

THESIS

UNITED FOR THE CITY: FIRST GRACE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN
POST-HURRICANE KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

UNITED FOR THE CITY: FIRST GRACE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN POST-HURRICANE KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Almost six years after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc in New Orleans, the city is still ‘open for impact’: rebuilding its infrastructure and communities. While Katrina traumatized New Orleans, it also provided an opportunity for change, for residents to rebuild their lives in alignment with their values. First Grace United Methodist church (First Grace) is an example of this kind of paradigm shift. First Grace was founded post-Katrina in 2007 via a merger between two Mid-City Methodist churches, one predominately black and one predominately white. First Grace is now a growing, flourishing multiethnic church that has attracted the attention of local media and the international United Methodist Church organization. This thesis explores how First Grace’s ethnically diverse community is united by common values and the shared goal of rebuilding their beloved city through service. These beliefs enable First Grace’s congregation to engage in ethnic transcendence (Marti 2009), a process by which one’s ethnic identity becomes less important than other shared identities in a diverse group. Invented traditions allow First Grace’s congregants to participate in rituals that emphasize their shared present, rather than separate pasts. Like other paradoxes present in New Orleans, both in spite of and because of the mass and personal tragedies of Hurricane Katrina, First Grace has formed as a church for and of the city and all of its peoples, a silver lining to Katrina’s dark cloud.

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Chapter I: Introduction



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“What is prophetic about First Grace is that it exists.” (Rev. Shawn, interview, June 3, 2009)

Entering First Grace’s sanctuary on a Sunday morning before service, you become immediately aware that this church is exceptional. You are greeted by a

continuous chorus: “How are *you* doing?” The way it is asked elicits the truth, not the simple “fine” or “good” that, when on autopilot, we so often give. Each face is radiant, warmed by sunbeams streaming in from the tall sanctuary windows. Those windows used to provide cool relief from the weight of the heavy, humid Louisiana summer. Today they are a reminder of a past that still shines through the historic sanctuary. Even though you’ve never been here before, you know that today’s First Grace doesn’t look as it always has, but you can’t imagine it any other way. You only know that this place feels good, feels right, and you haven’t yet stopped to ask yourself exactly why. As First Grace’s congregants sometimes say, “*this must be what heaven looks like.*”

Almost six years after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc in New Orleans, the city is still ‘open for impact’: rebuilding its infrastructure and communities. I have coined the phrase ‘open for impact’ to encapsulate the ways in which the hurricane’s damage has allowed space for social change to occur. While Katrina traumatized New Orleans, it also provided opportunities for change, for residents to rebuild their lives in alignment with their values. First Grace United Methodist church (First Grace) is an example of this kind of paradigm shift. First Grace was founded post-Katrina in 2007 via a merger between two Mid-City Methodist churches, one predominately black and one predominately white.

Using ethnographic evidence, this thesis explores how First Grace has built an

ethnically diverse¹ community by uniting behind shared values such as openness, diversity, and inclusion, as well as dedication to serving their city. First Grace's services use elements of African-American and Anglo-American rituals to create new traditions while honoring cultural and spiritual diversity, making the congregation a welcoming and dynamic community. In line with New Orleans' history, First Grace embodies a Creole ethos that celebrates its invented traditions.

The congregation's shared values are nourished by these invented traditions and by First Grace's leadership. This has allowed the congregation to engage in the process of ethnic transcendence, whereby individuals' ethnicities or races become less important than their shared socio-spiritual² beliefs and values (Marti 2009). As evidenced by their practices, congregants at First Grace believe in a commitment to their city and one another, a commitment that transcends different individualities while embracing a shared spirit of community.

"Religion [is] a way of tying together multiple experiences and memories of the sacred into a single system of belief and practice" (Fenn 2003:6). In a multiethnic society, religion can unite people who may have different heritages and practices but shared underlying values, allowing a participatory community to form. While particular practices of religion are all too often associated with particular ethnic groups, First Grace defies that history to create a common religio-spiritual³ and socio-spiritual experience

¹ I use the term "ethnicity" rather than "race" because ethnic identity is a self-identification based on cultural traits such as shared history, language, religion and foodways. Race, an ascribed status, has historically been used to denote scientifically fallacious biological categories (Brace 2005). In historical references, "race" may be used, but when referencing contemporary situations, I use "ethnicity."

² I use the hybrid term "socio-spiritual" to describe what is at once a social and spiritual phenomenon, linking an individual's lived social experience to that of a greater "transcendent order" (Wuthnow 2003:307).

³ I use the hybrid term "religio-spiritual" to describe what is simultaneously spiritual and religious, or what falls between the two. I have used these terms because congregants described experiences within First

that congregants from diverse backgrounds can take part in. “Spirituality [is] a state of being related to a divine, supernatural or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a supraréality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (Wuthnow 2003:307). First Grace’s socio-spiritual experience allows congregants to develop a spiritual community based on togetherness, and the minimization of socially constructed, normative boundaries of ethnicity. While the weight of historic differences is not ignored, these different histories have become less important to congregants as they have acted upon the opportunity to build a common future. Despite the persistence of racial segregation and discrimination in New Orleans’ neighborhoods, First Grace is a church where congregants of different ethnicities form friendships, defying the prevailing social order and drawing upon common religious and value-based identities to enact cultural change.

Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath disrupted the lives of returning residents and caused a prolonged sense of dislocation. For congregants at First Grace, rebuilding New Orleans required not simply moving back, but working to contribute to the construction of a new social landscape to meet the needs of a city largely in need. Even as the disaster exposed and exacerbated social problems already present in New Orleans, it allowed space for positive changes such as First Grace to come to fruition.⁴ Instituting positive change is a difficult process, and in New Orleans such changes are still few and far between. Hurricane Katrina permanently altered the built environment of New Orleans, but it also allowed residents to purposefully reconstitute their communities and social-

Grace’s services and community that transcend the traditional terminology of “spiritual” or “religious,” as these experiences were simultaneously religious and spiritual.

⁴ Disaster scholars recognize that there are, in the midst of suffering, some opportunities that arise for positive social change.

scapes, allowing some to subvert the historical pull of segregation. First Grace's growing membership may set the stage for other religious and social institutions to actively seek community-based integration rather than condone de facto segregation.

First Grace's recent formation and the city's ongoing rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina mean that practices and social interactions are not set in stone. Both the church and the city itself are 'open for impact,' which allows space for change to still occur. This set of circumstances has thus enabled the leadership and congregant leaders⁵ at First Grace to actively engage in setting the church's agenda as one that they see as fit for a "new" New Orleans: to be a service-oriented, open-minded and ethnically-blended congregant community whose social interactions and ministry activities reflect the heritages of many while building a common future. Like other paradoxes present in New Orleans, both in spite of and because of the mass and personal tragedies of Hurricane Katrina, First Grace has formed as a church for and of the city and all of its peoples, a silver lining to Katrina's dark cloud.

Overview of Thesis

At First Grace United Methodist Church (First Grace), I investigated what values are shared amongst congregants by examining congregants' behaviors and rhetoric surrounding the church's missions and purposes. I analyzed how congregants' statements and behaviors compare and contrast with the ethos of the church as stated by its leadership. I sought to understand how First Grace's congregant leaders are creating a

⁵ I use the term "congregant leader" to denote congregants who are involved in leadership roles in church ministries, volunteer for ministries and activities, and who spend time outside of church with one another participating in church-based service work. This term includes First Grace's live-in volunteers, who will be discussed later in the chapter.

sense of community at First Grace, and how this work fosters the unusual process of “ethnic transcendence.”

This thesis is written both analytically and creatively, and its organic structure is consistent with my understanding of how to explain the interconnected elements of First Grace in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans. I mix analytic and creative writing, along with bits of my poetry⁶ and visual representations of quantitative data in order holistically portray the broad range of experiences and information I took in while engaged in fieldwork.

In chapter two, I present the methodology I employed in this research. I used participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a survey, along with other methods. I also discuss methodological issues that pertain to my research. In chapter three I review New Orleans’ historical background, especially in relation to race and Methodism. By contextualizing New Orleans’ ethnic plurality, one can better understand the historical developments that transformed New Orleans’ three-tiered racial categories from their European-Latin roots to an American binary system of racial stratification. I examine the role of the church in African American communities, and the brief ascendancy of the mixed-race Methodist Episcopal Church in New Orleans. In addition, this chapter contains a meditation on my experience of engaging in fieldwork in contemporary New Orleans. In chapter four, I discuss First Grace’s ethnographic setting, which includes its creation story and background information about the church, its congregants and their practices. I introduce First Grace’s congregant leaders and its ministries and discuss the main components of services.

⁶ All poetry included in this work is my own.

In chapter five, I discuss the values that First Grace's leaders and congregants share. These uniting values include a desire to work toward the common good of the city, openness to different ways of being, acceptance of others' spiritualities, and celebration of life. In chapter six, I examine how First Grace's values are promoted through its invented traditions and institutional practices, and how ethnic transcendence is taking place because of these values. First Grace's invented traditions encourage all of its congregants to take part in the co-construction of the church's ethos, and these rituals allow space for congregants to build community. The analysis of chapter five contains a greater focus on what congregants and leadership *say*, and chapter six is more focused on what congregants and leadership *do*. Chapter six includes a question and answer session in which I address lingering issues related to First Grace. In chapter seven, I conclude with a reflection on what can be learned from First Grace, as communities impacted by disaster seek to rebuild in a socially proactive manner.

Chapter 2: Mixed Anthropological Methods

How do I know?

My senses tell me so.

How do they perceive?

Imperfectly through my beliefs.

What am I to make of the subjective?

Find comfort in ambiguity.

Research Background

I conducted cultural anthropological research at First Grace United Methodist church in Mid-City New Orleans, Louisiana.⁷ The congregation of First Grace was formed from two Methodist churches that merged on October 21, 2007, a little over two years after Hurricane Katrina flooded much of New Orleans in late August 2005. The church's name reflects its blended heritage: from First United Methodist and Grace United Methodist, First Grace United Methodist Church.

In a broader sense, I hoped to learn from this study how groups can engage in self-directed change when the city-wide status quo no longer exists and residents are subject to conditions beyond their control. Although social problems have both arisen and become intensified in New Orleans as a result of the hurricane's extensive damage and incomplete urban reconstruction, First Grace demonstrates that there can also be positive outcomes. The mindful merging of socially and ethnically distinct groups in the context of worship shows that given the opportunity, groups who desire and work toward social

⁷ This thesis provides the actual names of the churches where I conducted research, as well as congregant informants' first names. Informants were given the option to be identified by a pseudonym and none decided to do so. When quoting statements made by congregants that contain what I deem to be sensitive information, I do not identify the speaker.

change can stoke such change from the ashes of disaster conditions.

In this chapter, I discuss the anthropological methodology I used, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey. I also used GIS to create series of three maps of congregants' home locations throughout Orleans Parish, each focused on different aspects of their identities.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand what has motivated people to join and/or maintain membership in a congregation where aspects of identity that are often homogeneous at other churches are blended, like ethnicity and class. In this research, I chose to focus on congregants' values as proxy measures of what makes them feel a sense of belonging at multiethnic First Grace.

I sought to understand what values congregants hold in common that motivate them to attend such a church, and to what extent congregants' values are shared. Values are demonstrated in both observable behavior and verbal statements, and my observations of congregants' frameworks of values were formed by paying attention to both behavior and discourse. I inquired as to how the First Grace community was formed, and how members have constructed communities with one another despite the traditional divides of ethnicity and class.

As fieldwork progressed, my research questions became more specific: Does First Grace's ethnic diversity allow room for difference without detracting from congregants' sense of belonging? How does a merged church negotiate its congregants' varying worship preferences and diverse histories? What characteristics do First Grace's multiethnic leaders have in common with one another? By engaging in fieldwork I hoped

to find out more about the people who had chosen to be part of the rare phenomena of a multiethnic Protestant congregation. To do this, I employed a mixed methods approach.

Methodology

I received permission from Rev. Shawn, First Grace's head pastor, to conduct my research. I obtained housing within biking distance of First Grace, and proceeded to conduct fieldwork for the months of June and July 2009. My research at First Grace strongly relied on the bedrock of cultural anthropological methods, participant observation. I took extensive field notes at church services, suppers, meetings and social gatherings. I also interacted with First Grace's community as they engaged in various church-sponsored projects.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I relied heavily on the semi-structured interviews I conducted with consenting adult congregants.⁸ Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and relied on a general protocol with modifications depending on the individual or situation.⁹ I conducted a total of 33 semi-structured interviews with 30 individuals, including interviews with church leadership, congregant leaders, and those who attend services at First Grace but are not involved with its ministries. I audio recorded and transcribed all interviews. I conducted interviews with many of First Grace's intentional community members, a group of about 10 individuals (actual number fluctuates). These live-in church volunteers reside on the top floor of the

⁸ See appendix two for a list of interviewees and dates of interviews.

⁹ See appendix one for a general protocol of interview questions.

church in single room, dorm-style housing, and work for First Grace in exchange for their rooms.

Rev. Shawn introduced me to the congregation on my first Sunday in attendance and I used a sign-up sheet to allow willing informants to volunteer for interviews. Most study participants were recruited during face-to-face interactions. I used the snowball sampling method, whereby informants referred me to other informants. For each new potential participant, I secured that person's consent before conducting an interview. Rev. Shawn initially provided me with a list of congregants to contact in addition to those I recruited via the sign-up sheet, and those informants learned of the nature of the research via an introduction and oral briefing. Rev. Shawn's provision of informants was kind and helpful, but I also made sure to make contact with congregants who were less active in the church, allowing for the fullest possible range of opinions that I would collect.

Survey

After I completed in-depth interviews, I administered a short survey to 44 congregants¹⁰ based on salient topics that arose during interviews. The survey was a useful tool for verifying and challenging observations I had drawn and information I received during interviews. This survey has provided me with an additional dimension of insight, and in the end, quantitative support for several of my assertions about First Grace. Rev. Shawn approved the survey before I administered it, which ensured its content validity and that its terms were properly operationalized for its context.¹¹

¹⁰ The survey was administered in its two page form to 14 individuals on July 22, 2009 at First Grace's Supper and Study, and in its three page form to 30 individuals on July 26, 2009 after the 11:15 a.m. service. The two page form is the first two pages of the survey and the three page form includes the last page. The survey was completed by self-selected volunteer participants, and was not administered using scientific sampling methods.

¹¹ See appendix three for a summary of survey questions and answers, including a demographic list of who completed it.

This survey addressed aspects of self-identity, including religious and community membership, as well as spiritual fulfillment, personal values and a sense of belonging at First Grace. I asked questions about congregants' social networks and ministry/volunteer work in order to understand how the First Grace community is constructed.

GIS Maps of First Grace's Congregants throughout Orleans Parish

In addition to the opportunity to confirm or complicate data gathered from interviews and participant observation, one purpose in surveying congregants was to collect general demographic data about my congregant informants. I asked what street and block survey respondents reside on (i.e. 3700 block of Canal), and I used this information to create a set of three maps using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. The reader may reference these maps in appendices five through seven.

The first map reflects congregant distribution by ethnicity throughout Orleans Parish. This map demonstrates that congregants of different ethnicities are willing to travel from disparate locations throughout the city to attend First Grace, and that congregants of different ethnicities are distributed throughout the city, not coming from a single area or one neighborhood.

The second map shows how many Methodist churches each respondent passes on his or her way to First Grace, thus demonstrating how congregants choose First Grace over (sometimes several) other Methodist churches that may be closer to their homes. The third map reflects in its symbols both congregants' ethnicities and whether or not they lived in or near Orleans Parish before Hurricane Katrina. This map reveals that most of the surveyed population lived in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, and thus are likely to understand just how much the city has changed in its wake. By creating these

maps, I was able to visually demonstrate how congregants are drawn to the unique First Grace community.

Comparison to Other Methodist Churches in Greater New Orleans Area

In order to lend greater context to First Grace and to compare and contrast the church with other Methodist churches in the area, I attended Gretna United Methodist Church (UMC) in Gretna, LA as well as St. Matthews UMC in nearby Metairie, LA. Both churches were taking steps to increase the diversity of their congregations, according to Dr. Martha O., director of the Louisiana Conference Office of Multicultural Ministries and a black woman. I attended these services one Sunday with Dr. Martha O., Dr. Ellen and her husband. Dr. Ellen, who is white, is an expert informant on the history of Methodism, as she is a professor of Christian and Methodist History at a Seminary in a nearby state, and I met her while she was living in New Orleans for the summer to conduct her own research.

Limitations of the Study

This research was conducted over the period of two months, which did not allow enough time to become better acquainted with less active First Grace members, as well as more Hispanic/Latino/Spanish-speaking congregants. The congregants represented in this work mostly consist of the group I call “congregant leaders.” These congregant leaders conduct and participate in most of the church’s activities, and are not formal leaders but active members of the church’s ministries.

My sample was limited to only those congregants who volunteered to be interviewed. I interviewed black women, white women, white men and Hispanic men, but I was not able to conduct interviews with any black men. I regret that I was not able

to interview even one black man,¹² and I feel I could have done so if I had approached more men directly. Upon further reflection, I surmised that my position as a young white woman may have contributed to this dearth of male interview volunteers.

I received a list of Hispanic congregants to contact from Frank, a congregant leader who is married to Dr. Martha Ward.¹³ Frank's self-stated goal is to "break down barriers" between Hispanic congregants and other congregants. Frank's Panamanian-American nationality has allowed him to serve as an informal liaison to Spanish-speaking congregants, and he works with Reverend Oscar¹⁴ to minister to this population within First Grace. I attempted to contact all of the congregants on this list of about ten, but was only able to schedule an interview with one person on the list. It turned out that his wife attended First Grace, not him, and she wasn't available to meet. I interviewed two other Hispanic congregants and several bilingual (English and Spanish speaking) congregants, but this group is not the primary focus of this study. The language barrier prevents the full integration of Hispanic/Latino/Spanish-speaking congregants into the First Grace community. I will discuss this topic further in chapter six.

While I sought to understand how First Grace's multiethnic congregant community has constructed itself in the wake of disaster, my understanding of the geographic construction of this community is somewhat limited by constraining factors. First, I do not have data on how New Orleans' built environment pre- and post-Katrina has affected resettlement patterns, so I am not able to compare the ethnic composition of

¹² One young black man agreed to be interviewed, but we were unable to meet.

¹³ Dr. Martha Ward is a First Grace congregant and professor of cultural anthropology at University of New Orleans whose insights inform this work.

¹⁴ Reverend Oscar is Mexican man in his 40s who is a missionary pastor to the Spanish-speaking congregants at First Grace.

communities before and after Hurricane Katrina. Cultural inertia is a powerful force that can reconstitute individuals' and groups' practices even after a devastating event such as Hurricane Katrina, because despite the flood, the city's street layout remains the same, and thus the neighborhoods New Orleanians live in and the routes they take are often the same as they were pre-Katrina. It appears to me that the built environment has not thwarted the development of First Grace's new community, but I am not able to ascertain exactly how the built environment has either facilitated or hindered this process.

Reflections on Interviewing

I treated most occasions in which I was in the company of First Grace's congregants as opportunities for unstructured interviews. Bernard (2006) comments on the utility of unstructured interviewing for building rapport, since many people do not want to simply begin discussing personal experiences in a candid and insightful manner with a complete stranger. Taking time to be present, to make eye contact and small talk enabled me and my informants to become acquainted, even if by the end of the interview I knew more about my informants' lives than they knew about mine. Comfort can be built through smiles and small gestures, and warmth accrued over short periods of time. For most interviews, informants and I met at a local coffeehouse or at the church. I preferred the non-church setting but was willing to meet wherever was convenient or comfortable for my informant. Coffee houses provided the perfect venue for most of my interviews, since they are a neutral public yet private space for interaction to occur.

Although I had a semi-structured interview protocol,¹⁵ I modified my protocol slightly for each individual I interviewed, as I became less interested in some questions

¹⁵ See appendix one for a copy of my semi-structured interview protocol.

and more interested in others. For example, I asked every congregant I interviewed what three values they would ascribe to First Grace and its congregation. I asked variations of the question: “what values are most important here at First Grace?” and I would elicit stories that demonstrated those values in action.¹⁶

When I asked congregants their favorite part of attending First Grace, sometimes this would lead to a short answer (“the music!”) while other times the informant would elaborate on a moral message or idea. I noticed that informants’ favorite parts of services seem to reflect their individual personalities and interests, and that because services encompass so many traditions and interests, each congregant appreciates different elements of services a little bit differently. For example, one congregant who works with disenfranchised youth enjoys the children’s segment the most, while another congregant who studies scripture likes the sermons the most. Many informants cited the music and passing of the peace as favorite parts, as these elements of service encourage group participation, emotional communion, and community building.

I greatly enjoyed learning about my informants’ personal pasts. This component of each interview was fascinating, because it was the area of the interview most likely to reveal the “why” behind their First Grace attendance or membership. First Grace’s congregants come from very diverse backgrounds, but share a set of values that they practice in their everyday lives. When congregants told me about why they attend First Grace, their love for the church seemed to stem from disparate experiences that had led them to a common belief: that the community they live in should be constructed of New

¹⁶ See the end of appendix four, First Grace survey results, for a list of responses to this question.

Orleans residents from all walks of life, and that actively seeking this engagement is of core importance.

The process/experience of interviewing was different according to who each individual is, and what the individual wanted to tell me. Not every informant I interviewed was a dedicated congregant church member; some informants were not members or were not very involved with the church. Some informants had lived in New Orleans their whole lives, some were from the South but not New Orleans, and others had moved to the city after Hurricane Katrina. Most of my informants were congregant leaders, which affected the information I gathered and what I was exposed to while participant-observing at First Grace. While being around the most involved congregants of the church allowed me to be exposed to many of First Grace's happenings, I understand that not all congregants are as actively engaged as the congregant leaders with whom I spent the most time. This means that not all congregants necessarily share the church's values to the same extent as congregant leaders, who form the basis of this study, but I did conduct interviews with less involved congregants in an attempt to collect diverse perspectives on First Grace.

Chapter 3: Interaction, Segregation and Religion in Historical New Orleans

Introduction: Why is New Orleans Unique?

People believe two things about New Orleans. The first is that it is different from the rest of the United States....The second, related belief is that the city is decadent, and that its cultural distinctiveness is related to its reputation for tolerating, even encouraging indulgences of all varieties....there is ample historical evidence to support both of these popular beliefs. [Long 2004:1]

New Orleans is a subtropical American city located at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Since its inception in 1718 as a port for the French-controlled southern portion of the continent, New Orleans' geography and culture have been multiethnic. Passing from French to Spanish to American hands, and serving as an attractive port city for Europeans and Latin Americans, New Orleans belongs to a multitude of immigrant groups who have shaped its history. In addition to the primary contributions of the French and Spanish, many other groups who migrated to the area influenced the city's development, including Acadian, Haitian, Irish, German, Italian, Native American, Scandinavian, and West African immigrants. Often ignored by its French and Spanish colonial governments (Campanella 2007), the city's influxes of immigrants contributed to a demographic composition marked by diversity. By 1850, New Orleans was one of the most diverse cities in the U.S. Interaction provides a basis for culture change, and New Orleans' history is marked by interaction between many distinct groups.

