Faith

American Horror Story features a witch with Down Syndrome. She chooses, seemingly happily, to live in the afterlife and has free rein in the world of afterlives.[173] This witch is able to see both different realities in parallel as well as to see past lives lived even after people who have lived them are now living different lives in different

[173] Murphy, Ryan et al. (Writer), & Buecker, Bradly (Director). (November 14, 2018). Apocalypse Then. [10] In Murphy, Ryan and Brad Falchuk (Producer), *American Horror Story: Apocalypse*. FX.

timelines. She receives joy from knowing secrets of the universe and presents as an uncomplicated force for good in a fraught narrative. One church member remarked that her character reminded him of the childlike faith depicted in scripture[174] that Jesus rewards. He appreciated seeing such a character and thought it was important that she was a powerful figure.

A nonmember was distressed by the portrayal and reaction. She noted that the mythologizing of disabled, or differently abled, people as having powers or magic has deep and distressing roots. She also said that she was hurt that the man had described the actress' character as "childlike."

Church members then explained the idea of childlike faith as a positive thing that all Christians should seek to emulate. A member suggested that the idea of such faith is not that only children can possess it, rather, it takes effort and discipline by adults to have the kind of faith that children exhibit. Cultivating such faith is part of the call of Christians.

Participants from both groups were interested in the idea that questions of eternal significance were, in the Christian tradition, accessible to persons of all range of cognition and ability. Knowing God, for Christians, does not require much knowledge. Rather, it is a reflection of being in God's presence and choosing to walk daily with Him.

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[174] *See e.g.* Luke 18:17 ("anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it"); Matthew 18:3 ("unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"); Matthew 19:14 "'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'").

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This project succeeded in developing an intervention that brought together churched and unchurched persons for discussions about serious and weighty issues. It provides some insight into how media culture can be employed as a part of the evangelical mission of the church, and it examines how media culture, and particularly television programs, can offer narrative paradigms in which people can locate their own experiences and beliefs. The results of this project were broadly consistent with, but built upon, the published work analyzed in the literature review. Valuable insights were drawn about the potential impact of such interventions and the individual design choices required for churches to successfully execute them. While the experience at Sola Caritas was not universalizable, it does provide a framework for application to a broad array of faith communities. This project also raises areas for future research and practical exploration that should be generously engaged as churches seek to define their strategies and value propositions in a technologically, and narratively, diverse world.

Previous writing suggested two key strands of the potential of media; first that it could serve as an evangelical tool and second that it could be drawn into the faith formation work of the church. On the first count, this intervention delivered a more nuanced answer than simply confirming the evangelical utility of media culture. Media was deployed in ways that successfully fostered dialogue about religious issues and did invite more expansive definitions of community. But, the intervention did not result in dramatic conversions of the direct adherence of participants to particular beliefs. Rather, it offered a space and medium for the exchange of values and ideas between church

members and nonmembers. Existing sources that focused on the moral failings of media culture seemed to overstate the degree to which popular media was irredeemable. Sources that looked at the potential of media to play a direct role in evangelizing did not see their contentions confirmed over the course of this study.

The intervention confirmed that media could be deployed in the context of faith formation. *American Horror Story* is neither an overtly Christian show nor one conventionally associated with religious study. In this intervention, it was effective in inviting conversation amongst church members and inviting them to think more critically about their beliefs. Members developed more sophisticated views, and were better able to articulate their views, at the conclusion of the intervention than they were at its beginning. Existing sources that promoted the inclusion of popular media in the life of the church were vindicated as this study showed the conversations sparked meaningful reflection and faith formation. While some might argue that a simplistic, ideological, faith is better than a complex one, this intervention's goal of developing complicated, nuanced, faithful disciples was achieved.