In many ways, New Orleans is a celebration of syncretic blending, of old and new commingling. It is a place where traditions and ways of being have been creatively

blended as people from different nations have interacted over time in their new, shared home. New Orleans is different from the mostly agrarian, rural-rooted communities in the U.S. South by virtue of its cityhood (Lewis 2003), and from other Southern cities because of its history. Hewitt remarks that, like Tampa, Miami and El Paso, New Orleans is “in, but not of the South” (2001:15).

In this chapter, I trace New Orleans’ rise as an immigrant center and port city, and the city’s history of ethnic plurality. I outline the historical developments that transformed New Orleans’ racial categories from the more nuanced European system to an American system that insists on binary, oppositional categories of ascribed racial identity. I examine the role of the church in African American communities, as well as antebellum and post-Civil War Protestant worship patterns in the American South. I analyze the ascendancy and fall of the mixed-race Methodist Episcopal Church in New Orleans, and link this history to the formation of First Grace UMC in post-Katrina New Orleans. Building a congregation the mixed-race Methodist Episcopal Church could have only dreamed of in Reconstruction-era United States, First Grace is creating culture change by operating as a multiethnic church in a post-disaster city. This chapter concludes with a meditation on the cityscape of New Orleans, in order to better understand how a church like First Grace is both a result of and a contributor to the unique atmosphere of New Orleans.

The Port City’s Precarious Geography

As America’s second largest port, and for a time its largest (Lewis 2003), New Orleans has been both the mouth and (as some New Orleanians say) the urethra of the United States, the entrance to and exit from the rest of America’s cities. Post-Hurricane

Katrina New Orleans is being rebuilt from the pieces of a city of paradoxes on the edge of the Mississippi. “From the first, New Orleans has [had] a strained relationship with its environs, which seemed at once to guarantee and to cloud its future” (Kelman 2007:696).

In geographic terms, New Orleans’ *situation* is excellent but its *site* is unfavorable (Lewis 2003). *Situation* refers to the measurement of an area’s advantages relative to other places while *site* refers to a land’s particular placement. Sitting “ten to fifteen feet above sea level” (Lewis 2003:28), the Mississippi river’s level ensures that much of New Orleans lies beneath it. Human activities have contributed to New Orleans’ steadily sinking level, making the city susceptible to flooding. The Gulf of Mexico is a hotbed for hurricanes, and New Orleans has experienced throughout its history a cycle of devastation due to hurricane-induced flooding. Compared to other American cities, New Orleans’ physical growth has been limited by environmental factors.

Long before Hurricane Katrina wrecked New Orleans’ infrastructure and cultural landscape, the mighty Mississippi had been a constant concern for citizens. “The disjuncture between [the poor] site and [the excellent] situation in New Orleans has always generated anxiety, much of it centered on the city’s borders, especially the levees. Levees are supposed to form a boundary between the human and non-human worlds in New Orleans,” (Kelman 2007:697) but they haven’t always performed this job well. As early as the 18th century New Orleanians recognized the need to control the flooding of the Mississippi River in order to preserve the city’s built environment. Still, the city flooded several times throughout its history. “Even as New Orleanians struggled to remake the levee, another boundary proved as irksome. The backswamp confined the city to a thin strip of the Mississippi’s levee: the sliver by the river” (Kelman 2007:699).

During the city's first two hundred years, its residents settled on higher ground, which is about 15 feet above sea level (Lewis 2003).

The potent and unpredictable river is a force New Orleans has tried to tame, to appease, to live with and to embrace. The river pumps through the city with "economic lifeblood" (Kelman 2007:696), but it occasionally wipes away New Orleanians' efforts to build a stable infrastructure. Artificial levees are an important adaptation to New Orleans' unpredictable environment, yet they also impede the river's natural process of flooding and depositing the silt that provides higher ground. These levees now dominate the riverscape, barring the Mississippi from overflowing its banks. Thus the protection that levees afford does not come without a price: most of New Orleans is below sea level and sinking (Lewis 2003), and as Katrina demonstrated, at risk of flooding in the midst of hurricane-driven high tides.

The Mid-City area, where First Grace is located, is similar to a "shallow bowl" (Lewis 2003:28) whose center lies below sea level. The invention of the Wood pump in the 1913 allowed the Mid-City area to become inhabitable. Mid-City had previously been a swamp that fed into Bayou St. John, "a small, sluggish, but profoundly important stream" that provided boat access to New Orleans in the past (Lewis 2003:28). Much of the money and power in New Orleans today is still a product of river traffic, a result of the legacy of American dependence on its southern port. The city's economy shifted from shipping to tourism in the latter half of the 20th century (Lewis 2003); a change that is reflective of the economic shift from manufacturing to service that has taken place in post-industrial United States.

Race in New Orleans: A Creolized History

The city of New Orleans has always been multiethnic, and for its entire history, regardless of differing social statuses, people of different backgrounds have mixed in some way or another. In many ways the Crescent City's history is marked by paradox, and race is no exception, as New Orleans has been both multiethnic and segregationist. New Orleans' European colonization, demographic makeup, built environment, and geography, all contributed to the city becoming one of intermixture and cultural exchange.

"From 1718 to about 1810 New Orleans was a European city, both in physical form and human orientation" (Lewis 2003:39); this time span encompasses both French and Spanish rule. While under French rule, migration to the burgeoning city remained a trickle, as France's exclusionary policies hindered population growth in their overseas outpost (Lewis 2003). Lack of immigration led to labor shortages, which the French solved by importing slaves. "By the end of the 18th century more than half of the city's population was black" (Lewis 2003:41).

During the first decade of the 19th century the city experienced an influx of Haitian immigrants (Lewis 2003) who had fled their country's bloody fight for independence. Over 9,000 refugees from Saint Domingue immigrated to New Orleans, helping to re-inject Francophone lifeblood into New Orleans' culture (Campanella 2007). Freed American slaves also immigrated to the city in the mid to late 19th century.

In the early 1800s New Orleans' white Creoles,¹⁷ who were Catholic and French-speaking, lived throughout the city in close proximity to their slaves (Campanella 2007).

¹⁷ "The word 'Creole' is widely used in two quite different senses. It derived from the Spanish word *crillo*, 'a child born in the colonies'—according to John Chase....In this context, it came to designate

At the time, the city's infrastructure was mainly comprised of "superblocks" (Lewis 2003). Superblocks consisted of large, white-owned, street-facing houses arranged with slave (and later servant) quarters behind the mansions (Lewis 2003). Such an arrangement ensured that slave quarters would remain shrouded in the shadows behind the lush, ornate backyard gardens typical of New Orleans mansions, and the slaves always nearby. This proximity in an urban space allowed more frequent contact to occur between blacks and whites, thus making New Orleans the least spatially segregated city when compared to any other at the time (Lewis 2003).

An extremely important group of New Orleanians emerged from this interaction: Creoles of color. Creoles of color, or *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color), were a class of racially mixed individuals who were born of the unions between Latin slave owners and the slave women they took (sometimes forcibly) as their mistresses. As a group, Creoles of color were typically granted economic and educational resources by their colonist fathers, a position "unknown to persons of African descent living elsewhere in the United States" or the Caribbean (Bennett 2005:139). Many Creoles of color were well-educated and held property, and more than a few were wealthy. In European New Orleans, racial categorization could function as a proxy for class position, and Creoles of color were considered "above" black slaves in terms of class. The Catholic Church supported distinct rights for Creoles of color, thus reinforcing the idea that they were a distinct class of citizen (Bennett 2005). Creoles of color were afforded an array of rights in New Orleans before American political and cultural ascendancy.

native-born white Orleanians of Spanish and French ancestry. Over the years, however, the word took on broader meaning, to include anybody or anything that is native to New Orleans or is associated with traditional New Orleans" (Lewis 2003:5).

The racial hierarchy of New Orleans during European colonization placed Creoles of color on the middle rung of a tri-partite racial system. This prevailing belief of a color and class spectrum contrasted with the American “one drop,” dichotomous view of race, where anyone with traceable African ancestry was likely to be assigned to the lower-status group. In the American system, even if a black person was technically “free,” she or he still had few rights relative to whites. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans migrated to New Orleans, slowly altering the character of the city. By the late 1800s, Protestantism, American ideas of race, commerce and the English language had penetrated the ethos of the city (Campanella 2007). In terms of race categories, New Orleans had moved from a tri-partite hierarchy to a biracial hierarchy.

The 1896 Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson*¹⁸ upheld “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites, and represented a critical turning point in the Americanization of the city. As a result of this legislation, Creoles of color lost many of the rights and privileges they were accustomed to (Campanella 2007). In addition, the Catholic churches that served New Orleans became segregated after generations of combined worship (Bennett 2005), and Jim Crow laws subjected non-white New Orleanians to a host of oppressive practices.

“Once considered unique for its racial liberalism by both residents and visitors,” around the turn of the 20th century, “New Orleans’s racial order [became] more typical than distinctive in the American South” (Bennett 2005:101). Yet Creole identity is alive and well in New Orleans, and it is part of a spirit of interaction that has always

¹⁸ Interestingly, Homer Plessy was a New Orleanian Creole of color who, during his lifetime, saw the erosion of non-whites’ rights in New Orleans. With the backing of the Citizen’s Committee of New Orleans, he purposely rode on a “whites-only” train in order to incite the infraction that would help overturn the extant laws (Bennett 2005). Unfortunately his case only served to further entrench the discriminatory laws.

characterized the city's inhabitants, despite racial discrimination and segregation. First Grace is working to bridge the *similarities* between people who may have previously been taught by society that they are somehow inherently different, leaving room in its community for diversity of belief and being.

Geographic Expansion Institutionalizes Segregation in New Orleans

During the 1920s the Wood pump, a 1913 invention that removed standing water from sub-sea-level parts of the city, “was a powerful agent to accelerate racial segregation in New Orleans” (Lewis 2003:67). The white population of New Orleans relocated nearer to Lake Pontchartrain during this time period, and ‘white flight’ to higher ground continued into the second half of the 20th century:

By mid [20th] century it seemed New Orleans had finally sorted its spaces: the city here and nature there. Which allowed for another kind of segregation: racial and socioeconomic....Bound to the sliver of the levee for two centuries, the city had offered little room for exclusive enclaves.... By the 1960s...elevated freeways connected the city with suburbs, many of which had been built on drained land. New Orleans stratified, with the poor of all races and people of color of all classes often occupying lowlands in the city while many middle-class whites, who could afford to do so, fled town for new developments in the surrounding suburbs. [Kelman 2007:702-703]

New Orleans became a primarily black city by the 1950s, as whites moved from the urban interior to outlying suburbs. In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in public places, including schools, reversing the “separate but equal” dictate of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Many whites chose to move away from the city rather than desegregate, a trend which gained momentum during the latter half of the 20th century (Lewis 2003). Those with money and power have always occupied the spaces least prone to flooding in New Orleans, while economically disadvantaged populations have been left to live in the least desirable areas

(Hirsch 2009). The city's expansion further entrenched this form of structural violence. Inhabitants who lack economic assets and social access are placed at further risk by being relegated to the lowest-lying parts of the city.

During the mid 20th century the city's growth was characterized by strife and chaos: New Orleans' port industry faced a long and slow economic decline, and more distant suburbs exploded (Lewis 2003). Tourism arose in the 1960s and 70s as a new source of income for the city, and New Orleans remains a tourism-oriented economy to this day.

Lewis (2003) writes of today's New Orleans that the city cannot improve unless fundamental problems are corrected: "racial discrimination and intolerance, wretched public schools, miserable housing, and grinding poverty, especially among black citizens" (171). While this list of issues was written pre-Katrina, the social problems it names are more achingly prominent today: "All these problems are intimately related, and all are deeply rooted in the past" (Lewis 2003:171). Just as the reconstruction of infrastructure after Katrina should be purposefully undertaken to suit the city's extant and future needs, so should social reconstruction. Hurricane Katrina did not cause many of the city's current issues, but the aftermath of the disaster aggravated and exposed New Orleans' problems.

Segregated Worship in America and the Historical Precedent for Multiethnic Congregations

"If we want to fully understand race relations in the United States, we must understand the role of religion. If we want to understand religion in the United States, we must understand its core organizational form—the congregation" (Emerson 2006:6). The

congregation is the social body of worship that can serve as a basis for community-building, if the group is seeking to grow its community. But what if American congregations only include one ethnic identity? In the U.S., congregations of all faith backgrounds are overwhelmingly comprised of single ethnic groups, even though the U.S.'s religious faiths contain adherents of all ethnic backgrounds. According to Emerson (2006), religious organizations are the most racially segregated institutions in U.S. life, and the larger a denomination, the more likely it is to be segregated.

Over 9 out of 10 Christian congregations is racially homogenous (Emerson 2006), which means that at least 80% of the congregation is comprised of one racial group. Protestant congregations are also much less diverse than the neighborhoods where they are located--approximately 10 times less racially diverse (Emerson 2006). In the United States, 55% of Americans self-identify as belonging to a religious congregation, a relatively high figure when compared to other post-industrial nations (Emerson 2006).

Segregated worship and congregational community membership is made possible by congregations' volunteer nature (Emerson 2006). Religious congregations are "mediating institutions" (Emerson 2006:5), or groups that collectively function as both buffers and facilitators of communication between individuals/families and larger societal bodies, smaller interest groups and greater organizational structures, or between the public and private spheres.

In short, "congregations are the places where Americans most often go to seek the meaning of life, to worship, to find direction, and to receive social support" (Emerson 2006:7), so many seek out groups that they feel comfortable with, groups whose collective identity most closely approximates their own. In the case of First Grace,

belonging is not engendered by a homogeneous ethnic identity, but by a shared system of values and goals that are imbued with greater meaning in the particular context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

The ethnic and socioeconomic constitution of a congregation can reflect deeply-rooted social boundaries and norms, as well as the extant values of congregants. Congregational demographics can serve as an indicator of who is comfortable with whom, who considers whom their peers, neighbors, family, friends. Congregations can reflect community membership and participation, and communities of historically differential power levels are potentially reconstituting in post-Katrina New Orleans. If communities are reformed in ways that reflect ethnic boundaries as still prevalent, the same injustices and inequalities of opportunity will be reproduced, and continue to exert influence in New Orleans. Religious organizations are America's largest volunteer organizations (Emerson and Smith 2001), a reality that affects which projects and causes are taken up, and which are left by the wayside. In New Orleans' rebuilding phase, congregational activities have the potential to make a significant impact.

Protestant Churches as Community Centers in African American Life

African American Protestant churches have served as a center of community for many black Americans, and have played an important role in spiritual, social and political realms. The church has provided a space for African Americans to lead, a space where their voices are heard, where the congregation is comprised of relatives, neighbors and friends. These churches, especially in the South, concomitantly function as sites of worship, political forums for intra-community discussion, debate, and organization, and

as social gathering places. The African American church can serve as a community focal point, and its forms of Christianity are a source of socialization for many.

Racially homogeneous worship communities have afforded black Americans a certain level of protection in the past when race relations were more markedly unequal, but these segregated communities can amplify the impact of hegemonic forces.

Segregated congregations have allowed whites who attend white churches to consolidate their social networks as blacks who attend black churches have, and thus whites are more likely to maintain their privileged access to power.

Americans have often banded together under the auspices of the church to express themselves not only spiritually but in other ways. Aid societies and social gatherings are often based out of the church. While white Americans move freely and easily through the different sectors of a society that they themselves dominate, black Americans have a history of greater mutual reliance—an adaptive response to past (and present) exclusionary patterns.

For example, Browne (2007) found that, among an aggregated family group of over 150 individuals in St. Bernard Parish, outside of New Orleans, receiving federal aid was a last resort for large families who had been relying upon one another in times of need or scarcity for generations. Katrina destroyed the family's ability to mobilize their collective resources, disabling them from helping one another as they would have in the past. This new reality contradicted with their previous pattern of mutual aid. The family has displayed remarkable resilience as its members remained in limbo, waiting for federal compensation for their losses (Browne 2007). Their views of the economically supportive role of family reflect a tendency similar to what other researchers have

documented. Stack (1974) demonstrated how African Americans can belong to generalized reciprocity-based networks of exchange.

African American and Anglo-American Protestantism are often practiced differently, even as whites and blacks claim mutual membership in assorted Protestant denominations. W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American sociologist and social philosopher, wrote extensively about African American forms of religion in the United States. Du Bois was ambivalent toward the multiple functions of African American churches; he observed these churches to be community institutions that encompassed explicitly Christian as well as non-Christian functions (Evans 2007).

As an Ivy League-educated Northerner, Du Bois was different from “common” black people at the time, and held then-popular religious revivals in low regard, along with African American spiritual displays he deemed too out-of-control and emotional (Evans 2007). Du Bois’ ambivalence is probably a direct result of his dual identities of black man and white institutional scholar, and his attempts to reconcile the two objectively in his work may appear ethnocentric to today’s observer. Savage (2003) argues that “even when Du Bois acknowledged the centrality of the church to black life, including black political life, his greatest ideological consistency was seeing that fact not as a strength but as an impediment to be overcome or managed” (236–237).

Differences Between Antebellum Black and White Protestant Beliefs and Practices

Black Christianity was distinctive from white Christianity in the pre-Civil War period in four ways, according to Dvorak (1991): ritual, myth and symbols, leadership, and ethics. Blacks were forced to sit separately from whites during then-popular revivalist camp meetings, and thus were able to foster a sense of community amongst

themselves during these rituals. “Being asked to go last—together—to the Lord’s table would reinforce the impression” that they were one group (Dvorak 1991:21). Blacks who worshipped in mixed churches with whites became a group unto themselves, as they were always the ‘other’ inside of the larger congregational body. While they may have been immersed, they certainly were not swallowed.

Secondly, blacks’ sermon styles differed from whites’ sermon styles. Many antebellum black preachers were illiterate; subsequently they had to memorize their sermons. Black sermons differed from those of whites in their use of call-and-response form, as well as repetition for emphasis. Repetition and other poetic devices, such as rhyme or alliteration, facilitate preachers’ memorization of sermons, and congregants were moved by the use of these powerful rhetorical practices (Dvorak 1991). Black audiences were much more likely to verbally express their approval, or to shout when moved to do so (Dvorak 1991). Many Protestant Christian sermons today use call-and-response as a form of congregant participation and expression, and First Grace is no exception. At First Grace, congregants are free to vocalize their sentiments during services, and occasionally some do.

Dvorak (1991) draws attention to the differences between the content of white and black preachers’ sermons in the antebellum period, and how these differences articulate their contrasting philosophies of leadership. Pro-slavery white preachers cited the few lines of scripture that supported their assertions that slaves should obey their masters. While white preachers speaking to black audiences would emphasize the respective roles of slave and master, and how blacks who honor their masters by being obedient are honoring God, black preachers speaking to black audiences did not choose to emphasize

those messages. Black preachers could identify with their audiences, which granted them more charismatic weight. In addition, antebellum black preachers did not have the opportunity to earn money so “an urgent sense of mission, not money, motivated the black preacher” (Dvorak 1991:38).

Biblical ethical emphases differed for black preachers speaking to black audiences. Dvorak discusses how “conversion itself was experienced as liberation” (1991:23); stories of Biblical liberation were cherished by blacks because of their role in the ‘peculiar institution.’ The Exodus narrative, Dvorak (1991) asserts, was heralded by black Christians because of its resonance with their situation of slavery. If Moses and his people could be delivered from slavery by God, so could American slaves. While a white Christian could interpret freedom from bondage as a symbolic freeing from earthly sin and concern, a black Christian could interpret this story literally, and hold the tale in his or her heart as a source of faith; a wellspring of hope for a better future.

Black antebellum Christians held different views than white antebellum Christians in other ethical realms (Dvorak 1991). While salvation in Methodism is an individual matter, blacks were engaged in a more collective mindset when it came to ethics and ethical breaches (Dvorak 1991). Many slaves interpreted duty to God and duty to master as two separate entities, which, if known by whites at the time, would have been much to their chagrin. The sin of stealing was, for slaves, broken down into two categories, stealing and taking. For blacks enmeshed in the cruel institution of slavery, taking food out of hunger from one’s own master was permissible, while taking food or other items or from another slave or a white was stealing, and was therefore forbidden.

Between these functional ethical determinations and the other adaptive and resistant practices that slaves developed, black Christianity became an expression of a worldview much different than that of whites' Christianity. Black "double-consciousness," as articulated by DuBois (1903) began during slavery as a way for blacks to comply enough with white authority to survive, while expressing themselves and sharing their hidden feelings only with other fellow blacks who could understand.

Black Christians often focused on different Christian mythology and symbols than white Christians. Jesus' endurance of suffering was a source of comfort for black antebellum Christians. If Jesus Christ was able to bear the weight of the world's sins, then slaves could endure the supremely degrading and grating hardships of living every day in bondage. Faith that they would be rewarded for their patient suffering at the end of days had the potential to increase the intensity of religious fervor for those living under daily duress.

First Grace has a variety of slave anthems in its musical repertoire. I discuss the music of First Grace at greater length in chapter six, but it is important to note here that these songs often revolve around themes of freedom, and the origins of these songs lie with the slaves who sought freedom in conversion, faith and worship. While less literally significant for First Grace's congregants, the theme of freedom is still an extremely important one today, and the melodies and lyrics of these songs resonate powerfully with many congregants. First Grace, as an ethnically blended congregation, is able to retain in its sanctified space a collective sense of inclusion and belonging that encourages freedom of expression. This allows white and black Methodists to honor their traditions so that both histories are respected while building a common future.

The Post-Civil War Racial Schism in American Protestant Worship

In 1851, joint worship predominated in American Protestantism: “participation was dominant over exclusion in ritual” (Dvorak 1991:48). After the Civil War, separate worship arose organically, as the hegemony of the Old South’s slavery-based economy crumbled. Newly free black Americans left the established order for self-created worship environments that promised to be new and better. By the end of 1866 roughly half of the four million newly freed African Americans had left mixed churches to form their own congregations (Emerson 2006). “Southern” Christian branches, including Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist groups in Louisiana, Georgia, and Tennessee lost almost all their black members during the Reconstruction (Bennett 2005:33).

During the Reconstruction era African Americans exercised agency by forming churches in which they were in control of their own worship practice. Dvorak (1991) asserts it was not outside influence but the ex-slaves themselves who wanted to worship separately. In a detailed examination of the post-Civil War process of Protestant segregation, Dvorak (1991) states that historians have long attributed the separation to causes that do not fully account for why segregation took hold in Protestant denominations. The causes most historians give for the split are white pressure on blacks to worship separately, and black desire for equal status and autonomy in church worship (Dvorak 1991). Pope (1947), for instance, theorized that exclusively white churches have operated as segregating institutions, and exclusively black churches formed in response to that segregation. Dvorak (1991) argues that the historiography of this situation is not well-grounded in historical realities as experienced by the subjective actors who

participated in this church-forming and splitting, and that traditional explanations reflect the concerns of the observer's culture.

Parallel to Emerson's (2006) belief that those who wish to understand race in America must understand religion, those who wish to understand the process of racial separation in Protestant worship during this time period must understand how "black Christians' surge toward self separation [was their way of] acting on their own distinctive appropriation of Christianity" (Dvorak 1991:2). Black spiritual expressions differed in practice from white spiritual expressions, and Dvorak attributes these different modes of worship as primarily responsible for black Americans' establishment of their own churches and denominations (1991). Dvorak highlights black Christians' agency (1991) in order to demonstrate that worship practice, not political inequality, was what drove blacks away from white churches.

Antebellum Methodism in America

Methodism is a Protestant form of Christianity founded in the mid-1700s by John Wesley, a British former Anglican, along with his brother Charles. Wesley and his disciples brought Methodism to the U.S. around the time of the Revolutionary War, and many individuals contributed to the spread of the Methodist faith in the U.S. Wesley rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, and held that the only sacraments are those performed by Christ: baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion (Haskins 1992). "Marriage and confirmation are revered," but are not considered sacraments by Methodists (Haskins 1992:10).

Methodists are known for their central focus on good works and social responsibility, and tend to be charitable and socially progressive (Haskins 1992).

Methodist worship has been designated revivalist and conversion-oriented, the preaching biblically-based and “enthusiastic,” and Methodist hymns considered “stirring” (Dvorak 1991:46). Methodists then (and now) strove toward self- and societal-improvement. Wesley believed all would be equal in heaven, and that no matter one’s race or station at birth, all are capable of achieving salvation. As Dvorak (1991) explains, separatist practices in revival-based churches were not theological, as all were seen as equal once converted. Instead, separatism was a reflection of the prevailing social customs of the time, customs which seem to have outweighed the prevailing theological belief in Christian equality.

Methodism in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era South

“Neither theology nor practice alone but rather the tension between the two formed the center of religious experience for black Southerners” (Bennett 2005:32).

“We have to mix in heaven. Better get acquainted here.” (Northern Methodist Episcopal congregation member quoted in Bennett 2005:34).

The Reconstruction era was one characterized by confusion, as Americans were burdened with the arduous task of rebuilding in a new and uncertain social and economic environment. After emancipation, newly freed slaves sought education and community, and were charged with the complicated task of creating new lives in indifferent or often hostile environments. Christian worship and identity had been a way for blacks both to create and maintain group cohesion while still slaves, and upon emancipation it served as a building block for creating and maintaining communities of mutual support and exchange.

Methodism has a long and divided history in the American South. Before emancipation, the American Methodist church was divided over the righteousness of slavery. In 1844, the Methodist church in the U.S. split into Northern Methodist (also known as Northern Methodist Episcopal) and Southern Methodist branches over the issue of slavery. “The relationship between Northern and Southern white Methodists was exacerbated by the northern church’s targeting the black population for recruitment into its fold. The northern church’s activity angered southern white Methodists...” (Dvorak 1991:64). Northern Methodist leaders collaborated with Southern black leaders after the war to gain members and expand their reach.

What is now the United Methodist Church (UMC) merged from its component branches in 1939, and some forms of Methodist-based practice are not and have never been housed under the authority of the UMC. How American Methodists in the past, particularly in New Orleans, have approached the issue of race has set the precedent for how it is viewed in the Methodist church today.

The Reconstruction-Era Methodist Episcopal Church

New Orleans has been, throughout its history, a cityscape filled with religious-spiritual people of many persuasions, and religious groups can both reflect and shape the prevailing social norms. While Catholicism has historically dominated the city both politically and socially, Protestantism, as the second most populous form of Christianity in New Orleans, has a deep-rooted history there, as it does in the rest of America.

The Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) church is an interracial branch of Methodism that gained followers in New Orleans after the Civil War during Reconstruction. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MEC,S) was a whites-only branch, one of several

Methodist branches that operated during the Reconstruction era. From the 1870s onward, some of these Methodist groups formed exclusively for African Americans to meet the spiritual needs of black New Orleanians.

In an in-depth examination of interracial Methodism in New Orleans, Bennett acquaints readers with the story of the post-Civil War interracial sect of Methodists.

“By 1865, the northern [M.E.] church was a villain in southern eyes on three distinct counts: it had forced the North-South schism in 1844 over the issue of slaveholding Bishop Andrew; it had unlawfully and un-Christainly seized churches and properties that rightfully belonged to the MEC,S,; and it now brazenly was gathering black congregations into affiliation and in some locales was even permitting worship practices that smacked bitterly of social equality.” (Bennett 2005:107).

Reconstruction-era whites had a vested interest in controlling blacks, and religious expression was a significant vestige of their attempts. Dvorak argues that churches with separate galleries and entrances for whites and blacks “put each southern Christian in his or her place” (1991:18). After the Civil War, blacks worked quickly to replace the old order with a new one that would be more advantageous to themselves; after surviving the chaotic war atmosphere, they first sought to take care of and reunite with their families, then to obtain paid work, and education. Education soon became a primary concern, with literacy at its center (Dvorak 1991). Literacy would allow black Christians to read the Bible for themselves, an act that holds great power. The M.E. church helped former slaves who joined their ranks in their efforts toward better lives, and soon gained many more black members.

M.E. church members in New Orleans believed that their church “would be the soothing salve to heal the nation’s racial blisters.” (Bennett 2005:12). “Nowhere in the land does the battle rage more hotly,” Methodist Episcopal preacher Gilbert Haven

declared in 1877 about New Orleans (cited in Bennett 2005:12). M.E. church members in New Orleans managed to live their vision for about twenty years, but the 1890s saw a reactionary movement that derailed their efforts toward unity. White clergy focused their efforts on ministering to the new waves of French, German, Italian, and Scandinavian immigrants (Bennett 2005), which proved to be to the detriment of African Americans. As northern leadership sought to reconcile with the Southern Methodist branch, blacks became increasingly marginalized within the M.E. church (Bennett 2005).

The 1890s saw the M.E. church's goals of racial unity placed on a backburner so that the church could gain a stronger southern white following (Bennett 2005). The church's operating budget came more from Northern donors than Southern (Bennett 2005), and a shift in services exposed white M.E. members' motives to have a political undercurrent. In the past, "racially mixed organizations combined the concerns of African Americans with the power of white members to create an effective lobby for racial equality" (Bennett 2005:43). Yet by the 1890s, in order to appease "recalcitrant" (Bennett 2005:40) whites, the church had to cater to their needs and interests. The M.E. church thus shifted its focus from African American-centered initiatives to place a greater emphasis on white Southerners and their needs. In this way the pendulum swung from one group to the other; all the while the dividing line remained conspicuously present.

At the time, blacks were often disenfranchised due to national laws that sought to exclude them by requiring literacy or money to vote, and violent white mobs were on the rise. The 1890s was a brutal decade for African Americans in the South, as segregation pervaded in every sphere, and the Crescent City was no different. If the process of abolishing legally-sanctioned segregation in the 1950s and 1960s made formal strides

toward the yet-to-be-reached ideal of equality of opportunity in America, the practical reality of ‘white flight’ left cities without their wealth and business base, and urban black poverty increased. Covert racism still exists (Bonilla-Silva 2006), but is not always apparent in still-segregated neighborhoods.

Today’s United Methodist Church has annual conferences both for the country and the conference, which are the units of organization. The Louisiana Conference, for example, coincides with the state boundaries of Louisiana (this is not always the case). The M.E. church briefly instituted racially mixed conferences in 1880s, which was unheard of at the time, but after these mixed conferences ended they did not reappear again until the latter half of the twentieth century (Bennett 2005). Louisiana’s conference is the only one in America to never in its history vote in favor of racially divided annual conferences. The predominately black membership who strove for integration is the source of this vote (Bennett 2005).

Multi-Ethnic Protestant Congregations in America Today

Despite the achievements of the former M.E. church, over 100 years later the racial divide still characterizes America’s congregations, as evidenced by Emerson’s finding “that only 5% of Protestant congregations can be classified as multiracial” (2006:39). This figure is both surprising and predictable in contemporary America. “Well into the twentieth century, the M.E. church was the only substantially biracial Protestant denomination.” (Bennett 2005:15). M.E. church members in New Orleans tried to transcend segregation through their mixed model, which was revolutionary in the social context of the time and place, even though their actual congregations were not mixed. This precedent makes First Grace both a natural extension of the progress past

Methodist congregations have made, as well as a new development in the slow but ongoing movement toward a multiethnic, power-balanced society.

The fact that M.E. churches were denominationally mixed yet congregationally segregated is not one that should be overlooked. The rhetorical and theological emphasis on equality was rare in its context, but even at the liberal M.E. church blacks and whites didn't participate in the same congregational communities. In New Orleans, where the former 'superblock' structure (Lewis 2003) facilitated more mixing between races than in other southern cities, congregations were still racially homogeneous. Although African Americans were subjected to Jim Crow-imposed segregation in everyday life, the M.E. church's racially mixed Annual Conference gave blacks some degree of power within the decision-making structure of the church.

New Orleans' post-Katrina circumstances that led to the creation of ethnically mixed First Grace in some ways parallel Reconstruction-era developments in both the city and the American South. Social and economic cooperation across ethnic groups has been necessary in both time periods in order for proactive rebuilding to occur, and both situations allowed space for new practices, relations and attitudes to emerge from the rubble. While the M.E. church's accomplishments were compromised by the obstinacy of Jim Crow laws in the south, over 120 years later many of their goals have reached fruition in America. Yet their main tenet, racial equality in all realms, remains elusive. The social atmosphere at the time did not allow M.E. congregants to be part of mixed congregations, and aside from First Grace, the majority of today's congregations continue this tradition of segregation. First Grace's multiethnic congregation is experiencing

growing success as a forced unsettling has allowed some New Orleanians to choose social change.

Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards. Though race related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race. It is an issue we have never been at ease with and given our nation's history this is in some ways understandable. And yet, if we are to make progress in this area we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us. But we must do more....This is our duty and our solemn obligation." [Eric Holder, speech at the Department of Justice African American History Month Program, Feb 18th 2009, quoted in Chicago Tribune]

New Orleans is a city whose constructs of ethnicity and religion have been both fluid and contested due to its multiple cultural contributors. Within this context, "black and white [M.E.] church members emphasized a shared space constructed upon a common religious identity that made room for racial differences" (Bennett 2005:27). It has been over 100 years since the M.E. church first attempted to break down racial stratification through congregational membership. First Grace is the embodiment of the wishes of the Reconstruction-era M.E. church, and is a multiethnic congregation not just on paper but in worship and fellowship. By emphasizing what congregants have in common over socially-constructed differences, First Grace follows in the ideological footsteps of the M.E. church, yet First Grace's community is one that M.E. congregants never experienced in their lifetimes. First Grace's multiethnic congregation allows members room to express their different individual and collective identities that stem from personal pasts and historic contexts, all in the name of a larger spiritual unity that renders many of these differences superficial to the congregation.

Conclusion: It's Good to Be Alive: Reflections on the Cityscape of Contemporary New Orleans

*Downpouring rain.
Full mug of coffee. Thick chicory.
Tropical scents, soil steaming
from the streets.
The rivulets pooling, slipping
into cracks,
the collective streams.*

I wrote the above lines while taking refuge in a coffee shop during a mid-summer monsoon-like rainstorm. When I wasn't engaged in fieldwork with the First Grace community, I spent my time moving throughout the city of New Orleans. While I was there for only two months, my experience gave me a taste of the city's gritty beauty that left me hungry for more.

To me, New Orleans seemed tightly knit for its diversity. Several times I witnessed interactions that evidenced the city's concentric community circles, communities that are both discrete and highly overlapping. The socially prominent in New Orleans are often part of several different groups, a behavior I observed amongst several congregants at First Grace. Dr. Martha W. notes the New Orleans phenomenon of an expansive, interlinked community:

You could find yourself at the Windsor Court last night, and Hagar's House this morning, and in the 9th Ward this afternoon and at a fancy restaurant tonight. I mean in 24 hours, you could [do all this], without traveling very many miles in each direction...and you're not in a foreign place, you're not in a different place, you're not out of your routine.... [interview, July 24, 2009]

This phenomenon that Dr. Martha W. describes speaks to the tendency of many New Orleanians to move seamlessly through radically different social environments, quite at home in each. This characteristic of flexible group membership can be associated with Creole culture, and the First Grace congregant community shares this trait. Community

fluidity makes New Orleans the kind of place where you can attend a voodoo ceremony on a bridge over Bayou St. John and run into a couple who attends your church. No one thinks twice about it, especially because it has been historically common for New Orleanians to participate in multiple religio-spiritual systems. It is this sense of socio-spiritual flexibility that is present at First Grace, a church with an open character in a city known for its openness. First Grace's ability to draw congregants from neighborhoods across the city enables the church to construct a more representative community, one that contains individuals who have experienced different facets of city life.

New Orleans is the kind of place where you're on the corner with your friends well into the early morning, between destinations, never realizing that the between place where you are is the space where your journey has taken you, where you need to be. You've eaten late-night gourmet and danced to a soul-stretching jazz infusion. Walking along the pier, you and your group conversed with locals and those whose boats were just passing through.

You've watched people pass who are wearing elaborate costumes as though they were ordinary tee shirts and jeans in other locales, for no occasion but to honor the feeling. These costumes refract the roles of their wearers; their identities are illuminated by being enshrouded. You've seen sides of yourself and others that have never been before, but were just borne of old ingredients, like a stew made of what's left in the kitchen. In the sweltering night you see fresh expression floating from bodies like spirit smoke. The air is perfumed with debris and savory release.

Just when you think it couldn't get any better, that you couldn't experience anything more novel, you do. You and your friends wish aloud that the ice cream street

vendor was open, but alas, the metal curtain is sealed. Until, in an instant, it is not. The window suddenly opens, and there stands an ethereal girl with a pink cotton candy wig on. Her sprightly laugh accompanies the flick of a light switch as she asks “Hey y’all, who wants some *ice cream*?!” You squeal with delight, the well-ingrained Pavlovian response you’ve had since the days when twinkling music signaled the chance to run outside, barefoot on blacktop, to trade your grubby money for a sweet cool tongue.

Like other paradoxes present in New Orleans, it is not uncommon to find a warmly lit, fully-restored home adjacent to a condemned wreck, its dark windows shaded with detritus left by Katrina. These blighted buildings were once full of laughter and familiar voices, now only echoes of a submerged past. Some New Orleanians don’t have the means to rebuild, or they’ve been forced by circumstances to leave their land. So many residents who evacuated were subsequently restricted from returning by the bureaucratic red tape of disaster aftermath. Too many residents didn’t receive enough compensation to rebuild their lives at home again. Tensions between socioeconomic and ethnic groups in the city still run strong, and are discordant notes that mar New Orleans’ melody. The violence that has occurred in New Orleans after Katrina is an urgent reminder that the city is still stratified, and that its citizens are still experiencing strife, shared to different extents. First Grace’s community is united in its collective aim to heal their wounded city, to polish until shining a place whose luster is reflected in their open eyes.

Chapter 4: First Grace in the New Orleans Context



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Introduction: How Did First Grace Come to Be? A Reconstructed Creation Myth

It would be nearly impossible to recount the many versions of the merger between Grace and First churches that I heard while conducting fieldwork, since so many people were involved in the year-long “courtship” process, and different narratives emphasize different aspects. Congregant leaders in both congregations facilitated the merger, and are largely responsible for the growth that First Grace continues to experience three years after the official merge on October 21, 2007. In this chapter I construct a creation narrative by drawing upon several accounts given by church leadership and congregant leaders. I recount the role of Reverend Shawn, First Grace’s head pastor,¹⁹ and introduce First Grace’s intentional community. Next I outline and discuss the components of a “typical” service at First Grace. I then summarize the ministries and practices that cement the growing community relationships at First Grace.

Grace UMC, one of the two churches that merged to form First Grace, was founded in 1852. A traditionally black church, Grace UMC had experienced mergers with other black churches over its long, proud history. Before Hurricane Katrina, Grace UMC’s aging community of congregants was dwindling. Grace UMC’s sanctuary was severely damaged by flooding from Katrina, and the church was offered a sizeable insurance sum of approximately \$800,000 to restore their building, according to informants. Mending the sanctuary would have been an expensive and arduous process to undertake, so the congregation continued to hold services in their educational building

¹⁹ First Grace used to have an assistant pastor named Rev. LeKisha who was a black woman, and at the time I conducted fieldwork Rev. LeKisha was leaving First Grace for another congregation that she had been assigned to by the United Methodist Church organization. As a missionary pastor Rev. Oscar serves First Grace’s Hispanic and Spanish-speaking congregants. Currently there are no black pastors at First Grace, nor are there any pastors who are women.

while the future of their church remained in limbo. Grace UMC did not have to rebuild their sanctuary, as an opportunity came along that allowed congregants to continue to worship together while growing their community.

First UMC, located about a mile from Grace UMC, was founded in 1825 as the city's first Methodist church. The First UMC that existed before Hurricane Katrina was a result of two historical mergers, one in 1956 with Canal Street Methodist and the second in 1968 with Evangelical United Brethren Church. First UMC was a predominately white church in 2005 when its sanctuary was inundated with 5 feet of floodwater during Hurricane Katrina. The flooding badly damaged First UMC, but the building was not beyond repair. First UMC received an insurance sum comparable to what Grace UMC received to aid in their rebuilding efforts. When First UMC opened its doors again one year after Katrina, on Aug 27, 2006, it was a "sad and scary time" said Jennie, who moved to the city to help restore First UMC. The empty, dank building was in need of restoration.

According to Dr. Ellen (interview, June 2, 2009), a historian of Methodism who has conducted research in New Orleans, around 90 church buildings in Louisiana were damaged by Hurricane Katrina--some destroyed, while others remained structurally intact. Around 6 months after the storm, The United Methodist Church's Louisiana District Bishop William W. Hutchinson appointed Rev. Shawn to serve eight United Methodist churches as pastor in what was then called a "mission zone." A mission zone is a temporary unit of ministration that is formed during a crisis, according to Dr. Ellen (interview, June 2, 2009).

Rev. Shawn, who is white, served as pastor at First UMC, Grace UMC, and six other churches, with the assistance of a few part-time pastors. While ministering to the mission zone, Rev. Shawn said that he saw the opportunity to merge First and Grace UMCs (interview, June 3, 2009). The merger process began with small meetings of leaders from both churches and from the United Methodist Church organization. These smaller meetings led to larger group meetings with congregants from both churches while the leadership moved forward with the merger (Dr. Martha O., interview, July 5, 2009). These meetings were open to the public and were held in congregants' homes and at Dr. Martha O.'s home, which provided neutral ground: "no one had home court advantage" (interview, July 5, 2009).

Dr. Martha O. urged First and Grace UMCs to disclose their finances to one another, and they both had similar financial situations. After almost a year of regular talks and months of shared worship,²⁰ the time came for both congregations to vote on whether to merge. Voting of this nature usually takes place separately, but congregants from First and Grace wanted to vote together (Dr. Martha O., interview, July 5, 2009). The decision was unanimous to merge their congregations. Four potential names were narrowed to one, and thus First Grace was born.

In our first interview, Rev. Shawn, who is white, stated that people at First Grace were "still getting to know one another" (June 3, 2009) and that the process of merging churches was akin to courting. This simile has been invoked by other leaders in the merger process, like Dr. Martha O., who was instrumental to the success of First Grace through her service as an interlocutor and mediator for the two historically separate

²⁰ The first joint worship service for congregants from Grace and First UMCs was on Father's Day in 2007, about four months before the official merger date.

church bodies. Dr. Martha O.'s status as the director of the Louisiana Conference Office of Multicultural Ministries and as a black woman enabled her to facilitate communication, as well as find and establish common ground between the congregations. Congregants saw Rev. Shawn as the public face of the merge (several made statements along the lines of "this church wouldn't exist without Shawn"), but Dr. Martha O. was acknowledged by UMC leadership and other insiders as essential to the success of the merge. Without these two risk-taking, visionary leaders, First Grace would not exist.

The yearlong process of creating discourse and negotiating the merger allowed members of two ethnically different congregations with long, separate histories to get to know one another and find common ground. Some congregants were initially resistant to combining churches, and thus creating a common identity; this is a fear that could have been intensified by such a disorienting disaster. An overwhelming number of congregants, however, continued on as community members during the process. Several congregants were actively involved in the newly forming community throughout the pre-merger period, and these congregant leaders were integral to the success of the new church. Some congregants became supportive over time as they got to know leaders from the other church and saw the direction the fledgling First Grace was headed in. I was told by informants that no Grace UMC congregants and only a few First UMC congregants left the newly blended church, while many more joined.

Bumps Along the Courtship Road to Merger Marriage

While existing and emerging congregant leaders may have supported the church as time went on, there were still factors that worked against Rev. Shawn and the congregants. Logistical and monetary woes plagued their planning, and the city still felt

unsettled; according to Jennie, who arrived shortly after Katrina: “it was like a ghost town. So much was different...destroyed...” (interview, June 11, 2009). First UMC’s and Grace UMC’s congregants had reason to be suspicious of the change, as long-standing Catholic churches throughout the city were being shut down and their parishioners told to attend different Catholic churches. Both First and Grace UMC’s attendance numbers had dropped drastically after Katrina, providing leaders with good reason to merge churches. First UMC’s attendance “hadn’t been what it should have been” even before Katrina according to Marilyn, a congregant leader and First Grace’s current secretary. As a former member of First UMC for over 60 years (she joined in 1947 at age 17), Marilyn, who is white, observed that membership had been declining at First UMC since oil industry jobs started leaving New Orleans in the 1970s and 1980s²¹. Besides New Orleans’ urban depopulation, Marilyn cited another reason for First UMC’s dwindling attendance levels: “Jesus got buried under other priorities like football.”

Margaret, an active congregant leader, is a recent retiree and belongs to many church groups. She is a leader of First Grace’s chapter of United Methodist Women, an international, faith-based service organization, and has attended interracial churches in El Paso, TX and Lake Charles, LA, where she had positive experiences and felt embraced. Margaret, who is black, informed me that Grace UMC’s congregation thought it was in their best interest to merge with First UMC, since they couldn’t afford to repair the church building and pay the pastor with the insurance money they received. Even though this decision meant moving to a new building, “it was just meant to be,” she said of First Grace. Margaret believes that United Methodist Church *means* United—“open doors,

²¹ In addition, New Orleans’ most lucrative industry shifted from port-related activities to tourism during this period (Lewis 2003).

open hearts, open minds.” According to Margaret, if not for the merger, both churches “would be struggling in their niche” and “not being the body of Christ, just existing,” rather than acting as a true community. Margaret had “fallen into complacency” at Grace UMC before the merger but was now recommitted with her previous enthusiasm. This sense of renewal and expansion allows congregants to feel that their communities are whole again. Not because they are the old, intact communities of pre-Katrina New Orleans, but because they are new and intentionally formed.