This project provided three key insights for similar, media-based, faith formation interventions; logistics are key, faith formation and community can be expanded, and there is purpose in incremental faith formation. Logistics were central to making this a successful intervention. While other congregations might well execute this project in wildly varying ways, there are some key areas that must be considered and attended to properly. First, the group formed needs to be one in which people will have space to grow and learn. There needs to be space for all voices to be heard and the group needs to be manageable for the space and leadership constraints of the community. Second,

participants need to feel invited to comfortably bring their full selves to the conversation. This need has both an ideological and practical component. Ideologically, participants need to know that what they share will be kept private and that they will be treated with respect by all other participants. The group needs to align on valuing all perspective and treating everyone sharing their time and voice with respect. Practically, people need to feel at home. The space needs to be comfortable. People need to be able to have easy access to restrooms, food, and drink. The food and drink provided needs to meet the needs of the people attending. The more these features can be made better than adequate, and customized for the attendees, the more comfortable participants will feel and the more they will be willing to bring their authentic selves to the conversation.

This intervention confirmed that faith formation and community could both be enhanced through the prudent deployment of media culture. Church members actively tested and refined their beliefs during weighty conversations about elements of the television program viewed. Because the source material was a TV show, and not the Bible, church members did not just look to pastoral leadership for the right answers. Rather, they shared their honest beliefs and tested the strengths and weaknesses of these beliefs in community with one another. The program invited people to share mythologies and beliefs that might not usually come up in a conventionally Bible study. As such, there was space to see how those beliefs did, or did not, fit in with commonly held Christian teaching and belief. Participants were able to explore any areas of inconsistency and determine which beliefs seemed most salient. The exit interviews confirmed that participants formed community through interactions instigated by the intervention.

While the intervention fostered community and faith formation, it was not a silver bullet or quick fix for either of these areas. Participants reported spending more time with one another outside of the context of the intervention. Unchurched participants reported deeper involvement in the ministries and life of the church. Still, most unchurched participants remain nonmembers, and such participants are still not engaged in the life of the church in the same ways or to the extent of the member participants. Church members in the cohort have more connections with the unchurched members than they previously did, but it remains to be seen how deep and sustainable those connections will be outside of the context of the intervention. Community was enhanced, but it was not rapidly propelled to an ideal state by the intervention. Similarly, the changes in how participants described their beliefs showed incremental, rather than radical, faith formation. Church members were able to offer more nuanced descriptions of their beliefs and were better able to convey the details of what they believed. Unchurched participants similarly had more nuanced and detailed views and seemed more open to religious conceptions of afterlife. That said, neither group expressed radically transformed views or beliefs and no unchurched participants accepted whole clothe conventional Christian understandings of divinity and the afterlife. The intervention showed that media could serve as the basis for a dialogue and for bridge-building. That initial openness to discussion created space for meaningful conversations. The media study was able to foster incremental, rather than drastic, change in belief and behavior.

In applying this study to other settings, a few key design decisions would need to be made. Another setting would likely be undertaking this project more as an evangelical tool than as a study. This would open possibilities for wide variance in the demographics,

size, and logistics of a successful intervention. Demographically, this intervention could be deployed, with minor alteration, at less diverse and/or more theologically inflexible congregations. A less diverse community would need to be intentional in designing the discussion group for the intervention so that they contained genuine diversity of viewpoints in ways that would permit compelling discussion to take place. For example, a leader in such a context would want to make sure that the discussion group reflected whatever difference was available, for example age or socio-economic status, such that multiple divergent viewpoints could come forward. A congregation with a narrower theological mission than Sola Caritas might well select a more structured approach that was more overtly evangelical. Such a congregation would likely accept a less popular television program in an effort to find one that was more organically aligned with the church's worldview. Discussions would likely be more directive and would guide participants to prescribed answers rather than open discussion. Such modifications would likely limit the opportunity to welcome diverse perspectives and foster community, but they would allow the church to promote conformity of belief and would likely be more effective at directly adding members to the church.

One could also imagine scenarios where a similar intervention could be effective for a particular subgroup of the broader church. Youth ministry springs most readily to mind. While such an intervention might not yield the same richness of intergenerational connectedness, it would effectively foster community among members and across the member and non-member divide. Particularly active youth ministries often have access to a sizable cohort of non-member affiliates for whom this program might be perfect, and the teenage and young adult years are often deeply important ones for crystalizing beliefs

on issues of eternal significance. Programming well suited to such a cohort would require nominal customization and place special emphasis on some of the themes and issues that are particularly important for young people as they move into full-fledged adulthood. The one special customization for such a cohort would be a mindfulness that leadership of the intervention take special care and practice particular sensitivity with a younger group. It would likely not be appropriate to use the coercive network effects of youth peer pressure to promote a particularly conformist vision of Christianity, and facilitators that quiet participants, and those at the margins, not be steamrolled in conversation sessions.