Gwen, a black congregant leader who has a long history at Grace UMC and was close with their former pastor, recounted a story: “When we first started talking about the merge, there were a few resisters, but now they’re all in the mix, and active...one lady left and joined Bethany UMC, [because] she said when Pastor Shawn came to merge the church that it was racist...” and Gwen, whose self-described and observed behavior is relaxed, stood up to the dissenter and “said ‘you need to shut up. You’re not our member, so what you have to say does not count.’ Pastor Shawn worked so hard to accomplish this...[he] is the best thing that could have happened to us” (interview, July 11, 2009).

Reverend Shawn: Integral to the Creation of First Grace

“Shawn is our shepherd” (Gwen, interview, July 11, 2009).

Revered Shawn is a charismatic leader who is able to mediate between different groups while retaining authority over the decision-making process at the church. Rev. Shawn attended Harvard Seminary School to earn his Doctorate of Theology, and is married to Anne, a bright and strong ecofeminist with whom he has a young daughter and son. Anne and Rev. Shawn met while he was earning his Master’s of Divinity at Harvard, where she was earning a Master’s of Theology. Anne, who is white, has since

earned a Doctorate of Theology, and for her dissertation, Anne wrote about the spirituality of place, specifically New Orleans. Anne was a driving force in persuading Rev. Shawn to move to New Orleans, a city she had always loved and that they now both share an abiding passion for (interview, June 15, 2009).

While many leaders are responsible for the formation of First Grace, it was Rev. Shawn's overarching vision and leadership that allowed First Grace to come to fruition. Rev. Shawn critically needed the support of First UMC and Grace UMC's leaders in order for the merger to be successful. Through his ability to balance the interests of the two groups, he gained their favor. The process of merging may have been lengthy and fraught with the potential pitfalls of any courtship (especially one that involved so many individual interests), yet Rev. Shawn has inspired dedication and loyalty in many at First Grace.

When I asked Rev. Shawn if the church makes decisions through consensus, he replied that it does not. Rev. Shawn feels that while it is important to take into consideration what the congregation thinks, it takes a leader to make the tough decisions that will guide the congregation in the right direction. Rev. Shawn has the final say on what goes on at First Grace. Examples of this include his decision to say "Mother-Father-God" instead of "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer, and his decision to implement the weekly recitation of the Statement of Faith, a creed that he wrote to reflect the beliefs of the church.

Marilyn expressed her admiration for Rev. Shawn's ability to draw people together, to share "the word of God" in a way that's true to the Bible and relevant to congregant's lives:

Shawn sets the tone for the church by showing love of Christ, which trickles down to the people. Whatever you give the people that's what they're going to learn and become...there came a time [in the past thirty or forty years when the] truly expressive preacher died out...[and] you need enthusiasm to preach...[while some people are] turned off by evangelicals [it was] mostly a way of life [then].[interview, June 19, 2009]

For Marilyn, Rev. Shawn evokes the charisma of an evangelical preacher without the bombast that often accompanies the style (interview, June 19, 2009). For Matthew, a white congregant who has a Master's in Divinity from Duke University and teaches adult Sunday school at First Grace, "this church is a gentle Jesus, because the gospel is chiefly refracted through Shawn" (interview, July 7, 2009).

Rev. Shawn is white, yet he is seen by several congregants as a person who helps the congregation transcend race: "Shawn is Pastor Obama," said one black congregant (Linga, interview, June 13, 2009). He attempts to honor congregants' different ethnic backgrounds while acknowledging his own, and has treated Grace UMC's congregants with sympathy and sensitivity in the aftermath of their immense loss. Rev. Shawn works to bridge divides by forging relationships across color lines. In this way, Rev. Shawn is an example for congregants.

Rev. Shawn's work as pastor goes above and beyond religious education and guidance. Rev. Shawn visits congregants' relatives at the hospital, counsels those in times of crisis, and goes to great lengths to assist congregants in need. He sends weekly "Canal Street News" emails to the congregation. These spiritually nourishing emails include personal (sometimes humorous) insights and thoughts related to scripture, along with church updates and happenings. Rev. Shawn does not earn a great deal of monetary compensation for his efforts, but my research suggests that he has clearly earned the reverence of his flock and a cherished place as their spiritual leader.

Intentional Living: First Grace's Community of Live-In Volunteers

Rev. Shawn used to pastor at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge (about an hour's drive from New Orleans) where he met many young Christians. When he moved to New Orleans from Baton Rouge after Hurricane Katrina to help with the recovery efforts he brought seven young adults with him who moved in to the second floor of the church. This group used Americorps funding to support their work, which was to help renovate First UMC, along with other community projects such as restoring the building of a local elementary school. When the group first arrived to move in to First UMC's dorm-style housing, there was no electricity in the building and New Orleans was in shambles. Rev. Shawn was extremely busy with his own projects and often wasn't able to tell these volunteers what to do every step of the way, so they had to take initiative and act as self-starters, leadership practices that have contributed to the "intentionality" of this community.

This dedicated and talented group of young people came to create something new from the remains of the past. Along with church caretaker Jacinto, they live like a family, taking turns doing chores and cooking meals; they even have a shared dog. At one service, intentional community member Tia spoke to the congregation about the group: "the intentional community shares a belief in living what they believe, in incorporating each others' spiritualities into their own lives....I used to live in a house, now I live in a home." While some of the original community members have since departed to pursue other interests, new volunteers have arrived to carry on their efforts and the intentional community remains an integral part of First Grace.

Common Ground: First Grace's Location Allows Greater Accessibility

The physical location of First Grace at a major intersection in Mid-City New Orleans makes it a place of common ground. Rev. Shawn pointed out that Mid-City is “no man, no woman’s land.” This area is known by New Orleanians as an ethnically diverse and local-oriented area of the city; it contains fewer tourist destinations than other parts of New Orleans and features affordable housing. First Grace is in a geographically advantageous position for reaching its ultimate goal, which is to serve the city in which the church and (most of) its members reside.

The church’s location at the corner of Canal Street and Jeff Davis Highway makes it “accessible [and] visible” to the public: “When they put the church here they were looking for a signal, a drawing card....[it is] a signal that God is alive” (Marilyn, interview, June 19, 2009). First Grace’s location allowed several congregants to discover the church, when they happened to pass by and noticed something that made them want to visit, like a message of welcoming on the signboard. Stephanie and her son noticed the church while riding on a streetcar, and they chose to visit the church at his urging to see what it was like, despite her knowledge that it had been a white church.

Rev. Shawn summed up a belief that many at First Grace share: “if you’re in a multicultural neighborhood then the church should be mixed.” Rev. Shawn also stated that “the church is still in its starting stage because there are Brazilians, Caribbean [people], Asians” and others who live in the Mid-City area who have yet to join the congregational community (interview, July 21, 2009). In keeping with First Grace’s pluralistic vision, Rev. Shawn emphasized how First Grace should be open to further transformation as it seeks to accommodate a wider variety of the city’s denizens: “Just

because this is our home doesn't mean we have the right to set the rules. We exist for the people who haven't yet joined. Nothing is better, just different..." (interview, July 21, 2009)

Brod, a congregant leader and community organizer, spoke of First Grace's building as a metaphor for its existence. The church's unfinished sanctuary (as of late July 2009) served as a metaphor for the church as a whole, he said, since First Grace's specific goals and plans to achieve them were still up in the air. First Grace's damaged building is one that has been and will be beautiful when completed, and is beautiful in some places, but still under construction in others. Brod's metaphor includes room for expansion: First Grace's building and congregation are part of a city that has been under construction since Katrina's devastation, and congregants themselves are reconstructing their lives. As time goes on and needs become more apparent, "the people will organically create ministries," according to Brod (interview, June 5, 2009). In this way, the composition of congregants' lives, pursuits, and service missions are still being retooled, recalibrated to the tune of a new New Orleans.

Structured Surprises: A "Typical" Service at First Grace

Services at First Grace are structured yet surprising, similar yet unpredictable, which "gets you to want to come again to see what's going to happen!" (Margaret, interview, June 16, 2009) Like going to see your favorite jazz group weekly, one knows the service will reflect some structure, but will change each time, thus creating a new, powerful experience. Services begin at 11:15,²² and last from 90 minutes to two hours, a time that always seemed to fly by since services contain participatory activity, thoughtful

²² Service time has recently been changed to 11:10 am, in an effort to get started a little earlier. This relatively late service time is convenient for congregants who may have been up late on Saturday night.

sermons and pace-changing moments of solemnity. At one service, an interpretive dance to a traditional African American spiritual song was performed. At another, one of the songs included a rap-style solo. The musical variety is an oft-cited source of excitement for many congregants.

The general format of services follows this sequence: As one enters the church building and approaches the sanctuary on Sunday morning, joyful music wafts down the halls. The opening song is sung by the choir with instrumental accompaniment. One is greeted and handed a program by one of two or three First Grace greeters, who are enthusiastic in welcoming congregants and visitors alike to the church. Sunlight streams in from the tall windows lining the sanctuary, and a balcony behind the congregation stands apart, unoccupied, as the group of between 80 and 120 individuals fit on the main floor.²³ The opening song is different every week, is usually jubilant, and goes on for several minutes while church congregants greet one another with hugs and smiles. While the song sets the tone for worship, attendees dressed in a range of casual to formal clothing seat themselves and join the choir in singing.

Rev. Shawn greets the congregation, and the Statement of Faith is recited in unison. A prayer is recited, after which Rev. Shawn shares “life in our community,” which includes church announcements and news. A time of silent prayer is then ushered in through a reading, which is new and interesting every week. The silent prayer calms the commotion that typifies the beginning of service at First Grace, and is a time to quietly center oneself after the musical release of the opening song. Spiritual in nature, the readings that precede the silent prayer are not usually from the Bible, but were

²³ The congregation was this size during the period in which I performed fieldwork. As the church continues to grow, the balcony may need to be used during services.

selections of cross-cultural poetry read aloud by Jennie, an intentional community and choir member, and assistant music director. Pieces have included a poem by Hafiz, a 14th century Persian poet, or Rumi, a 13th century Persian poet and Muslim mystic whom Rev. Shawn has “turn[ed] to quite often for wisdom.” Another week it was a traditional Native American hymn. The different selections reflect First Grace’s commitment to honoring diversity via incorporating diverse sources of spiritual wisdom.

Several other components of service took place weekly. One of these traditions is the passing of the peace, an approximately 15 minute long greeting ritual that is distinct from the few seconds more typically afforded this greeting at other churches. Another tradition is the children’s moment, which is a time when Rev. Shawn invites children to the front of the sanctuary to share the week’s lesson with them in language they can understand. Communion is also a weekly occurrence, as well as a group recitation of First Grace’s Statement of Faith and the Lord’s Prayer.

Visitors are asked to stand at every service, and they are then applauded as a group by the congregation. This greeting is quite thorough, in that visitors are identified during services, then sought out by congregants during the passing of the peace and later on for further salutations. This demonstrates First Grace’s emphasis on welcoming. Several visitors stood every time I attended First Grace. I further discuss the significance of these rituals in chapter six.

Once a month a bilingual service is held, in which First Grace’s missionary Pastor, Rev. Oscar, translates Rev. Shawn’s words for Spanish speakers in the congregation. Spanish language services are held every Sunday in the mid-afternoon. The first service I attended was a bilingual one, and I was impressed by how easily it

flowed. Rev. Shawn exhorted the congregation: “if you speak English, learn some Spanish. If you speak Spanish, learn some English” and then reminded the group of the free Spanish and English language classes available at First Grace, taught by Rev. Oscar. At the time I conducted fieldwork most congregants were not bilingual, but several congregant leaders were, and these leaders were able to assist in the translation process on an everyday basis if Rev. Oscar was not around.

In addition to being a bilingual service, the first service I attended was Rev. LeKisha’s final day at First Grace, as she had been transferred by the United Methodist Church organization to another congregation.²⁴ I never got to meet Rev. LeKisha, a relatively young black pastor, but she seemed to be very passionate about First Grace, and she shed tears while bidding her public goodbye to the congregation. During this service, a well-dressed middle aged black woman swooned in response to Rev. Shawn’s preaching, vocalizing her experience and falling to the floor as two women on either side supported her. I only witnessed this once, but others at the church did not act as if it had been an isolated event. The kind of freedom to worship as one pleases, to respond to calls, to yell out when moved to do so: this is the freedom that allows services at First Grace to be full of (structured) surprises.

Open Arms: Joining First Grace

First Grace is a growing church community that is not difficult to join. When I first arrived, there were about 140 members of First Grace UMC, and the church gained at least 10 more before I left. At that pace, First Grace could average about 60 new

²⁴ Rev. LeKisha was an assistant pastor to Rev. Shawn. The United Methodist church follows a practice of regularly transferring pastors to different congregations according to Dr. Ellen (interview, July 5, 2009).

members a year, or possibly more.²⁵ A few of the informants I interviewed were not formal members of the church, but attended weekly and were involved with volunteer work and other church functions.²⁶

Like most churches, becoming an official member of First Grace is encouraged by the church's leadership. At the end of each service, Rev. Shawn inquires "who would like to join this congregation?" When the new prospective members rise to indicate that they would like to join, the transitional, "liminal" period (Turner 1987) is brief. New members head to the front of the sanctuary, where they stand next to Rev. Shawn, who embraces each person. He then asks them a question that encompasses the mission of the church: "Will you be a part of this church community as a part of this city?" The wording of this question varies slightly week to week, but it usually contains the word "community" and the phrase "this city."

The ritual process of joining is publicly shared, poignant and brief, and it seems to bring joy to the witnesses amongst the congregation, as they clap and cheer. Upon joining, the new member signs her or his name in the book of members. Even if the decision was not made spontaneously (although I was told by a few informants that they had made their decisions to join on the spot), this spontaneous-seeming membership process is quickly consummated, which reflects the emotional component of services at First Grace. Once a congregant has officially become a member, he or she meets with

²⁵ Since summertime is traditionally when New Orleanians who have the means to do so leave the city for less humid destinations, the church's membership growth during the summer is not necessarily reflective of its growth during other seasons.

²⁶ 90% of survey respondents are actual members of First Grace. The official member count is not necessarily accurate in determining the size of the congregation, as it fluctuated weekly while I attended. There is the possibility that some individuals who are actual members may not attend regularly, just as some who are not actual members do attend on a regular basis.

Rev. Shawn to discuss spiritual matters, and Rev. Shawn encourages the new member to become involved with a ministry. In addition, if the new member has not been baptized, Rev. Shawn makes plans with him or her to do so, and he or she is encouraged to attend adult Sunday school. Adult Sunday school is held weekly before services and is taught by a religiously educated congregant volunteer.

The Children's Moment: First Grace's Messages Modified for Young Congregants

Services at First Grace always include a children's moment. The sound of Rev. Shawn's good-naturedly off-kilter singing signals the children of the congregation to come to the stage. The performance of this ritual is dear to several of my informants. The children, mostly under the age of ten or so, fiddle with toys as they sit in a circle around Rev. Shawn, who uses the time on stage with the children to teach them the day's lesson using language and examples they can understand. Rev. Shawn finds ways to engage the children through his inquiries, and this portion of the service often draws lighthearted laughs from the congregation as Rev. Shawn invariably makes a joke, or a child blurts something unintentionally amusing. The image of the children's many shades of skin color as they sit closely to one another and play is a striking one.

Circulating Bonds: Experience of Passing of the Peace at First Grace

The passing of the peace is an exhilarating part of weekly services, and is one of the unique practices at First Grace. It is a component worship that promotes genuine interaction with one's fellow congregants, as it lasts about 15 to 20 minutes and is unstructured. This greeting period is considerably longer than the passing of the peace at the other two Methodist churches I visited, where this ritual consists of saying "peace be with you" to those on sitting on either side of oneself. During the passing of the peace at

First Grace one must leave their seat, the comfort zone of many, and go around and about the room to engage with other congregants.

During my first service, Rev. Shawn introduced me with humor, pointing out that my last name is “Bayou,” which means a small stream in Southern Louisiana dialect. This interesting coincidence worked in my favor, since it provided congregants with a word relevant to their area to remember me by. After this introduction, I knew I would be greeted by several congregants. As the passing of the peace began, I cautiously wiped my sweaty palms to ensure no one would have to feel my perspiration on their own hands. I stood up and surveyed the room, only able to see the immediate bubble of smiling faces that surrounded me. Only a moment would pass before my hands and sometimes body would be embraced in another warm show of hospitality: “*peace be with you.*” All throughout the sanctuary congregants were greeting one another with handshakes, hugs, and variations upon the phrase. After several minutes small groups began to splinter off as congregants engaged in conversations with new friends and those whom they already knew. While the decision to hug or shake hands in social situations can sometimes be an awkward one, I never recall feeling that I had blundered, or that another had made a faux pas toward me.

The passing of the peace is a symbol of First Grace’s commitment to conciliation, as relationships serve as a basis for movements of social change. You must move to change, and you must make continuous effort to grow: these are amongst the lessons learned during the passing of the peace at First Grace. I further discuss this ritual in chapter six.

“No Matter What You Call God, This Table is Open to You”: Weekly Communion at

First Grace

*Am I in need of a seeking spirituality?
Or is it a hunger to costume
distraction
from knowing the bare of
what’s already there.*

The line was growing quickly down the center aisle as I nervously awaited my chance to step away. Although I had made my decision, I hoped to be inconspicuous as I sidestepped the growing queue, because I didn’t want to offend anyone in the congregation. I had spoken briefly with my advisor Kate about my decision, one that I made out of disorientation, or that heightened sense of vigilance and overstimulation that sometimes accompanies immersion in new environments. I decided to step to the side when my row joined the line, and as I did a woman looked me in the eyes and told me reassuringly “you can take communion.” That first day I chose not to take communion.

Reflexivity requires me to share that I was raised Muslim, and had only attended a handful of church services in my entire life before attending services at First Grace. As the daughter of a Libyan Muslim father and an American mother who converted to Islam, I was socialized into an Arab Muslim subculture that existed within the larger, dominant Christian culture of a populous suburb near Washington, D.C. Many of my friends are agnostic, atheist, or have lapsed from practicing the Christian, Muslim or Jewish faith of their upbringing. I have always loved learning about and discussing matters of religion and faith, and attending First Grace re-awakened my interest in those topics while stoking my own humanistic-oriented spirituality.

I chose to take communion at the second service I attended and all services thereafter. Methodists practice an “open table,” whereby all are allowed to take communion regardless of baptism status or religious denomination. This policy affected my decision at the next service, since I knew I wouldn’t have to identify myself as a non-Christian or risk disrespecting a holy sacrament. Even though I became comfortable with the act over time, I knew that if I had continued to choose not to take communion my refusal would have had the potential to detract from building rapport and trust with congregants at First Grace. I interpreted the act as sharing “communion” with my fellow humans at First Grace, and this gave the ritual a spiritual significance to me. Rather than viewing this act as a solely Christian one, I transformed its personal meaning from a consumption of the body of Christ, a faith-affirming ritual, to a consumption of shared life-force and shared energy, a community-affirming ritual.²⁷

What Does the First Grace Community Do Outside of Worship?

While attending services is a critical component of membership in the First Grace congregant community, volunteering for different ministries and attending socio-spiritual events is essential to full community participation. First Grace has many active volunteer groups, and since these groups are relatively new and still establishing themselves, there is room for all who would like to participate. There are several opportunities on a weekly basis for congregants to engage in charitable work or social events with their fellow congregants; if one is very busy with work, family, school, or other activities he or she could still most likely make time for some degree of participation in these happenings.

²⁷ This view of communion, as well as the fact that I even took communion, may offend some Christians, and I respect their belief that those who are not believers in Christ should not take part in Christianity’s sacred rituals. But at First Grace all who are present are encouraged to take communion, no matter whether they had been baptized or not.

Hagar's House, a Home for Women in Need

Hagar's House is one of the main charitable services that First Grace provides to the New Orleans/Mid-City community. Hagar's House is a women's shelter where housing and other services are available at no cost to women in need, until they are "back on their feet." Run by volunteers from First Grace's intentional community and congregation members, Hagar's House was expanding at the time I conducted fieldwork. After I left New Orleans, Hagar's House received a \$20,000 grant to fund their program, and it has been growing and thriving.

Run by advocate volunteers like Angela and Sarah, who are both congregant leaders and members of the intentional community at First Grace, the home is not just a place to stay but a place for a woman to reestablish herself. The program helps employed women save money by holding most of their income in a savings account until they leave. Unemployed recipients are required to actively search for a job and receive assistance doing so. Amongst other resources provided to the women of Hagar's House, weekly meetings help monitor and encourage their progress. Many of the women who stay there attend church at First Grace.

Usually a peaceful place, I was told only one incident had occurred at Hagar's House where a woman had to be asked to leave, and she was placed at another home. Violating the rules of the home, the woman had returned drunk, and volunteers found morphine in her purse. Hagar's House volunteers emphasized to me that they usually work with people to allow them to stay if issues arise, but they are not prepared to assist in cases of serious substance abuse, so they referred the woman elsewhere and ensured she was safe (Angela, interview, June 12, 2009).

The volunteers of Hagar's House are hoping to expand their services to include places for children in the home, as they currently have space for only women. According to several informants, rent prices and unemployment rates increased significantly in the city after Hurricane Katrina, forcing many women and families out of their homes. In a city where homelessness has increased dramatically, Hagar's House is a welcome place of refuge for women in vulnerable positions.

Volunteer-run Groups and Ministries²⁸

Besides Hagar's House, another important volunteer ministry at First Grace that benefits the New Orleans community is Loaves and Fishes food pantry, a source of non-perishable food for those in need. Recipients do not need to be congregants at First Grace to receive food from the pantry, as I witnessed one afternoon when a man came to the church via word-of-mouth to get food for his grandchildren who were visiting. He was warmly greeted by a congregant volunteer, and was asked questions of concern to ensure his needs were met. First Grace runs school supply drives and donates to other charitable causes. A mobile healthcare unit visits regularly, which provides vital services to those in the community who lack access to healthcare (particularly prenatal care).

In addition to community outreach, First Grace has volunteer groups that are concerned with internal matters. There was a committee to make over the sanctuary, which still showed bruises from Hurricane Katrina. The membership committee strives to organize small group meetings for congregants who are unfamiliar with one another to get to know each other under the premise of sharing their personal "First Grace stories."

²⁸ There are ministries and volunteer groups comprised of First Grace community members that have formed after I conducted fieldwork, and new projects are being launched, so this account is by no means a comprehensive one.

Congregants' and community members' efforts have led to the establishment and opening of Morris Jeff, a charter elementary school that has earned positive attention and praise throughout the community. Of course, congregants also individually participate in other community service activities that are not directly affiliated with the church itself.

Wednesday Night Supper and Study

A Supper and Study took place most Wednesday nights during the period I attended First Grace. During the summertime, the church hosted a series of speakers from within its own congregation. These speakers discussed their work, which highlighted that they were all, in some way, working for the common good in the city of New Orleans. Speakers included Tia, the intentional community member who works as an advocate to prevent the spread of HIV, Stephanie, who works for the New Orleans Center for Racial Justice, and Brod and Celeste, a married couple who both work on various social improvement-oriented projects as community organizers.

Congregant Leaders: Making an Impact in a Congregation and City that are Open for Impact

To be a congregant leader at First Grace is to be among the ranks of a special, dedicated group: "It's a self-selection. People come and they see this situation and they see if it's not for [them]" (Dr. Martha W., interview, July 24, 2009). I define congregant leaders are those who are most engaged in church activities, including organizing and running ministries, and spending time with community members. Anyone who chooses to do so can be a member of this group. Being a self-chosen leader at this newly created church requires one to embrace creation, since the church must work to establish new structures where old ones once existed, all while working with the interests of the United

Methodist Church and the congregation in mind. Leaders at First Grace come from many different backgrounds, but they share several common traits.

Above all, congregant leaders at First Grace are living in a city and involved in a church that is *open for impact*. Katrina's destruction left New Orleans a place where leaders are able to step in to create new forms of organization, to focus on new missions, and to participate in different recovery efforts. First Grace, as a product of the city's post-Katrina reformation, is still in its formation phase and is open, by virtue of its unsettled organization, to new leaders' visions of new missions and community formations.

What Do the Leaders of First Grace Have in Common?

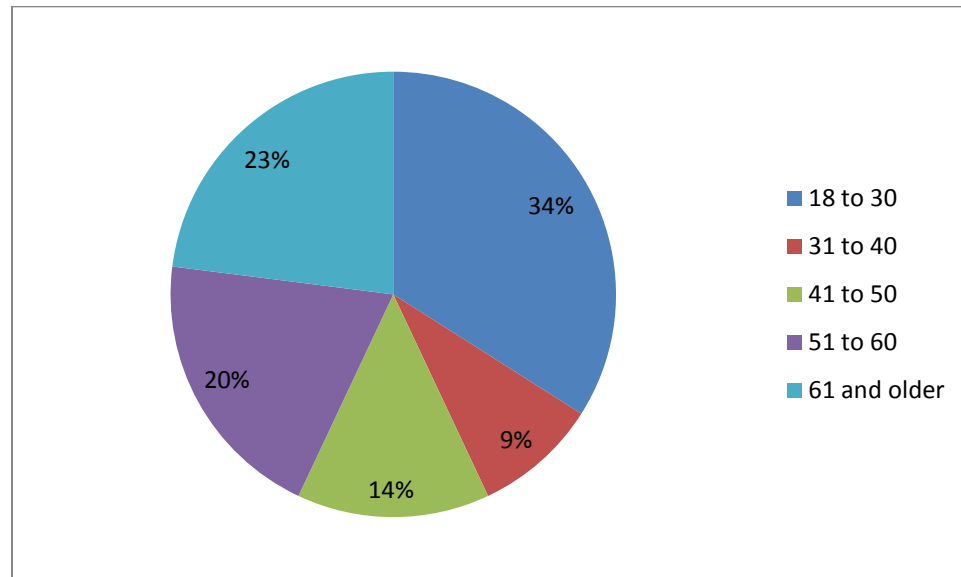
According to Marilyn, the thing that people have most in common at First Grace is "a willingness to work for what they want" (interview, June 19, 2009). First Grace's congregant community leaders are a group of individuals who occupy roles in multiple realms, and are involved in much of the 'action' at First Grace. A single congregant leader could be involved in activities ranging from the choir to the sanctuary committee, to Hagar's House and ESL classes. Congregant leaders have spearheaded many of First Grace's projects, and their names arose again and again in relation to different ministries.²⁹

Congregant leaders at First Grace spend a significant amount of time with one another as they work on various endeavors. These leaders have to be excellent communicators, and both assertive and consensus-oriented. In order to establish ministries and keep them up and running, congregant leaders must be flexible and willing to compromise, and able to work with diverse interests in mind.

²⁹ These leaders comprise the 9% of survey respondents who spend more than five hours a week engaged in ministries/service activities outside church services.

First Grace’s leadership is as diverse as the congregation itself. Congregant leaders at First Grace are of different ages, ethnicities and genders. This allows diverse interests to be represented within the church, keeping First Grace consistently multiethnic, rather than dominated by one ethnicity or age group.³⁰

Figure 1—Congregant Age Groups (n=44)



The congregant leaders of First Grace often share humanist beliefs and participate in humanitarian actions. While First Grace has served as a center for their faith-based work, these congregant leaders’ passions for helping their community were not bridled to a single organization. First Grace’s congregant leaders often share ideologies, but they don’t always work for the same causes, which is a reflection of their diversity.

Social Justice Orientation

Not only do First Grace’s congregant leaders have several traits in common, they share common goals that correspond with these traits. Social justice is a central

³⁰ See figure 4 for a visual representation of the age distribution of surveyed congregants. The survey results support my assertion that at First Grace there are a mix of age groups, especially people in their 20s and people in their 50s and up.

component of Abrahamic religions, and is supported throughout the scriptures of Christianity, Judaism and Islam (DeYoung 2007). Social justice is a school of thought concerned with helping those who are marginalized, assisting those in need, and ending the oppression of peoples. The congregant leaders whom I got to know at First Grace were concerned with issues of social justice, whether or not they framed their interests using that term, although many did.

Even though First Grace does not have an explicitly stated social justice orientation, many of its most active congregant leaders make it a social justice-oriented church through their good works. Some congregant leaders expressed that they wanted social justice to be a central tenet of the church, but Rev. Shawn, to allow space for other ideological orientations, has not labeled First Grace a “social justice” church.

DeYoung (2007:8) delineates four “ways of being [that] emerge from the lives of faith-inspired social justice activists....(1) their religious faith motivates them; (2) their worldview emerges from the margins of society; (3) their identity is rooted in a belief that we share a common humanity; and (4) they embrace the ethics of a revolution that demands structural change.” These principles are clearly shared by many of the congregant leaders at First Grace.

For one congregant leader, Christian morality *is* social justice, and First Grace’s role is to be involved with the causes that affect its congregation, such as housing rights. When she first arrived after Katrina, the as-yet unmerged First UMC seemed to this congregant leader like “a dying place, [one] with an *inward* spirituality...versus [an] *outward* oriented [spirituality].” This speaks to many congregants’ personal belief that the church must reach out to the city in order to fulfill its mission, to create a better

community. Some congregants have engaged in political activism to bring about structural change; others have worked at alleviating the current post-Katrina hardships New Orleanians face.

Fernandez and Trotter (2009) have suggested that Hurricane Katrina's devastation could serve as a catalyst for inter-ethnic and intercultural movements towards social justice, and my research suggests that this is taking place at First Grace. New Orleans is a city that has, particularly since Katrina, been negatively impacted by forces beyond its residents' control, so it is a place where social justice-oriented agendas could thrive. New Orleans' poverty, crime, education system and other social issues cannot be tackled by government and secular organizations alone, and faith-based organizations have filled a gap in services that the city can't always address. Hagar's House, Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry and the mobile health clinic are a few ways in which First Grace provides essential services to residents of New Orleans. The causes that First Grace's leaders support outside of the church are most often in areas in which the New Orleans community is in crisis.

Ability to Lead through Change

Congregant leaders who embrace the ethos of social justice are likely to embrace change, as these leaders strive to make positive changes in their church and city communities. Congregant leaders are not attracted to a system that is already in place, a system where the burdens of responsibility are distributed throughout an established church bureaucracy, or where all efforts go to a single ministry. Instead, these leaders are attracted to a place with space for change, and they are working to create self-sustaining

programs at First Grace, or programs that can expand and shift focus over time to serve their constituency more effectively.

One congregant leader and social justice activist, Celeste, said that those who were more comfortable with change were more likely to be leaders at First Grace. Her insight led me to believe that congregants who wanted to keep intact the rituals and practices they had participated in at their former churches were less likely to accept the changes of First Grace, so those who accepted or embraced change were more likely to have a hand in the formation of new rituals and practices. Those former Grace and First UMC congregant leaders whom I interviewed were all supportive of changes that they viewed as positive or necessary. One congregant leader discussed the people from First UMC who left during the merge process because they didn't like "black music," or Rev. Shawn's influence. This congregant felt that "you have to roll with the changes, not just seek comfort in what you already know."

There is a fine line between not supporting change because one is uncomfortable with change itself or because one doesn't like the specific changes being made. All congregant leaders did not enthusiastically support all changes, but there was a general attitude amongst them of openness to changes that accommodate others. Rev. Oscar told me of the conference he began in, where the worship service was

from the 1940s or 50s, and it hadn't changed, like a time capsule, [even though] the neighborhood is different now...[and] we need to change....When we get stuck in a way of doing, we become slaves of that way, but when we got back to our roots...the love of God, self and neighbor...we can explore many other possibilities....The only sacred thing is God, all else is culture. [interview, July 2, 2009]

For congregants who think change is necessary for inclusion, rituals must be altered so that all can identify with their meaning. One congregant leader told me that she was not

used to some of the music played during worship, but that she “intellectually appreciated” its value, and that it was part of another group’s tradition. Like other activities that one may not be used to but does because of their inherent value, congregants at First Grace are more likely to take the long view on changes, because they feel that it is the right path for them.

I have identified the particular values that First Grace’s congregant leaders share. In the next chapter I discuss the values that First Grace’s congregation as a whole shares, and examine how these values support the process of ethnic transcendence.

Reflexive Thoughts on First Grace’s Christianity

Attending First Grace allowed me to reflect on my own biases toward Christianity and its practice. At First Grace I saw firsthand how Christian moral-based lifestyles can be constructed in multitudes of ways, depending on different cultural variables and personal factors. As a person who has not been baptized, I felt safe and comfortable at First Grace. Rev. Shawn did not directly ask me about my faith background, instead he provided the space and understanding for me to share my personal history in my own time. When the opportunity arose for me to disclose more information about my background, Rev. Shawn didn’t express much surprise and was respectfully interested in my story. In this way he provided me with “tzimtzum,” a Hebrew word for space that Rev. Shawn shared in a sermon about leaving space for God and other people to be a part of one’s life.

Even though many Christians would revel in the atmosphere of First Grace, I know that others would not accept some of the church’s multicultural practices. Some Christians would probably feel uncomfortable with the incorporation of non-Christian

spiritual writings read aloud before silent prayer time. These Christians would probably feel uncomfortable with Rev. Shawn's use of "Mother-Father-God" during the Lord's Prayer.³¹

Yet these Christians would also have to notice that at First Grace they would be flanked on either side not simply by people of different ethnicities but by people from the educated upper middle-class, homeless people, working class people, young adults, gay couples, middle class people, heavily tattooed people, children, and elderly people. People from all spheres and strata are congregants at First Grace, reflecting the diversity of the city of New Orleans. Those Christians who may feel uncomfortable with such openness, who may feel fear of what they see as an erosion of tradition, would probably still intuitively know that something special was going on at First Grace. Equality and common humanity are at the forefront of First Grace's messages; this belief in our inherent similarity is a Judeo-Christian value that is all too often obscured in identity politics.

³¹ Rev. LaKisha began the use of "Mother-Father-God" at First Grace.

Chapter 5: Shared Values Promote Ethnic Transcendence at First Grace



Photo © 2009 Aziza Bayou

Introduction: Ethnic Transcendence

In the decade since Emerson and Smith published their groundbreaking study of multiethnic congregations in America, “Divided by Faith” (2000), multiethnic (also called multiracial) congregations have become a more common topic of sociological study. Marti (2009) asserts that while multiethnic congregations may be researched more frequently than they used to be, the dynamic formation of personal identity within these congregations is still an under-examined topic.

Marti uses the concept of “ethnic transcendence” to describe how shared religious identity can allow people with different ethnic backgrounds to establish and maintain social ties (2009). Ethnic transcendence is a process by which communities are formed despite historical ethnic boundaries, and because of shared identities that are deemed more important than ethnic differences. At multiethnic First Grace, assertions of differential ethnic identities are deemphasized, as a common New Orleanian identity and shared values are emphasized. Ethnic transcendence is taking place at First Grace because collective beliefs drive collective actions.

In this chapter I analyze how values shared by First Grace’s leadership and congregation nurture the development of ethnic transcendence. I examine how First Grace is able to build a simultaneously cohesive and diverse community by emphasizing the values and identities that congregants share over those elements that make them different from one another. This chapter focuses on what congregants and church leadership *say* about their values and community. I begin the chapter with an analysis of how First Grace’s Statement of Faith outlines the church’s values, and I discuss what these shared values are, how they are exemplified, and how they lead to ethnic transcendence.

In his exploration of the phenomenon of ethnic transcendence, Marti asks “how...members of disparate ethnic...heritages come to identify and achieve stable affiliation with multiracial congregations” (2009:53). Marti asserts that ethnic identity is experienced differently depending on social context; it can be emphasized or deemphasized in favor of other roles. “In diverse congregations, the presentation of [ethnic] identity is selective as members negotiate a variety of identities within the

constraints of congregational life” (Marti 2009:55). At multiethnic churches, congregants can share many other facets of identity rather than ethnicity, and these other components can become loci of group bonding and shared identification, which is occurring at First Grace.

Spiritual and ethnic identities leave room for personal negotiation, and in the context of New Orleans these are particularly fluid. Marti acknowledges the fluidity of ethnic identity at multiracial churches, as other components of identity are emphasized during the process of congregants’ formation of a sense of collective belonging. In his discussion of the Christerson, Emerson and Edwards’ (2005) work, Marti asserts that “an inclusive congregational identity...becomes important for the development of multiracial congregations” (2009:56). At First Grace, openness to and inclusion of all is the norm, thus facilitating the process of ethnic transcendence.

First Grace’s Statement of Faith Declares Collective Values

The Statement of Faith is a text unique to First Grace that is recited by the group weekly during service, in unison. The Statement has both enabled participants’ bonding and elucidated the church’s central values for congregants and potential church members. Since Methodist practice tends to leave room for local variation, First Grace’s ethos contains components of common Methodist beliefs, such as non-judgment and openness, along with more unique elements, such as dedication to bettering the city of New Orleans. The Statement exemplifies how First Grace’s leadership has contributed to the creation of a common congregant identity that is reinforced weekly, like a pledge of allegiance to the church’s central values.

First Grace's Statement of Faith

We believe in a God who shows no partiality.
And in Jesus Christ who came to heal the broken hearted,
And to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

We believe in the Holy Spirit who leads us
Into the hope of each day
And toward the creative will of God almighty.

We believe in loving our neighbor,
And in praying for those who persecute us.
We believe that whatsoever we do to the least, we do unto Christ.
And we believe in forgiveness, our own and others'.

We believe that in Christ there is no Jew or gentile,
No slave or free, no black or white, no male or female.
And we believe that neither death nor life,
Nor heights nor depths nor anything in the world as it is or as it shall be,
Can ever separate us from the love of God known in Christ Jesus.

And we believe that by seeking the welfare of our city,
As peace comes to it so shall we find our own.
This we believe. Amen.

First Grace's Statement of Faith was written by Rev. Shawn, and it sets the church's mission as one that goes above and beyond religious belief, into a territory of social responsibility and action. The Statement of Faith outlines a specific religious and social vision, while elucidating the value system church leadership expects congregants to share. The Statement of Faith portrays First Grace's congregant community as a non-judgmental, forgiving and loving group. These ideals make up the church's core values, and the ritual of reciting the Statement reminds members of both the ideals and their attendant duties. In the Statement of Faith, Rev. Shawn uses both secular and sacred language to frame the church's values, making this religio-spiritual document a powerful contributor to First Grace's community-focused ethos. This document encapsulates First Grace's multifaceted mission and is well suited to its diverse congregation.

The Statement of Faith emphasizes that First Grace's congregation believes in a universal human spirit that transcends socially constructed differences. The congregants I interviewed who recite and believe in this statement would be able to pick from several passages if ever in search of First Grace doctrine that supports their own personal convictions.³² For those congregants who work toward social justice in all realms: "And to set at liberty those who are oppressed." For those congregants who have experienced difficulty in their lives, and are in need of a revitalization of hope: "We believe in the Holy Spirit who leads us//Into the hope of each day//And toward to creative will of God almighty." For those congregants who have been victims of others' actions or inaction, their own actions, circumstances or events beyond their control: "And in praying for those who persecute us.//We believe that whatsoever we do to the least, we do unto Christ.//And we believe in forgiveness, our own and others." For those congregants who seek to change a world of rank and hierarchies, inequity, stereotypes and social stigmas, crudely rendered binary oppositions, institutionalized racism, sexism, and ignorance: "We believe that in Christ there is no Jew or gentile,//No slave or free, no black or white, no male or female." To remind congregants of eternal life with God, achieved by accepting the Savior, Jesus Christ: "And we believe that neither death nor life,//Nor heights nor depths nor anything in the world as it is or as it shall be,//Can ever separate us from the love of God known in Christ Jesus." To remind congregants that their love of fellow humans should be acted upon firstly at home, in New Orleans, the statement definitively concludes by focusing on the city: "And we believe that by seeking the

³² The following categories of congregant are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping.

welfare of our city, // As peace comes to it so shall we find our own. // This we believe.
Amen.”

Not all congregants are happy reciting the Statement of Faith that Rev. Shawn has written. One theologically-trained congregant “take[s] creeds very seriously,” and since this congregant “didn’t know [the] providence” of the Statement of Faith, which is akin to a creed, this congregant chose not to join in the group recitation. The congregant stated that there are a great number of historically accepted creeds in the United Methodist church and wondered why Rev. Shawn has chosen to write one himself rather than use a creed that had already been sanctioned. Yet this congregant acknowledged that different cultures maintain different expressions of Christian (and Methodist) worship, so Rev. Shawn’s writing of a Statement of Faith to fit the particular worship culture at First Grace is not unheard of, and is an example of why so many creeds exist—someone had to write them at sometime. Creeds in no way replace scripture, but they can enhance congregants’ understanding of their particular church’s beliefs and missions.

One congregant leader recognized a paradox of ritual behavior: “people don’t like ...doing things over and over, people have a hard time hearing it again and again...but there’s comfort [in such enduring ritual], and it is the way it is supposed to be done.” First Grace’s Statement of Faith represents some ideas that are traditional in Methodist Christianity, yet it is an entirely new permutation specific to First Grace. The Statement of Faith’s specific emphasis on “seeking the welfare of our city,” and its declaration that (historically divisive) personal differences are erased “in Christ” encourage congregants to act in accordance with the values the church represents.

Above All, the City: Shared New Orleanian Identity and Values Transcend Ethnic Differences at First Grace

The people that were left at Grace and First [churches after Hurricane Katrina] were the people who were already committed to the city, and that's the theme.... That's the theme that runs through the statement of faith, through the prayers--"the holy city"-- this is the city on a hill, this is the new Jerusalem. If you're a convert to the city.... that's it, you'll do anything it takes to be here, make things happen. So here were, long term Methodists with a commitment to New Orleans itself, and New Orleans is a black majority city... so if you really did have a spiritual commitment to this city then you'd have to be committed to an interracial communion.... [Dr. Martha W., interview, July 24, 2009]

Being a New Orleanian is a central self-identification for most of First Grace's congregants, as most lived in the area before Hurricane Katrina and have chosen to return.³³ Whether someone lived in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina is not the only indicator of identifying as a New Orleanian, since one does not have to be a native to love New Orleans, but to love New Orleans, one must love the city's people. Most congregants feel that attending a church with ethnic diversity is very important to them,³⁴ which may have been what drew them to the church, since approximately two-thirds of survey respondents were not former members of First UMC or Grace UMC.³⁵ Diversity may be an important draw, yet congregants stay at First Grace for a multitude of reasons.

Most congregants at First Grace spend time with people outside of their ethnicity³⁶ and generation,³⁷ which demonstrates that bonds are being forged across

³³ 66% or 2/3 of survey respondents answered that they lived in New Orleans or a surrounding Parish before Hurricane Katrina. 33% or 1/3 of survey respondents did not live in New Orleans or a surrounding Parish before Hurricane Katrina. See GIS Map 3 in appendix six for a visual representation.

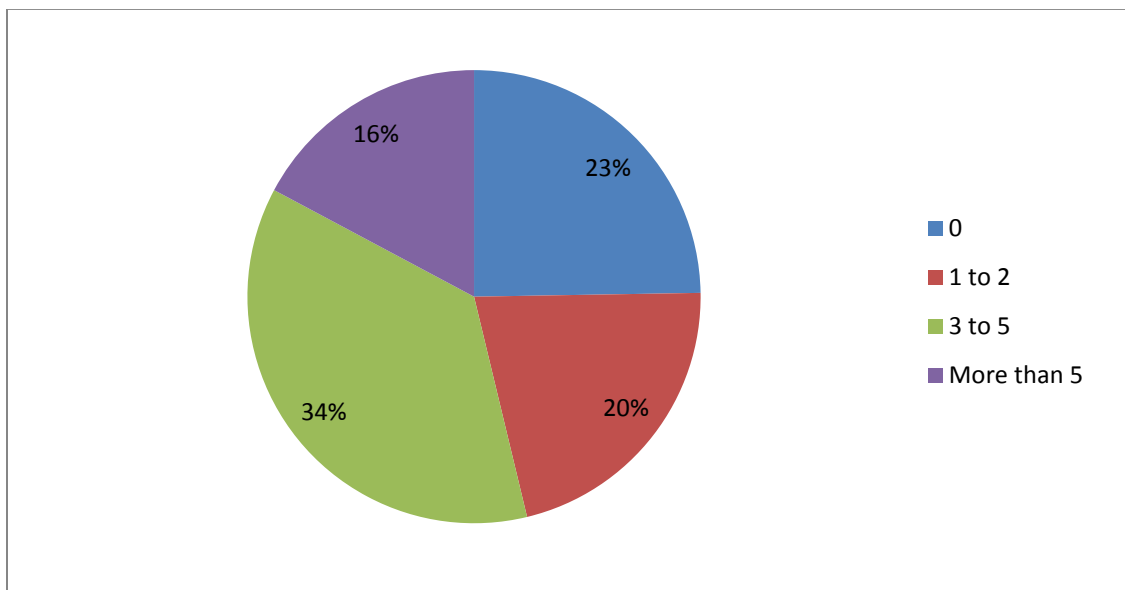
³⁴ All survey respondents agreed with the statement that "attending a church with racial or ethnic diversity is important to me." 66% or two thirds of survey respondents strongly agreed with the statement, and 33% agreed with the statement.

³⁵ 18% of survey respondents were members of Grace UMC, and 14% of survey respondents were members of First UMC.

³⁶ See figure 1 for a visual representation of the proportion of surveyed congregants who spend time with other congregants who do not share their ethnicity. A total of 70% of survey respondents spend time with

traditional dividing lines. I witnessed how First Grace’s social networks go beyond seeing one another at church services and church-based activities alone, and survey evidence supports this assertion.³⁸ The values that congregants share may have been part of their identities before they joined First Grace, but the church’s leadership and congregation magnify and amplify the aspects of personal identity that the church values.

Figure 2—Spend time with how many congregants of a different ethnicity? (n=41)



at least one fellow congregant who does not share his or her ethnicity. Unfortunately I lack a larger set of comparative data to contextualize the information I gathered about interethnic friendships at First Grace.

³⁷ See figure 2 for a visual representation of the proportion of surveyed congregants who spend time with other congregants who are of a different generation than themselves.