This type of intervention could also be deployed in contexts where a church is trying to form connection and community between church members and a population that is not able to fully participate in the events and activities of the church community. For example, if a church has a strong relationship with a senior community or a prison, weekly discussions can be held between members and a nonmember cohort. Nonmembers would need to have some way of viewing the programing and discussions could then be held weekly. It is important, in such a context, for the church members to understand that they will need to be diligent in viewing, attending, and proactively informing relationships. At the same time, there must be flexible expectations for participation among the nonmembers. Participants may well join midstream, participants may well leave in the middle of the intervention, and attendance and ability to watch the program may well be uneven. The church should actively love the people outside their membership and should invite, rather than expect, connection.

With a purely evangelical, rather than investigative, approach, churches of different sizes could deploy this intervention effectively with minor modification. For a

very small church, this intervention could be made to fit into education hour, either by alternating weeks or inviting participants to view the program at home and then engage in weekly discussion. For very large churches, the intervention could succeed so long as discussion groups of manageable sizes were carved out of the mass of participants. In such an event, the leadership of the intervention would need to be mindful that the discussion groups they created featured a diversity of viewpoints and a good mix of church members and nonmembers. This might be harder for a very large church where interested church members vastly outnumbered nonmembers who could reasonably be counted on to participate in such an involved undertaking. Here the church should cap the number of participating members in line with the number of nonmembers interested in taking part in the cohort.

Another church might well also find different logistics meet their goals for using a similar intervention for an evangelical tool. Sola Caritas' particular emphasis on social awareness in vendor agreements, food, and programming access made its logistics more complex than those that many other churches encounter. While that complexity might well be useful for other churches, it is not essential to successfully executing a similar intervention. Sola Caritas offered this programming in the evening and thus offered substantial food as part of the fellowship of the cohort. A church that slotted this intervention into their education hour might limit food offerings to the refreshments customarily offered during the education hour. This study, being an investigative one, put a premium on ensuring that all participants watched the program before participating in discussions. To that end, access to the programming was made available to participants in their homes. This type of access might be impractical for other congregations. In such

event, a weekly viewing for participants, combined with short written summaries of plot points for participants who had missed a week, might well suffice to ensure continuity of conversation. Other congregations undertaking similar interventions should be broadly mindful of how the logistical choices of their customized intervention design shape the ways that people participate and engage. While different logistical design decisions will better suit different communities, a premium should always be placed on broad participation, community mindedness, and Christian fellowship.

This study invites many areas for further research. Most significantly, more study would focus on the potential of a longer intervention, different media mediums, and different community creating activities. While a lot was accomplished in eight weeks, it remains an open question how a similar intervention might have impact over the course of several months or an even longer period of time. *American Horror Story*, now airing for about a decade, along has sufficient programming to offer an intervention that extends for almost a year. A good area of future study would offer an extended intervention, interviewing participants every month or so, and would look for the point at which community development and intergroup understanding plateaued. This definitely seems to be a point further out than the eight weeks of this study. Similarly, it would be interesting to see how participation changes for persons participating in more than one intervention. Are second and subsequent interventions similarly transformative? Do returners treat interventions differently than those participating for the first time?

The type of media used in this intervention was chosen carefully, but one could imagine different mediums being more compelling to different participants. While study of any meaningfully different television program would provide interesting insight, the

two key areas for further investigation are probably news programming and televised sports. An intervention that drew from a weekly news show or some other aggregator of current events might well push conversations quickly towards substantial and weighty topics. At the same time, they might not provide the space for authentic and open sharing that a fictional narrative allows. A good study would deploy a weekly news program in a similar intervention, taking particular care to examine to what degree persons for the churched and unchurched groups were able to find common ground and foster meaningful understanding with one another. So too might different studies look at an intervention featuring national, as opposed to local, news programming. Might national or local issues and perspectives foster richer exchange and dialogue? Was news programming able to get to the essential questions that drive spiritual exploration and were participants able to interact with such questions after departing from such nonabstract source material? Both would be key areas for future study.