³⁸ See figure 3 for a visual representation of the proportion of surveyed congregants who spend time with other congregants.

Figure 3—Spend time with how many congregants of a different generation? (n=43)

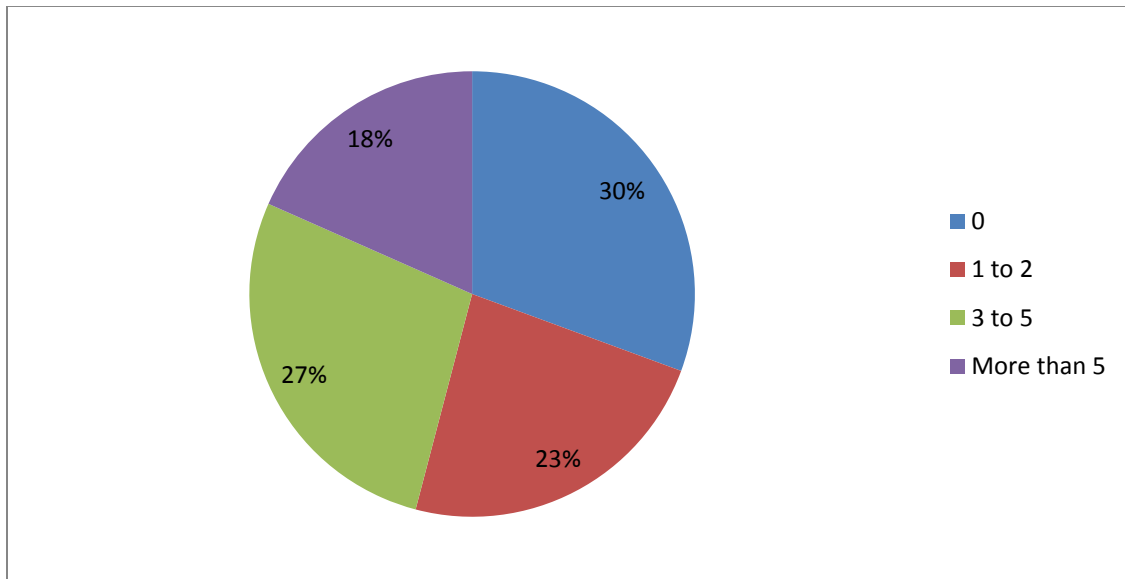
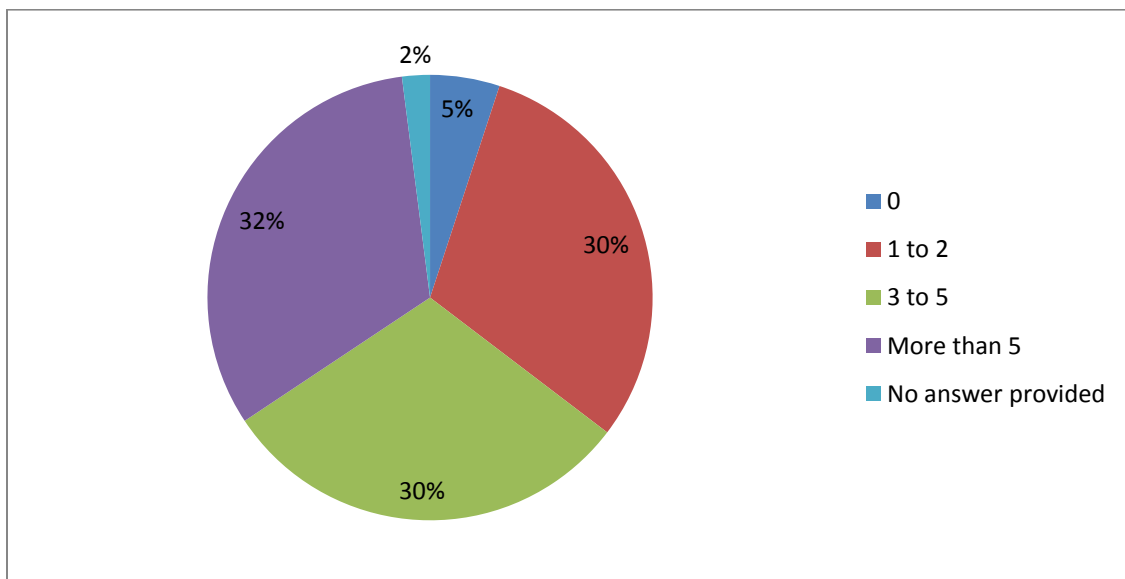


Figure 3-- Spend Time Outside of Church-based Activities with How Many Other Congregants? (n=42)



At First Grace, one's spiritual connection to God and other human beings is central, even if personal faiths and beliefs differ, and so dedication to the diverse city is an expression of love of God and one's fellow humans. Congregants' values and priorities have created strong, nourishing bonds for those coping with dislocated families and friends, as almost half of congregants surveyed do not have any family members who

also attend First Grace.³⁹ “Spiritual healing is created by human activities,” (Brod, interview, June 5, 2009) and congregants at First Grace are provided with opportunities for healing as they forge relationships with one another.

Shared values are a basis for shared action, but in a city marred by blight as a result of catastrophe, mismanagement, and slow recovery, there are many avenues for congregants to work for their individually-valued causes. Many congregants participate in service that the church is involved in, but individuals also pursue other causes that they themselves are personally interested in. Involvement with local education reform, Loaves and Fishes, Hagar’s House, a community garden or a city-wide AIDS prevention and advocacy organization demonstrates commitment to alleviating inequity on the local level. Ministering to the city of New Orleans is the shining center of First Grace’s congregants’ collective efforts, and First Grace’s congregant leaders are the strongest representatives of the values the church inculcates in its congregation.

***First Grace’s Congregants’ Values and Attitudes Allow Ethnic Transcendence:
“Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors”***

Openness is both a central tenet of First Grace and of the United Methodist Church, whose official motto is “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.” Several congregants believe that since Katrina made New Orleanians face hardships they otherwise wouldn’t have ever faced, they are now better able to put differences in perspective, and to be grateful for life as it is, rich with diversity.

³⁹ 45% of survey respondents do not have any family members who attend First Grace. 32% have one to two, 16% have three to five, and 9% have more than five family members who also attend First Grace. The survey did not differentiate whether congregants’ family members do not live in the area and are therefore unable to attend First Grace or whether congregants family members live in the area and choose not to attend First Grace.

One way in which openness is practiced is via the act of welcoming. One white congregant leader, Melanie, emphasized how First Grace's open-arms welcoming made an impact on her as a prospective congregant, so that she was now more involved with First Grace than she had been with any other church in her past. Because of her positive experience, Melanie chose to become a volunteer greeter at First Grace, joining black congregant leader Stephanie, who had initially greeted her. Stephanie had been drawn in the same way, and was thus passing along the same socio-spiritual welcoming that she herself had experienced. Both women imbued First Grace's welcome with great importance, and even though each woman revealed different backgrounds during interviews, both were looking for communities based on "love," where the congregation feels like a real "family." "People here mean their hugs," said Tia (interview, June 17, 2009). According to Brod, this welcoming spirit "transcends dictates" and is instead "created by people" (interview, June 5, 2009).

Congregants often used similar language when discussing salvation as when they discussed what it took to embrace the changes that come with joining a church like First Grace. For Gwen, "you have to be ready to listen, to hear," (interview, July 11, 2009) and for Matthew, "the heart has to be open" (interview, July 7, 2009). The language used to describe the process of accepting change as well as the process of being saved is the language of submission, of being faithfully open to what is happening. This repeated narrative of salvation and acceptance emphasizes trusting in God's will rather than attempting to control one's future and environment. According to the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline, Prevenient Grace is

the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first

glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith. [2004]

“Prevenient Grace” is a Methodist belief that there is a divine Grace that exists a priori to humans, and that humanity has a deep knowledge of God that prompts individuals want to do what they know is right. Wesleyans believe that this Grace does not ensure salvation, but enables it, and it is this Grace that makes human hearts open to God’s will, which eventuates change.

Tolerance of Fellow Congregants’ Religio-Spiritual Differences

Certain beliefs I hold as my own and personal enough to not expect others to share, nor do I force them but, I enjoy mutual respect and love for the “diverse wonder” of this church including the individuals and individual beliefs that make this church as beautiful as it is. [Survey response, July 26, 2009]

“First Grace...[has served as a] catalyst [for me]; it challenges me to think again about what my preconceptions are, my faith boundaries...” (Andrea, interview, June 16, 2009)

Many congregants at First Grace were not raised Methodist, nor do all members consider themselves Methodist now.⁴⁰ “It doesn’t make a difference whether someone is

⁴⁰ 48%, or slightly less than half of congregants surveyed, claimed Methodist self-identification. 11% of congregants surveyed claimed Catholic self-identification. 7% of congregants surveyed claimed no religious affiliation. Congregants were able to circle as many religious self-identifications as they chose.

I found during my semi-structured interviews that First Grace’s congregants often identify with more than one religious denomination or tradition. Some people may claim that you cannot be Protestant and Catholic simultaneously, but those who hold multiple religious self-identities would disagree. Survey results as a whole defy mutually exclusive categorizations.

In addition to circled responses, three congregants wrote in self-identifications: “Evangelical,” “Nature/Pagan Centered,” “Reconciling Methodist,” and “Spiritual but not pious.” Of the four respondents who chose to write in their religious identities, all were white females. One of these respondents wrote that she is Protestant, Methodist, Catholic and “Evangelical.” Another wrote that she is both Christian and “Nature/Pagan Centered.” Another wrote the word “kinda” next to where she circled Methodist and also wrote in that she is a “Reconciling Methodist.” Yet another white female congregant wrote in that she is “spiritual but not pious.” This documents my belief that First Grace’s congregants are accepting of multiple identities, some of which many Americans would find to be contradictory. This paradox is consistent with New Orleans’ religio-spiritual history, and would probably not surprise many New Orleanians who do not attend First Grace.

Methodist, as long as they are sincere” (Marilyn, interview, June 19, 2009). Rev. Shawn acknowledged during a service that he was aware of this trend at First Grace, when he jokingly stated that “many of you who have joined this church may not even know you’ve joined a United Methodist Church!” This joke reflects the sentiments shared by some congregants who *are* Methodist, who felt that some congregants did not have enough specific knowledge of the Methodist faith.

“Someone who’s not theologically trained shouldn’t pick the prayers,” complained one congregant, since a layperson chooses one of the prayers that is read during services. The congregant who felt this way also acknowledged that these prayers were popular amongst the congregation, most of whom do “know what it means to be a Methodist Christian.”⁴¹ First Grace is a church that is centered upon incorporation, or allowing new religio-spiritual and socio-spiritual elements into its congregation body, which enables congregants who do not necessarily self-identify as Methodist to feel comfortable in the blended worship environment. The diverse group of congregant leaders at First Grace contributes to the invention of tradition that takes place there. While many congregants strongly self-identify as Methodist, all are welcome to come share and celebrate their religio-spirituality in the open atmosphere at that First Grace promotes.

At one Supper and Study Dr. Martha W. spoke of her work reconstructing the life of Marie Laveau, “Voodoo Queen,” and how stigmas against Voodoo ritual practices are

⁴¹ 34% of congregants surveyed strongly agreed with the statement “I know what it means to be a Methodist Christian,” and 31% agreed with the statement. 31% were neutral about the statement, only 3% disagreed and no one strongly disagreed. The majority of congregants surveyed, 65%, “know what it means to be a Methodist Christian.”

founded in ethnocentric ignorance, from conceptions of the religion based on anachronistic media characterizations. Dr. Martha W.'s presentation was initially met with a few skeptical faces in the room of interested listeners, yet by the end of the presentation those congregants who seemed doubtful appeared to recognize that this religion is simply another spiritual expression, rooted in a different culture. Voodoo (or Vodun) religion is a topic of historical significance in New Orleans, and Dr. Martha W. was able to weave her discoveries about the subject into New Orleans' African American history, broadening the narrative so more congregants could understand the historical context of Voodoo. Dr. Martha concluded that "you can be [a voodoo practitioner] and a Catholic and a Methodist altogether...that's [what] [people] are able to do" (interview, July 24, 2009).

One congregant leader recognized that many modern people are "disenchanted" with religion, that they have been "abused" and "bored" by it, and are looking for something new to speak to what they believe. In a creolized city like New Orleans, First Grace's incorporation of new traditions lends socio-spiritual freshness to religious worship for many congregants. This invention of tradition provides congregants with a way to feel connected to one another without feeling restricted by participating in only one ethnicity's traditional forms of worship. Since those who are not baptized are able to take Methodist communion, even those who are not Christian can participate in the shared communion of souls that takes place each Sunday at First Grace. I discuss this topic further in the next chapter.

Many former and current Catholic Christians attend First Grace.⁴² While I did not probe deeply in interviews as to why these congregants do not attend the Catholic Church anymore since that question was not my focus, a few congregants wanted to discuss with me why they left the Catholic Church. Two lapsed Catholics informed me that they were attracted to First Grace because it doesn't have the strict hierarchy and adherence to tradition of Catholicism, but it is still intensely socially engaged (social justice is often particularly associated with Catholicism). Catholicism has been historically entrenched in New Orleans, so it is not surprising that many of First Grace's congregants were raised in the Catholic Church, but have chosen to attend a different church for various reasons.

According to Rev. Oscar, many Hispanic congregants at First Grace were only nominally Catholic, so the Catholic Church isn't "actually losing members to the Protestants....One priest [is] assigned to serve 10,000 people," in the Latin American towns where many congregants emigrated from (interview, July 2, 2009). Rev. Oscar surmised that the reason why some Catholic Church members were less likely to be engaged in the practice of their faith once they immigrated to New Orleans was because they did not receive enough personalized attention from clergy members in their towns of origin. Belonging to a church that serves less people could be an appealing factor to congregants who were not necessarily devout Catholics in the first place.

Appreciation of and Participation in a Diverse Community

Appreciation of diversity at First Grace is a central belief that is frequently invoked in leaders' and congregants' rhetoric. It is an integral part of congregants' religio-spiritual and socio-spiritual attitudes and practices, and is one of the reasons many

⁴² 11% of congregants surveyed self-identified as Catholic; the majority of whom circled "Catholic" and no other identity.

congregants joined First Grace in the first place.⁴³ This appreciation was essential to the process of First Grace's coming into existence; First Grace would not exist if this important value was not shared by congregants. If First Grace was not comprised of two formerly single-ethnicity churches, its diversity rhetoric could be only a dream, or a stated value used to attract diversity. Yet at First Grace, it is a reality, and is a basis for the church's commitment to the city as a whole, as they are proud to represent a diverse cross-section of New Orleans. For First Grace's congregants, embracing diversity does not simply mean people with many skin colors and class backgrounds all sitting together, it means a knowledge and appreciation of divergent thoughts and philosophies, and the creation of communities across ethnic lines.

For Rev. Oscar and many others at First Grace, ethnic diversity in the church is Biblically ordained. During our interview he told me of a commonly quoted passage from the Book of Genesis that tells Christians that humans are created in God's image. Rev. Oscar believes that God is diverse, and that human diversity is divine: "God is not [a] single, one expression. When we see others it's [evidence of] God's creativity" (interview, July 2, 2009). He went on to cite other Biblical passages about spreading the word of God to all nations (Matthew 28), and passages from the Book of Revelations (7,9,10) about the end of the world, when people of all languages, colors and tribes will worship together. "God is waiting for us, [so] we should start now acting this way; it's our responsibility to create that reality now" (interview, July 2, 2009). Rev. Oscar has a globalized view of Christianity's purpose, and emphasized that in today's world people

⁴³ Most congregants pass by one or more Methodist churches that are closer to their homes than First Grace, yet they choose to attend First Grace over other churches. See Appendix four for map of congregants' locations relative to other Methodist churches in Orleans Parish. Many congregants cited diversity in interviews as a large part of the church's appeal.

must “get to know” each other, “that we are different, and we are all the same” (interview, July 2, 2009). For Rev. Oscar, shared worship has the power to facilitate intercultural communication and cross-cultural community relationships, which is the basis of a better world.

Potential Drawbacks of Diversity

While First Grace’s congregants may appreciate diversity, there is the potential for congregants to become disenchanted with the idea if not enough rituals or messages feel familiar, or personally inclusive. One informant felt that First Grace’s diversity is simply not enough to sustain her interest in worshipping there, because the rituals were not similar to what she was used to in worship, or what she expected from worship. Worship is both an individual and group activity, and its meaningfulness is highly personal. Almost all of the congregants I interviewed at First Grace derive satisfying meaning from worshipping in a place where there are people with different worship backgrounds.

Another risk of focusing too heavily on the ideology of diversity over the actual experience is the potential for appreciation of diversity to exist as an abstract value, not a true basis for the intertwined community of First Grace. Celeste, a trained social scientist and congregant leader, asked: “What does talk about diversity really mean without personal relationships?” (interview, June 24, 2009) At First Grace, most congregants do form relationships with fellow congregants who do not share their age⁴⁴ or ethnicity.⁴⁵ “It takes time to build a community, [they] have to make it their normal lives [by]

⁴⁴ see figure 2

⁴⁵ see figure 1

spending time together during the week, not just Sunday morning” (Rev. Oscar, interview, July 2, 2009). I found that congregants of different ethnic backgrounds at First Grace do indeed have relationships with one another outside of church, and that these relationships are growing and deepening over time.

Self-Acceptance and Acceptance of Others

“This community is always trying to meet people halfway, to actively embrace people no matter who they are...” (Eric, interview, June 19, 2009)

“On the essentials, agreement, on the non-essentials, acceptance.” (Rev. Shawn quoting John Wesley, interview, July 21, 2009)

The messages emphasized at First Grace by its leadership and throughout its congregation are that God loves you for who you are, that the people in your life love you for who you are, and that with spiritual awareness and socio-spiritually guided action you can become the best person you can be. These messages underlie much of the rhetoric of services and are harmonious with the way First Grace’s congregants and leadership talk: “Whether you’re gay or straight, white or black, Christian or not...[you are loved]” (Rev. Shawn). First Grace is not a place where you have to hide your “sins,” it is a place where you can “let it all hang out,” according to Marilyn (interview, June 19, 2009). “At First Grace you can really be yourself, you don’t have to be somebody else...” and “I find it easy to fit in [at First Grace]; I’ve never been excluded [there].” are both sentiments echoed by First Grace’s leadership and many congregant informants. “What is it that you want to change, your hair, your body, your face? Why? Because God is in love with all of those things and would weep if they are gone” (Rev. Shawn).

Rev. Shawn’s use of “Mother-Father-God” during the Lord’s Prayer is a way for the church to transcend American culture-bound ideas of gender by ridding itself of a

gendered image of God. The historically ubiquitous depiction of an old white male God can be harmful to those whose looks aren't represented by this icon of omnipotence. Some congregants are uncomfortable with First Grace's alteration of the traditional Lord's Prayer, and a few congregants stated that it sounds polytheistic. Yet the inclusive language of this new Lord's Prayer is meant to encompass more congregants' ideas of God. Rev. Shawn spoke about his difficult decision to change the way he says the Lord's Prayer, saying that "it's become more natural, but it's still being worked on. It's a little forced...I don't think it's wrong, but it's right in front of a traditional prayer" (interview, July 21, 2009). First Grace's commitment to inclusion is demonstrated in this purposefully remade ritual.

While in the intentional community's common room, I noticed a depiction of a handsome, blue-eyed white Jesus with a sticker placed above it that stated in stark, capitalized letters: "Jesus Wasn't White". By placing this in their common room the intentional community members were cheekily asserting that not only did Jesus almost certainly not look like this artist's portrayal, but that this anachronistic image is tacitly racist and should not be taken seriously. The "white Jesus" portrait hanging in the community room is a symbol of defiance, of refusal to buy into ethnocentric portrayals of Jesus or, by extension, sexist personifications of God. In displaying their resistance, the intentional community members were expressing that they were indeed celebrating humanity's diverse reality.

"The power of the Methodist spirit is that whoever you can't be in communion with is on you...you can share communion with 'the other,' right here" (Rev. Shawn). This statement epitomizes the acceptance rhetoric of First Grace. "Othering" is not

acceptable at First Grace, and those who have been marginalized in American society are welcomed at First Grace. Stephanie, a black congregant leader in her 50s who's seen the city change over time, expressed how she has never felt discriminated against at First Grace, only loved and accepted.

First Grace strives to be a church where homeless individuals attend services and receive aid, not a church that relegates the homeless to being anonymous recipients of free meals given at the back door, as Rev. Shawn witnessed at another Methodist church in a different state. Homeless congregants are commonplace at First Grace, and some congregants have even given rides homeless individuals to bring them to services. At one Wednesday night Supper and Study Stephanie, who works for the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, spoke of New Orleans' housing crisis that left 1 in 24 (mostly black) residents homeless at that time. Alleviating homelessness is one of the church's missions, as Hagar's House aims to provide women in crisis with housing. One congregant I interviewed moved into Hagar's House after her husband's death. Like numerous New Orleanians who were newly homeless, she'd previously enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle, and even during periods of money trouble could never have imagined that she would need free housing. Yet the circumstances that befell many of New Orleans' residents after Hurricane Katrina could never have seemed possible.

Celebrating Life and Recovering From the Trauma of Katrina

"Going to First Grace is like going on a vacation to Paradise island—you expect to have a good time then it's even better than you thought!" (Margaret, interview, June 16, 2009)

"First Grace is based...on being an active prophetic voice in a hurting community, with an emphasis being strictly on community." (Dr. Martha W., interview, July 24, 2009)

New Orleans is a place that evokes the pleasures of life, and its people celebrate even amidst struggle. First Grace is a church of the city, in a city known by outsiders for Mardi Gras, jazz funerals, and an “anything goes” mentality. While residents of the Crescent City may collectively have a more laissez faire attitude than residents of other American cities, First Grace’s congregants do not necessarily share an “anything goes” mentality. First Grace’s celebration is socio-spiritual in nature; as congregant leader Tia once said “at First Grace [they’re] celebrating Christ in a city famous for celebrating.” For Sarah, First Grace is “a celebration of life and community, a celebration of life in New Orleans together, as a body, [a] body of Christ. It’s cozy and easy to fit in...there’s no pressure to conform, to act a certain way, sing a certain song...” (interview, June 26, 2009)

Exuberance, elation and joy are ubiquitous at First Grace, as congregants optimistically recover from the life-altering events of Katrina. Yet there still exists a painful side to recovering from such tragedy, especially at First Grace, which was borne of loss. “There’s a change when people publicly process pain,” congregant leader Brod observed (interview, June 5, 2009), and despite its generally upbeat environment, First Grace provides a forum for congregants to publicly process their pain. This process allows reconciliation not just for those sharing their pain, but for those witnessing the pain being shared, because they too are participating by listening.

Hurricane Katrina decimated longstanding communities, so bonding in new communities can occur through the cathartic acts of individuals sharing and listening to one another’s experiences of trauma. Recovery is an ongoing process, so those impacted need space to talk about what they have been through. Those empathizing community

members who didn't live in New Orleans until after the storm can serve as sounding boards for survivors and as new lifeblood in the community. Those who did not personally experience Katrina may have pain in their lives that being in a space of recovery could allow them to process, reconcile:

All of us are committed to something new, to coming back and returning to a very damaged city, with few social services...all of us made commitments about where to live, what our friendship networks would be....all of us here have made that choice [to return and help New Orleans recover]. [Dr. Martha W., interview July 24, 2009]

As the old adage goes, "joy shared is doubled, and pain shared is halved."

Several New Orleanians I met (including non-congregants) consistently used humor and parody when talking about the city and their chaotic, post-Katrina lives, even in the midst of heart-wrenching stories. Congregants were often lighthearted in the face of pain, choosing to focus on the positive and what they saw as good and right in their lives. Rev. Shawn frequently used humor to keep an upbeat, positive attitude about life's hardships, and to focus on congregants' commonalities. Participating in humor can promote group bonding, and remind individuals that life can still be joyous even during times of extreme duress. Bringing humor into discussions of serious topics allows rising tension to break like a wave upon a rock.

Several congregants discussed their Katrina-induced suffering in ways that demonstrated how they have rendered their stories of pain and strife as rites of passage or necessary events that led them to their current states of grateful happiness. They felt that their lives had purposeful paths, and that God was in control of their paths. Many of these congregants had been through overwhelmingly traumatic experiences to emerge feeling that they had been gifted by their new lives at First Grace. A few stated that they

felt they had changed to become more accepting, patient, and open because of what they had been through. One survey respondent wrote of her Hurricane Katrina experience:

[First Grace] is my family in Christ and no matter where in the world I am there is always a Methodist family that I can be part of. It was the Methodist church in Abbeville, AL that was there for me and my mother after Katrina. I was not a Methodist until Katrina. My mother and I lost 3 homes and all belongings. Then I lost my mother....When I returned to NOLA, I sought out a new family. I am very proud of First Grace UMC.

For Stephanie, First Grace delivered her from personal tragedies in her past to where she was at the time that I interviewed her: happy and hopeful even though she still faced some hardship. Stephanie and others felt that First Grace was the light at the end of a tunnel of difficult times, and thus their pasts had to happen for a reason, to lead them to where they were. Similar gratitude radiated from many congregants who had experienced living in New Orleans pre-and post-Hurricane Katrina.

Congregant Losses beyond Katrina

“An awareness of loss often typifies studies of the sacred” (Fenn 2003:6), since religion deals in sacred times, people and places that have since been lost. Loss can serve to remind one that life is ephemeral, and to be cherished. Rev. Shawn knows that “people have given up something to be [at First Grace],” (interview, July 21, 2009) and that a sense of loss pervades even in times of joy. Former Grace UMC’s congregation lost their antebellum church building and some of their traditional ways of worship, and former First UMC’s congregation also lost some of their traditional ways of worship. One white congregant remarked that “black Christians get suffering like white Christians don’t,” since their collective history has been impacted by the trauma of slavery, yet their heritages strengthened by resistance and resilience in the face of unimaginable hardship. For former Grace UMC’s congregants, their ancestors’ ongoing, arduous work was not

limited to constructing and maintaining their church for over 150 years, but doing so in an oppressive environment.

To cope with fear of loss, one of the messages frequently conveyed in sermons and repeated by congregation members is that the future is unknown, but by cherishing the present and strengthening your faith in God the future can be exciting. For many Christians, learning lessons from the Bible and from the life of Jesus Christ can strengthen faith, and many of First Grace's congregants cite those lessons as fundamentally important. In addition, participating in rituals reaffirms faith while uniting participants. At First Grace, congregants have experienced loss and regained wholeness, but that loss is what has allowed space for change. Dr. Martha W. describes how First Grace's formation was made possible by the hurricane's havoc:

What allowed this opening was mad trauma, mad suffering, mad destruction. And...the government did not move in with appropriate levels of assistance or help. And the churches [that had political structures] had to make a decision, and their leaders came from the outside, and they had to step in and do something [when] there was no playbook, no manual, none....[Hurricane Katrina] changed things in New Orleans at a cellular level. [interview, July 24, 2009]

New Orleans and First Grace's congregation have been permanently altered by the loss they have experienced. Rebuilding after loss and thriving after tragedy is an avenue through which believers can strengthen their faith. Despite setbacks, First Grace's Katrina survivors are strong and growing stronger in the face of continued struggle.

Conclusion: Summary and Concerns

First Grace is a church where the collective rises above the individual. Despite the ascent of a capitalist moral system that promotes individualism (Browne 2009), the phenomenon of collective orientation is characteristic of New Orleans culture,

historically and still today. A collective mindset is what allows individuals to feel that by compromising they are facilitating the construction of something bigger than themselves. Social movements require some compromise to accomplish what they set out to do.

Tannen (1990) theorizes that a human need for connection with others is coupled with a need for autonomy and control, and that these dual needs underlie many social interactions. The shared socio-spiritual language at First Grace encourages connection, but the space for invention allows control. If First Grace's practices become too set in stone, the same people who were attracted to the church because of its potential, its Creole newness, may want to leave the community because they are no longer affecting change. This is a major risk that First Grace faces, and overcoming this risk is a continual process. Many of First Grace's young congregant leaders have left New Orleans since I conducted fieldwork, because they wanted to pursue other avenues of change. The city cannot remain "open for impact" indefinitely, as social structures will become entrenched over time. It is still in question whether First Grace's efforts during this critical window of recovery will create the enduring change they seek in a country whose economic system doesn't usually reward non-profit ventures. For First Grace's impact to be continual, it must remain open to newness while sustaining its ideals. This is surely a difficult balance to maintain.

First Grace forges a collective identity within its institutional bounds that places city before the group and the group before the individual, all while respecting different groups' histories and allowing individuals personal freedom to define their own spiritualities. First Grace's leadership and its congregants' shared values allow them to form bonds despite historically divisive practices and power differentials. First Grace's

congregation is one that values openness and tolerance, acceptance and the celebration of life. First Grace aims to be “a place where the city worships,” a vision which resonates with a sense of urgency in the changing post-Katrina New Orleans landscape. Their desire to heal the city by forging relationships of mutual assistance and webs of exchange is acted upon collectively and individually, allowing congregants the space to pursue individually valued causes. First Grace’s congregants may have different ethnic identities and spiritual backgrounds, but all are dedicated to the city they live in, and all share a foundation of values that will allow culture change to occur in their developing, dynamic community.

In the next chapter, I discuss how First Grace’s invented worship and social structures promote the behavior that demonstrates the collective values I have identified. These collective values are what allow First Grace’s congregation to engage in the process of ethnic transcendence. In addition, I discuss current issues and future areas of concern for First Grace, so that the church can address these potential issues before debilitating problems ever arise.

Chapter 6: First Grace's Invented Traditions, Rituals and Worship Structures promote Ethnic Transcendence

Introduction: First Grace's Invention of Tradition

"[Today's] increased spiritual inventiveness...has opened up a wide range of possibilities for mutuality and interaction" (Fenn 2003:3). At First Grace, interaction has promoted the invention of traditions, which is a process of spiritual creativity that has traditionally taken place in creolized New Orleans. "Creole identities are themselves an invention of distinct African and European cultural influences" (Browne 2004:84), and First Grace's worship services use elements found in both African American and European American churches to invent something new. First Grace is neither a "black" church nor a "white" church. A more accurate descriptor is that First Grace is a Creole church.⁴⁶

The invented traditions of First Grace not only reflect the heritages of the congregation, they also allow all congregants to lay claim to the newly formed rituals and practices. Anne, a congregant leader and Rev. Shawn's wife, asserts that ritual is more prominent in the everyday lives of New Orleanians than in most other cities in America. First Grace's worship rituals, church community structures and practices promote the congregation's shared values, which in turn allow space for the process of ethnic transcendence to occur.

⁴⁶ Many, if not most, of its members do not necessarily share a Creole self-identity, but the church shares a collective Creole ethos.

In this chapter I explore how the church's practices inculcate and reinforce the values outlined in the previous chapter, with a greater focus on what congregants and leadership *do* that evidences these values. I examine the rituals that exemplify First Grace's invention of tradition, and how First Grace's structures promote its values. I discuss how First Grace's congregants and leadership contribute to the invention of tradition at First Grace, from the church's music to practices such as the passing of the peace and new member meetings that allow congregants to build community. In order to contextualize First Grace's invention of tradition, I compare and contrast First Grace's services to two other local Methodist churches' services. Finally, I discuss the challenges, problems, and future concerns that First Grace faces in the form of a question and answers. Creative newness can be borne of chaos, and the chaos surrounding Katrina allowed space for First Grace to invent its own traditions and rituals. By being 'open for impact,' First Grace allows collective participation in the development of culture change.

“Oh Happy Day”: Music Promotes Group Bonding at First Grace

“Lord, help me to hold out...’til my change has come” (Rev. James Cleveland, sung by First Grace's choir)

At First Grace, music is a central draw for many of the congregants I interviewed. “Music helps blur the line between your secular and spiritual self,” according to Tia (interview, June 17, 2009). At First Grace, where multiple musical genres and heritages are represented, the variety evidences why several congregants cited the church's music as “the biggest change” since the merger. This musical variety is symbolic of First Grace's multiethnic unity. Tia and Jennie, both talented singers in the choir, performed a

duet one Sunday in which their dual voices merged and soared. Jennie and Tia are young women who are, respectively, white and black, and their shared song was a symbol of First Grace's harmony. As they sang, the congregation appeared captivated, rapt with attention to the pure tones that came from deep within the two women. One could tell from their performance that Tia and Jennie are good friends. Their eyes shined as they looked at one another, and this interaction energized the entire room.

Assistant music director⁴⁷ Jennie didn't want the music of First Grace's "grassroots" choir to become formulaic or over-polished. This is in-line with First Grace's element of structured surprise during service, and reflects First Grace's eclectic invention of tradition. Traditional hymns, gospel songs, and popular spiritual music by artists such as Kirk Franklin, the Beatles, Alison Kraus, and Leonard Cohen were all performed at First Grace during the course of my fieldwork. Much to congregants' delight, songs often transformed into extended improvisations and built up to rollicking crescendos, where congregants could feel the musical tension tighten and then be released. Not only is the music at First Grace eclectic, it is collaborative, creative and spontaneously structured.

All who want to join the choir are welcome, and choir members are given the opportunity to perform a solo piece during a song if they desire to do so. The choir is made up of a multitude of different voices: male and female, young adults and older, all with different timbres and intonations. In the choir all can sing the way they feel, and the resultant sound is one that, combined with the instrumentation, brings goosebumps to the

⁴⁷ Carver is the music director, and he is an accomplished musician and professor at New Orleans' Dillard University.

congregation more often than not. The diversity of players, singers, songs and styles is representative of First Grace itself.

Rotating solos give everyone in the choir a chance to be center stage. This practice contributes to the participatory nature of First Grace, the group orientation that offers a place to anyone who wants a role. One normally shy teenage boy appeared filled with confidence as he let his voice ring clear and true during a solo performance, and that confidence radiated from him during the rest of the service. The safe and accepting atmosphere that First Grace provides allows congregants to feel comfortable joining the choir in song, as they are encouraged to do, and every service brings congregants' joyous celebration of life to a fever pitch. The diverse choir itself has "gotten used to each other" according to one member, which speaks to First Grace's congregants' desire to accommodate differences by inventing shared traditions.

New Orleans is so steeped in musical traditions that it is no surprise people are open to different forms of music, and that they expect good music at church. The band and choir's varied musical repertoire better positions First Grace to exceed congregants' musical expectations. While many songs rejoice, others lament. The invention of an eclectic musical tradition at First Grace creates an atmosphere that primes congregants for structured surprised, which the church uses to allow space for culture change. By eliciting congregants' emotions, the music at First Grace promotes group bonding and allows ethnic transcendence to occur.

Leaving Room for Others: The Passing of the Peace Promotes Personal Relationships amongst Congregants

“Controlled chaos” is an idea that was invoked by a few informants to describe First Grace’s passing of the peace. Each person who said the phrase, or one similar to it, seemed to revel in the re-invented tradition, this New Orleans-style extended social time. “Controlled chaos” is a state that New Orleanians are used to, and that many newcomers have learned to love. Some forms of chaos have been consistent in New Orleans since its inception, and the city’s artistic core may rely on this chaos to produce new understandings through stimulation and tumult.

The passing of the peace at First Grace has been described by informants as a space where genuine interaction and community bonding occur, as congregants are encouraged to leave their seats and roam about the room to greet and chat with other congregants. If witnessed from above, one might liken the circulation of congregants in the sanctuary to a pot of stew being slowly stirred, with each ingredient softening as it embraces another. The 15 to 20 minute span of time allotted to this activity signifies that it takes a little while to truly be able to “pass the peace.” Congregants felt this unstructured ritual allowed “real” interactions to occur: “It never felt false to me, like other ones I’ve been to [where congregants only greet the people immediately surrounding themselves]” (Sarah, interview, June 26, 2009). “All that hugging is real, not fake; I don’t do well with fake!” (Stephanie, interview, June 25, 2009).

First Grace’s passing of the peace is able to simultaneously fulfill its goal of creating fellowship and communion amongst its congregants while projecting another message about the church’s structure itself: First Grace does not adhere to strict or

restrictive service practices. First Grace's passing of the peace is a ritual that goes beyond the comfort zones of many, but facilitates the formation of personal relationships. Once friendship is established, the passing of the peace allows the church body to renew its commitment to itself weekly. The passing of the peace at First Grace demonstrates that the congregation cherishes relationships within its community, and that they are open to forging new relationships with new congregants, or open to new impacts. Promoting the development of personal relationships would be of utmost importance to any church that is striving to forge a stable congregational community, or a congregation that is built upon a foundation of true understanding and commitment to the city's people.

Honoring Diverse Ways to Create and Sustain a Personal Relationship with God

The creation and exploration of a personal relationship with God is part of the Methodist tradition; this is how one is believed to achieve salvation. John Wesley preached against predestination and group salvation at a time when those ideas predominated in England and the fledgling United States, and instead attracted followers (and persecution) by preaching that it was the responsibility of the individual to create a relationship with God.

Many of First Grace's congregants appreciate a wide array of religio-spiritual experiences that are not always derived from the Christian tradition, and participate in rituals that honor this value. Congregants recognize that a personal relationship with God can be scaffolded by a diverse array of actions, as the following example illustrates: five of First Grace's intentional community members decided to fast for Ramadan, a holy month in Islam. Ramadan is a month on the lunar calendar where Muslims around the world work to honor and renew their faiths by being especially attentive to religio-

spiritual matters. Muslims abstain from food and drink (including water) from dawn to sunset daily during the month. For Muslims, this ritual fast honors their faith in Allah and enables them to empathize with people who are starving, among other religio- and socio-spiritual benefits. Purity, family, and charity are amongst the values emphasized during this period, and the month ends with the celebration of Eid.

I was told by one congregant leader that Rev. Shawn announced during service that the group of four (plus another who was living outside of the country) were fasting for Ramadan, in order to understand the Muslim ritual and to experience the same spiritual benefits that Muslims do. One of the participants emphasized the closeness that he felt to the others in the group who were fasting, as they met in the morning to eat before the day began and then again in the evening to break their fasts together. This group felt a sense of community amongst themselves as they found new ways to deepen their own personal faiths, and the experience provided them with an increased sense of connection to those who practice other religious faiths. First Grace's congregants recognize that one's religio-spirituality can be strengthened through participation in rituals that aren't always Christian or Methodist, which the intentional community's Ramadan fasting exemplifies. Borrowing from the practices of other religions allows congregants more options as they seek to invent shared traditions at First Grace.

Unique but Still Methodist: How First Grace's Services Compare to Services at Other Methodist Churches in the Greater New Orleans Area

What makes First Grace different from other Methodist churches? On a national, demographic level, this question is not difficult to answer: First Grace is a multiethnic Protestant church, a rare phenomenon in America. I sought to answer this question on a

local level by attending two other Methodist churches in the greater New Orleans area in order to experience their services and observe the makeup of their congregations. This inquiry was methodologically limited to a single service at each church on a single summer Sunday, so it is by no means a conclusive comparison, but a snapshot of what I witnessed. Gretna UMC in nearby Gretna, LA and St. Matthew's UMC in Metairie, LA, were two churches that were mounting efforts to become more ethnically diverse, as I was told by Dr. Martha O. and Dr. Ellen, with whom I attended. This made the churches prime candidates for comparison with First Grace.

Church programs create first impressions of churches that congregants can use to evaluate whether or not a church will fit their spiritual needs. At First Grace, each service's program featured different artwork on the cover. This art was either congregant children's work or the work of one of the intentional community members, Jennie. The cover art tended to portray natural scenes with Christian imagery, such as an angel or swan, and sometimes secular imagery. Hebrew was occasionally used in the program cover art. At the other two Methodist churches, the cover art was strictly Methodist or explicitly Christian on the day I attended. St. Matthew's UMC used the United Methodist Church logo on its program cover, while Gretna UMC's program featured a pyramid with the word "GOD" in the middle, from which lines extended to the three points. Each thick line had "is" written within it, and pointed to either "Father," "Son," or "Spirit." Encircling the pyramid shaped diagram was a thick line with the words "is not" written three times, one for each section that surrounded the pyramid. These programs were in no way reminiscent of First Grace's, and their images create a first impression of the church's mission(s) that seemed more traditional, less "creatively" Methodist than First

Grace's. Neither featured a "Statement of Faith," or anything similar as is found in the First Grace program.

Another notable difference between the First Grace program and those at St. Matthew's and Gretna UMC was that on the First Grace program Rev. Shawn's personal email and his office phone number are printed. While recruiting informants I noticed (and was told) that many people in New Orleans do not use email often or at all ("this is a face-to-face city"), so having Rev. Shawn's phone number avoids communication barriers between congregants and their pastor. St. Matthew's program featured a list of email addresses for the church's "ministry team," which included two pastors, the music director and office manager. Only the church's main phone number was listed. On Gretna UMC's program, no contact information was given for the pastor, who, the program noted, was on vacation. Congregants were directed to call the other pastor in case of "a pastoral emergency," and his phone number was provided. While a pastor's personal phone number was provided, it was provided under the condition of "emergency" use, thus making the pastor less accessible to the congregation.

At Gretna UMC, the church building was a neat, modern facility with stiffly upholstered couches in the lobby, and goodie bags with items like candy, mugs and pens for visitors. I was greeted by one or two congregants, but not with the enthusiasm and personal attention of a First Grace greeter. The choir was comprised of black and white members, and the songs were sung in contemporary and smooth jazz styles. Around less than half of the congregation appeared to be black, with the rest of the congregation appearing to be white, but this number could fluctuate from week to week.

The pulpit was front and center, whereas the pulpit at First Grace is on one side. The choir of five formally dressed singers stepped off the stage when the pastor delivered his sermon, unlike at First Grace, where the choir of ten plus remains seated in front of the congregation during the sermon, waiting to sing again. Rev. Shawn doesn't want the choir on stage, elevated above the rest of the congregation, even though some choir members have complained that the congregation sometimes cannot hear them over the instruments. The floor-level choir facing the congregation demonstrates that at First Grace the choir is part of the congregation; they are in no way removed from the group. Dressed in whatever clothes they desire, not the robes of former First UMC or many other churches, First Grace's choir is common, they are leaders in song but not to the exclusion of the congregation, who are encouraged to sing along. Singing participation at Gretna UMC seemed much lower than at First Grace. The church felt like a pleasant place to be, but its polish was intimidating and the room did not exude the welcoming of First Grace.

At St. Matthew's UMC, my group was not really greeted at all, save for one "hello" on our way in. Dr. Martha O. gave a riveting sermon on the need for diversity in the church, and her message seemed well received. Even though this was a church seeking to become more diverse, the congregation appeared to be all white on the Sunday we attended. The group was small on the day I attended, about 20 or fewer congregants. The music was played and sung by a guitarist with some accompaniment, and the congregants sang along, reading the lyrics on the big screen televisions that lined the walls. At First Grace, congregants are given program inserts with the lyrics to one or two of the day's songs, while other songs they simply know, catch on to, or do not participate

in singing. While this technology enabled congregants at St. Matthew's to participate in singing along with the talented church guitarist, it did lend a less intimate feel to the service, which took place in a darkly-lit room with kneeling altars lining the stage. The music was all performed in an acoustic folk/rock singer-songwriter style, which would most likely need to be changed if the church were to attract and then retain a diverse congregant body.

Some of my informants at First Grace complained that other churches do not practice what they preach, but claim that First Grace certainly does. One congregant stated that while other churches talk the talk, First Grace does the "love walk," according to Julie (interview, July 14, 2009): "People go out of their way to tell you they want YOU here, they are glad to see YOU, and that they look forward to seeing YOU next week....They make you feel as if your presence means something...." Julie had gone to "30 or 40 churches" before finding and choosing First Grace. As I interviewed Julie in First Grace's common room someone walked past and greeted her, thanked her for being there, and for being her. This occurrence was a perfect example of what she had just explained, and a demonstration of what I had continuously seen myself. One cannot help but feel comfortable when personally greeted and welcomed, which was one of the greatest differences between First Grace and the other two Methodist churches I visited in surrounding parishes.

First Grace's music, its lengthy passing of the peace and even its service program are features that make the church unique, yet it is still a legitimate Methodist church. The music at First Grace is diverse and can accommodate many tastes and backgrounds, and the open, naturally lit sanctuary provides an appealing backdrop for a welcoming

congregation. While structured, the element of surprise is present in every service at First Grace, which facilitates joyful congregant bonding over the unique experience.

Current Concerns, Long-Term Challenges, and Areas for Improvement at First Grace:

Questions and Answers

As First Grace grows and changes, many questions have been asked by congregants and church leadership: How can First Grace remain open to growth, yet socio-spiritually cohesive? How are Hispanic/Latino/Spanish-speaking congregants being integrated into First Grace's community? Will the current church and congregant leadership "burn out" due to the multiple roles they fill and duties they perform? Will the church's ministries continue to expand and flourish, or will some lose support and die out? All of these questions pertain to First Grace's future, a future that is doubly unknown in the context of still-recovering, disaster-prone New Orleans. In this section, I will address these lingering questions to the best of my ability, even though some answers will only become apparent over time.

Q: Are Hispanic/Latino/Spanish-speaking congregants being integrated into First Grace's community?



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“Latinos are treated [by some] as invisible people in the city...sometimes being ignored is worse than discrimination [since it implies non-personhood].” (Rev. Oscar, interview, July 2, 2009)

A: In order for congregants to get to know one another better, congregant leaders held small group meetings in their homes throughout the summer of 2009. At the meeting, each person in attendance told his or her “First Grace story,” or how she or he came to the church, what his or her life circumstances were, and what she or he hoped to find.

One set of small group meetings was held after service at the church. Participating

congregants were broken into groups of about six to eight individuals, and Hispanic/Latino and Spanish-speaking congregants were distributed evenly amongst the groups. One of the main intentions of these meetings, as I was told by several congregants, was to integrate Hispanic/Latino and Spanish-speaking congregants into the larger First Grace community.