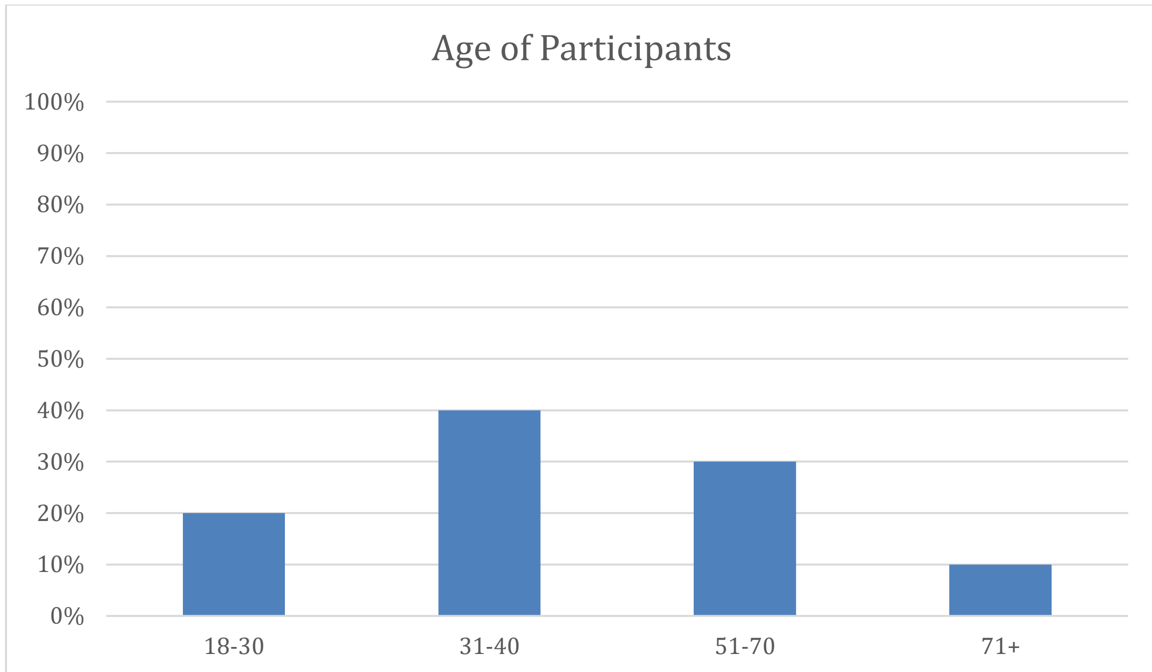
Sports programming is particularly popular, and especially popular with demographic groups that were nonplussed by *American Horror Story* and similar types of television programming. It is not immediately evident how one uses sport to invite rich discussion of questions of eternal significance, but studies should be undertaken trying to invite such conversation. A number of different areas exist for further study within the deployment of sport. First, future researches can look at how to design an intervention in ways that invites conversation and discussion of important questions. How can community be formed while looking at programming that deliberately invites "teams" and tribalism? How can questions be shaped so that they invite people to open up about themselves and their beliefs in response to programming that is more embodied and

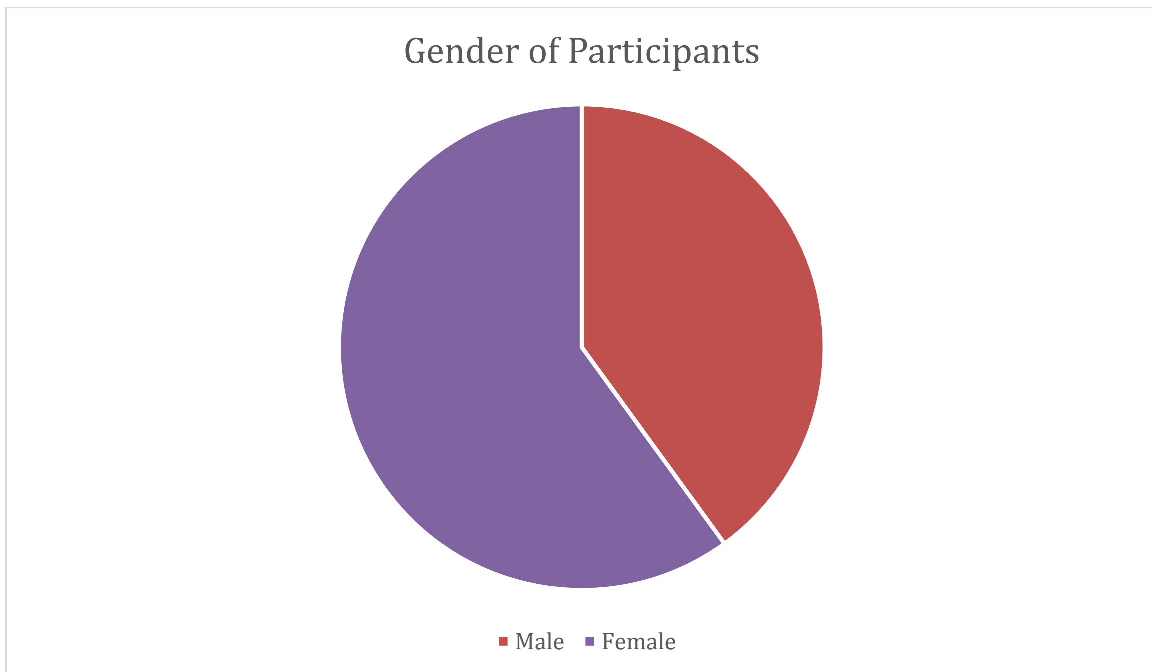
performative than cerebral and emotional? Similarly, future research can look at what sport events are most effective for inviting rich cohort discussion. Perhaps infrequent major sporting events, like the Olympics, could serve well as the basis for infrequent, compact, interventions. Perhaps a certain sport, like football, seems to invite different or better discussion than another, like hockey. Perhaps the relationship between cohort participants (e.g. a group composed of diehard Cleveland Browns fans) would invite a richness of exchange within an intervention that might not be available to a random assortment of participating church members and nonmembers. There are many areas for future exploration and discussion.

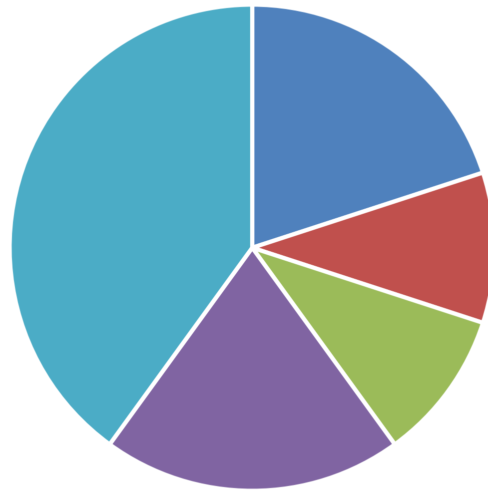
Finally, future research should look at the ways the rich cohort discussions of this intervention could be applied to community building activities completely different than television programming. Could a church field a softball team of members and nonmembers who, in addition to their sport, meet for weekly discussions of eternal significance? Could a church invite local knitters to join with church member knitters to spend time in their craft while forming community and fostering a rich exchange of ideas? How can the church coopt book clubs, writing groups, astronomy enthusiasts, and countless other community focused assemblies into its evangelical mission? These questions are particularly pressing at a moment when the church feels every more disconnected from the broader society and many are flailing for opportunities to meaningfully engage the people in their communities. Future researches should look at all the ways churches can locate exchanges of faith and ideas in activities that invite community.

As American civil society moves further away from conventional Christianity, churches need new ways to engage the unchurched people of their communities. Creativity must drive both efforts to continue to interact with, love, and serve those communities, but also the ways that they invite meaningful dialogue and exchanges of ideas between church members and the people outside the church doors. As this intervention showed, engaging popular media culture can create space for fellowship, connection, and the robust exchange of ideas and beliefs. Future researchers will want to examine additional and better ways of effecting such results. For the time being, churches are encouraged to engage, rather than fear, the world and the narratives within it. God has given Christians a rich and vibrant world in which to make disciples. Confident that they have something of value to offer, Churches should find joy in the complexity of the world and its narratives, and not fear that they will drown out the life changing word of the Gospel.

Demographic Appendix







Race of Participants
White
Black
Hispanic
Asian
Two or More Races

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