Hispanic/Latino and Spanish-speaking congregants may not have had as many opportunities as others to get to know the rest of the congregation, and these meetings relied on translators to overcome the language barrier so congregants could become familiar with one another. I was pleasantly surprised to see several young non-Hispanic congregants serving as translators, yet most congregants who are not of Hispanic descent are monolingual English speakers. These meetings may not have been able to become very personal because of translation and their “getting to know one another” nature, but they did allow people to become acquainted enough so that they could greet one another during the Passing of the Peace.

First Grace’s open values and invention of shared worship traditions seek to accommodate its growing Hispanic/Latino demographic, but the two bilingual Hispanic/Latino congregants whom I interviewed both noted that language posed the most significant obstacle to full community integration. These bilingual informants felt that Spanish-speaking congregants shared the values of First Grace, but that they could not fully participate in its ministries and social community due to language differences.

Many Spanish-speaking congregants attend the 2 p.m. worship service, as it is conducted in Spanish by Rev. Oscar. Rev. Oscar pointed out to me that many Hispanic/Latino congregants work Sunday mornings, so 2 p.m. services better suit their

schedules. This structural barrier to full integration-participation is something the leadership at First Grace is well aware of, and has been attempting to overcome via the new member meetings and by providing once-monthly translated services. Separate services are meant to accommodate Hispanic/Latino and Spanish-speaking congregants, yet separate services prevent communal participation in rituals, and this interaction is essential to community building.

Two choir members and congregant leaders wanted to include more Spanish language music, and they performed at least one song in Spanish while I was in attendance, but I was told that it was proving difficult to teach non-Spanish speakers to sing in Spanish, so the process of incorporation was still ongoing at the time I completed fieldwork in late July 2009.

Q: Is it possible for First Grace to remain open yet cohesive in its values as time marches on and the congregation grows? Can the congregation become too large and lose some of what makes it so personally engaging? Simply put, is growth always a good thing for First Grace's congregant community?

A: First Grace is a pluralistic church. There are many viewpoints represented there, and they are held together by the fundamental belief that God created myriad humans to embody diverse practices, and that humans are fundamentally equal. First Grace's ethnic transcendence is an ongoing process that, if continued, will enable the church community to grow in numbers while keeping its values consistent. Some congregant leaders anticipated that this will be the church's central struggle, while others were more optimistic that the church community could "roll with the punches," as it has in its relatively brief history.

According to a couple of congregant informants, First Grace does sacrifice some of its theological coherence for the sake of tolerance, since the church doesn't want to risk alienating individual congregants by disapproving of anyone's earnest views. As one congregant leader remarked, "it is totally credited to Shawn that we have not had a visible doctrinal fight. That's what kills churches."

For instance, a few congregants felt that Rev. Shawn's use of "Mother-Father-God" in place of "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer was a theological misstep, since these congregants appreciate reciting the traditional form of the prayer. Yet other congregants were pleased with what they see as an essential "update" to an old prayer, and thought that this alteration gave the Lord's Prayer greater power and relevance in today's society.

First Grace's congregants are free to disagree with practices at the church, or ideas that other congregants hold, because all know and trust in the commitment of one another to the betterment of themselves and their city. Yet if this commitment becomes "watered down" by those who do not share the sense of urgency (engendered by Katrina) that First Grace's congregants did during the time I attended, then the church may lose its ability to draw people to its shared construction of newness.

As membership grows, congregants' different beliefs could lead to confusion, or faction forming instead of intra-group cohesion. Could tolerance of difference, rather than openness to difference, become First Grace's standard? One congregant leader informed me that she feels the church sometimes lack cohesion, and needs "a direction, a vision" to better guide their missions and work in the community. This congregant thought "a more standard or regular set of programs" could help First Grace achieve a more unified direction. She did note one caveat of her ideas for improvement; she didn't

want “to see regularity stifle randomness,” or regulations prevent the church’s openness to change and new practices.

While First Grace is a church that accommodates different religio-spiritual perspectives, it is first and foremost a Methodist church. As much as its community is open to those who aren’t Methodist, its religio-spiritual rhetoric could fail to attract people do not share a Methodist self-identity but who do share the community’s values. This would limit First Grace’s ability to be a true community base for the city. As I have noted, many of First Grace’s members do not self-identify as Methodist, but most members do believe in God. Some activist-oriented individuals may not like the explicitly religious part of the community, and therefore never choose to merge their efforts with First Grace’s.

A few congregants worried that if church membership grows too large then the community will “lose meaning,” or “create a community disconnect.” There is a 200 person capacity in First Grace’s sanctuary,⁴⁸ so if the church grew too large in membership, congregants would lose physical proximity and wouldn’t be as close to one another as a community. One congregant stated that she would like First Grace’s congregation to grow, but she doesn’t want the church community to become “like a college class that’s too big,” since she wants to greet everyone personally. In March 2009, First Grace’s congregation wore name tags, a temporary practice that felt “too impersonal, too formal” to this congregant. Another congregant thought that membership growth was good for First Grace, since it would allow the church to become more powerful in New Orleans, more “politically and socially engaged, [and] active.”

⁴⁸ There were between 70 and 100 congregants in attendance on any given Sunday when I conducted fieldwork.

First Grace may risk losing a portion of its congregants and potential congregants by catering to variety of interests, yet openness to inevitable change is one of First Grace's greatest strengths. Post-Katrina New Orleans is a place where people are nostalgic for how things used to be, but are actively creating and constructing how things are, and how they are going to be. First Grace's congregants create some of the rituals that they participate in, such as the passing of the peace, while they engage in others that are very old, such as taking communion. This allows First Grace to straddle old and new, to integrate and incorporate meaningful elements once isolated from one another. "Marking time, ritual, is so so important. To remember what is impermanent and to let go of it, and to recommit to what is eternal and to live out of it" (Rev. Shawn in "Canal Street News").

Q: Is the current leadership likely to experience burnout due to the overwhelming responsibilities they face? Will First Grace's ministries remain sustainable over time?

A: The 9% of survey respondents who replied that they participate in over five hours a week of service/ministry work at First Grace are likely the core group of congregant leaders. They are the hands and feet of First Grace, and without them, it is undeniable that some ministries would fall by the wayside, or become inert. These leaders sometimes complained that they had too much responsibility on their plates, or that other congregants did not do enough to help out. If congregant leaders were able to delegate more tasks to willing congregants, their burdens could be eased.

The nature of volunteer work is that many people will not go out of their way to perform such labor, so it is unlikely that congregant leaders will suddenly be able to recruit an army of willing volunteers to help them out. Instead, First Grace's growth will allow new members to slowly become integrated and involved with ministries they care

about, and congregant leaders will likely be periodically granted at least a few new passionate volunteers. Many congregants were doing what they could to help out, and volunteering even small amounts of time could make a big difference. As ministries become more established, they may run more smoothly and take less time and effort in comparison to the conditions of their establishment.

“Right now, the opportunities are endless,” said intentional community member Sarah; “you could start a committee” for just about any cause that one was inspired by (interview, June 26, 2009). This idea epitomizes how First Grace is ‘open for impact,’ yet is also open to the disadvantage of being less established; projects and ministries could fizzle out, or an overzealous congregant leader could impose his or her own agenda upon the ministry. These potentially negative impacts have not occurred at First Grace, but leadership changes over time, so this risk is always present. In addition, if First Grace’s congregant leaders do not feel that they truly are making an impact over time, or if their efforts do not lead to satisfactory results, First Grace could lose several of its valuable leaders. People want to feel that their continuous work is leading somewhere, that they are building something successful. If congregant leaders do not feel that they are doing this, they may become discouraged and discontinue their labors.

First Grace is not a church of factions, but it contains groups within its larger body who spend more time together outside of church than others. New member meetings were a way for congregants to get acquainted and reacquainted, and to allow new congregants opportunities to get involved. Both the new member meetings and Wednesday night Supper and Studies facilitate conflict-alleviating communication, so it would be beneficial to the church to continue to periodically hold meetings of this nature.

Q: What other issues were raised by congregant informants?

A: Several informants cited the need for more young people in the church. Some congregants were speaking of pre-teens and teenagers, while others meant those in their 20s.⁴⁹ The congregants who brought up this issue felt that the church didn't offer enough activities or opportunities for young people, especially teens, to get involved. "Without the youth you've got a dying church" said Gwen (interview, July 11, 2009), and several others echoed the same sentiment. Youth issues are a prominent concern in New Orleans, as poverty and violence continue to wreak havoc on the recovering city. Youth anywhere in America need activities to foster their growth and development, and these congregants were well aware that First Grace needs to better cater to this population, a group who so often falls in the cracks when it comes to voluntary participation and general involvement.

At Gretna UMC there were Bible study classes for (almost) every demographic, ranging from Seniors to age 40 through 60, young adult couples with children, youth preschool aged through 5th grade, 6th through 8th grade, and 9th through 12th grades.⁵⁰ While Bible study won't necessarily create significant involvement with the church, it does provide the potential for camaraderie and fellowship with members of one's own age group. First Grace does not often divide its congregation by demographics (with the exception of a children's group), so the fact that First Grace does not have a set of Bible studies for different age groups is quite characteristic of the church's ethos.

⁴⁹ 34% of survey respondents were aged 18-30, the highest percentage of any age group represented. This non-random sampling does not represent the demographics of the entire congregation, but it does demonstrate that there are indeed many younger aged congregants at First Grace, which my observations support.

⁵⁰ Young single adults and young childless couples are not listed as demographic groups with their own Bible studies, but the program makes it clear that all are welcome in any Bible study.

Conclusion: Summary and Concerns

First Grace's leadership and community conduct themselves in ways that evidence their engagement in ethnic transcendence. By facilitating congregant participation in invented traditions, First Grace creates a space where all have a role in the formation of a shared socio-spirituality. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath may have disrupted some longstanding traditions, but this allowed for the alteration or replacement of rituals that no longer fit the groups they are associated with. First Grace's extended Passing of the Peace, its music, its missions, and its diverse makeup all contribute to the church's ability to be both unique in its rituals while still being a Methodist church. By engaging in the invention of new traditions, First Grace promotes collective participation in the culture change that its congregant community is enacting.

It took a sweeping change in the city of New Orleans for the community of First Grace to come together, and change will inevitably continue to occur in the city and community. The culture change that First Grace's leadership and congregants have created risks corruption in its reproduction, since reproduction is a process that has the potential to leach the original meaning from traditions over time. First Grace thrives because it is new and because it is shared, but this novelty cannot sustain the church community forever. New leadership, ideas and causes may transform First Grace as old leaders cease volunteering or leave the area,⁵¹ but if its practices change with the city's needs, then First Grace will remain aligned with the spirit of its adaptable Creole roots.

⁵¹ At least three congregant leaders have moved away from New Orleans since I completed fieldwork.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: What can be Learned from First Grace?

First Grace is a Creole church. Creole cultures are created in the wake of rupture, and are able to reconcile through the invention of newly shared traditions. The far-reaching effects of the African Diaspora contributed to the formation of a large-scale Creole culture in New Orleans, and Hurricane Katrina produced a smaller scale version of disruption in the city. Hurricane Katrina allowed the formation of First Grace, a new home with a new culture that is shared by survivors. While many of First Grace's congregants did not experience Katrina firsthand, they are engaged in the Creolization process, bringing new ideas and energy to the reconstituting city.

First Grace is a growing, successful church thus far because its deliberately open structure and participatory ethos allow congregants to retain and build their individual identities while at the same time forging a group socio-spiritual identity. Congregants at First Grace avoid viewing their fellow congregants through the lens of historically divisive difference, and instead choose to build a common future based on the shared goal of improving their beloved city and its people. First Grace allows people with different socially ascribed identities to choose for themselves how they want to be identified in a larger social environment where race is a centrally defining characteristic. To be a New Orleanian, and a person of faith, to be interested in helping the city recover and in being a part of new traditions that are connected to those of old, yet transformed for new times: these are the central identifications that congregants are able to make with

one another, and that bind them together. First Grace's congregant community is striving to affect lasting changes in the place they call home.

This culture change is being purposefully forged, which is important to note, because although the hurricane was beyond New Orleanians' control, the changes that they have chosen to make afterward within their communities are, to a greater degree, within their own control. Even though the city's structures are still under reconstruction, these structures can be actively remade to become more inclusive, collaborative, and integrative of multiple groups' interests.

Transformative religio-spiritual and socio-spiritual practices launched by First Grace's leadership have been embraced by congregants, yet space has been left for individual congregants to personalize their experiences of the church's messages and to act in ways that they feel reflect those underlying values. The shared set of practices and ideals that First Grace has built are at risk of transforming into something completely different if the culture of the church is to be maintained and grow. Its congregant leaders may hold the key to sustaining this culture, but as the rebuilding dust settles, First Grace could settle into routines that no longer make the impact they once did.

The nature of Creole is invention, and if a new leader comes to First Grace to replace Rev. Shawn, new ideas may take root and traditions could be re-invented. This development could be in-line with First Grace's inception if the new leader comes from a similar ideological background. Yet if this leader has forgotten the wounds of Katrina, the collective sense of a city's near-death that brought many New Orleanians immense gratitude to be alive, then the movement that First Grace started could lose its sense of urgency, and the uphill battle could be given up for the comfort of complacency.

Post-disaster recovery is a process fraught with peril, as old, oppressive structures could be perpetuated or reestablished by those in power, or new, emerging social movements could be lost amidst the chaos of recovery. First Grace has picked up enough momentum that the changes taking place there cannot be ignored. Nothing worthwhile in life is easy to come by, and the First Grace community was not built overnight. It has taken time for relationships amongst congregants to form, and they are still actively engaged in this community-building process. Genuine and lasting relationships need time, space and attention to grow, and must be prioritized to develop. At First Grace, congregants are provided with the space to get to know one another organically, to build friendships with those whom they may never have crossed paths with in any meaningful way otherwise. As congregant leader Brod's metaphor brilliantly illuminated, First Grace is an unfinished church that represents the ongoing healing of post-Katrina New Orleans. Yet if healing implies a return to the city's previous state, then it is not healing that First Grace strives toward, but transformation. First Grace thrives because there is room for growth, but First Grace risks its central values not being reproduced because its practices are not set in stone.

Like any pastor's responsibility to his or her congregation, Rev. Shawn's is a significant one. Yet unlike pastors at most churches across America, Rev. Shawn is at the helm of a ship with a newly assembled crew, charting unknown waters with a flag stitched together from the flags of former groups, places, and times. Pre-Katrina New Orleans would have certainly benefitted from a church like First Grace, yet First Grace's boat only began to float when the city drowned. Without the pressing need for a new way, without the shut doors, boarded windows, and stains of floodwaters marring the

walls, without the strained tether of normalcy that tied the city to itself, that frayed rope that both segmented and held its citizens together, the city would not have space for change. As it is, Hurricane Katrina allowed an opportunity for the formation of the salient social movement that First Grace's congregants are striving to realize.

First Grace's community provides a venue where the city's socio-spiritual interior can be remodeled, where old ideas of racial boundaries and class castes can be deemphasized in favor of new criteria for inclusion. If one is dedicated to the future of the city while remembering its past traditions, reverent but not stuck in the old ways, then one may make a good addition to First Grace's congregation, or the new New Orleans. Hope and possibilities for New Orleans' future fan out like the shape of the Crescent City itself, and openness to those possibilities, the spirit of First Grace, occupy realty on the point where that fan radiates out from, a no-(wo)man-every-(wo)man's land of openness, like a stem cell with infinite opportunities.

First Grace is created by its congregants, and those whom I got to know in my relatively brief time there showed as a whole to be people interested in seeking truth, and in seeking growth through understanding difference. Stereotypes can be shattered by experience, by real world encounters that defy the mind's attempts to use heuristics, or to render the world in simplistic binaries. Binaries are destroyed by dialectics, or the philosophic method of questioning a premise until it is broken down, until a middle agreement can be reached. Attacked with counterexamples, stereotypes cannot survive, and they are exposed for what they are: fabrications that may have been derived from kernels of truth, but are no longer useful when seeking to understand the richness of human experience.

I hope that this research has provided insight into how cultural groups can proactively change while rebuilding in the aftermath of a disaster. For those who are members of other religious-based organizations, I hope that this research provides an example of how transformation to become more inclusive or representative is possible. It is also my hope that this case study will provide inspiration to the courageous New Orleanians still affected by Hurricane Katrina, as well as survivors of any catastrophic events and circumstances.

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Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Initial Interviews with Congregants

1. What is your full name and age? Can you tell me a little about your upbringing, and your religious background? Were you raised in another religious tradition besides Methodist? Do you self-identify as Methodist?
2. What brings you to First Grace? What first attracted you to First Grace, or how did you hear about the church?
3. Can you tell me about your first service or interaction with the church? How often do you attend?
4. Did you attend First United or Grace Methodist before coming to this church? Can you tell me what that was like? (loss?)
5. Do you hold any positions within the church? If so, can you tell me about that position and what you do? If not, do you hope to in the future? (What position?)
6. Do other family members or friends attend First Grace?
7. Can you tell me about a particularly memorable service, or a sermon that was meaningful to you? What is your favorite part or parts of services?
8. Can you tell me about any special events you've attended that First Grace has sponsored? What happened?
9. What do you think makes First Grace different than other churches? (Stories, Examples) What do you think First Grace has in common with other churches?
10. What do you think First Grace congregants have most in common with each other? In what area(s) do you think congregants have the least in common?
11. If you had to name three values that First Grace congregants have in common, what would they be? How do you think those values are shown? (Stories, Examples)
12. If you had to name three values that the church emphasizes, what would they be? How are these values acted out or shown? (Stories, Examples)
13. If you used to attend First United or Grace Methodist, what are some of the biggest changes that you've seen as a result of the merger/convergence?

14. Do you feel you've changed in any ways since you've begun attending First Grace? (Values, etc., give examples)
15. How do you think the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina allowed for this church to come to be? (Besides the actual destruction of Grace's building and damage to First's building)
16. What challenges do you think the church faces? Do you think First Grace has any areas for improvement or change, and if so, what would they be? (In maintaining or transforming what it is now)
17. What do you think attracts people to First Grace? In your opinion, what keeps them coming back?
18. Does First Grace provide you with something that other churches, in your experience, have not?
19. Is there anything you'd want other people to know about First Grace?

Appendix 2: List of Interviewees

Dr. Ellen Blue	6/2/2009, 7/5/2009
Dr. Martha Ward	6/2/2009, 7/24/2009
Rev. Shawn	6/3/2009, 7/21/2009
Brod	6/5/2009
Linga	6/13/2009
Jennie	6/11/2009
Angela	6/12/2009
Diane	6/12/2009
Julie	6/14/2009
Anne	6/15/2009
Margaret	6/16/2009
Andrea	6/16/2009
Tia	6/17/2009
Melanie	6/18/2009
George	6/19/2009
Marilyn	6/19/2009
Eric	6/19/2009
Jose	6/22/2009
Celeste	6/24/2009
Stephanie	6/25/2009
Sarah	6/26/2009
Rev. Oscar	7/2/2009
Dr. Martha Orphe	7/5/2009
Matthew	7/7/2009
Alejandro	7/7/2009
Jacinto	7/11/2009
Gwen	7/11/2009
Lisa	7/12/2009
Paula	7/15/2009
Kristin	7/19/2009

Appendix 3: First Grace Survey Results:

All percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

3 page survey:

Black females: 9

White males: 8

Black males: 6

White females: 5

Hispanic females: 1

Hispanic males: 0

Total: 29

Survey 2 pages:

Black females: 6

White females: 6

White males: 1

Black males: 1

Hispanic males: 1

Hispanic females: 0

Total: 15

Total surveys=44

Race and Gender of Respondents:

Black females: $15/44 = 34\%$

White females: $11/44 = 25\%$

White males: $9/44 = 20\%$

Black males: $7/44 = 16\%$

Hispanic males: $1/44 = 2\%$

Hispanic females: $1/44 = 2\%$

*15 individuals filled out two page version, 29 individuals filled out three page version (second version)

* Two individuals filled out third page of second three-page version after completing two page version

Ages of Respondents:

Age 18-30: 15 (34%)

Age 31-40: 4 (9%)

Age 41-50: 6 (14%)

Age 51-60: 9 (20%)

Age 61 and up: 10 (23%)

Membership Status:

Member of First Grace: 39 (89%)

Not a Member of First Grace: 4 (9%)

Former Member of Grace UMC: 8 (18%)

Former Member of First UMC: 6 (14%)

No Answer Provided: 1 (2%)

Almost nine out of ten (89%) survey respondents are members of First Grace, while just under one in ten are not members. Almost one in five (18%) survey respondents were members of former Grace UMC, and 14% of survey respondents were members of former First UMC.

How Often Attend Services:

Every Week: 29 (66%)

Almost Every week: 12 (27%)

Sometimes: 0 (0%)

Rarely: 0 (0%)

Two-thirds of survey (66%) respondents attend services every week, according to self-reported survey results, and about one in four (27%) of survey respondents attend services almost every week. No survey respondents answered that they attend First Grace sometimes or rarely, which would make the respondents much less likely to complete a survey about the church.

Lived In New Orleans Before Katrina?

Yes: 29 (66%) (two thirds of survey respondents)

No: 15 (33%) (approx. one-third of survey respondents)

Religious Self-Identification (could check as many as apply, percentages add up to higher than 100):

Christian: 26 (59%)

Protestant: 8 (18%)

Methodist: 21 (48%)

Non-Denominational Christian: 1 (2%)

Catholic: 5 (11%)

No Religious Affiliation: 3 (7%)

Other (Write-In): “Evangelical” “Nature/Pagan Centered” “Reconciling Methodist”
“Spiritual but not pious”

I spend time outside of church services with ___ number of people who also attend First Grace:

0: 2 (5%)

1-2: 13 (30%)

3-5: 13 (30%)

More than 5: 14 (32%)

No Answer Provided: 1 (2%)

I have met ___ number of people at First Grace with whom I spend time outside of church services

0: 7 (16%)

1-2: 9 (20%)

3-5: 10 (23%)

More than 5: 19 (43%)

No Answer Provided: 1 (2%)

I have ___ number of relatives who also attend First Grace:

0: 20 (45%)

1-2: 14 (32%)

3-5: 7 (16%)

More than 5: 4 (9%)

I spend time outside of church services with ___ number of people who do not share my ethnicity:

0: 10 (23%)

1-2: 9 (20%)

3-5: 15 (34%)

More than 5: 7 (16%)

No Answer Provided: 3 (7%)

I spend time outside of church services with ___ number of people who are of a different generation (age group) than myself:

0: 13 (30%)

1-2: 10 (23%)

3-5: 12 (27%)

More than 5: 8 (18%)

No Answer Provided: 1 (2%)

Outside of attending church services, I spend approximately ___ hours a week engaged in church ministries and/or activities:

0: 2 (5%)

1-3: 24 (55%)

3-5: 9 (21%)

More than 5: 5 (11%)

No Answer Provided: 4 (9%)

Overall, I feel my spiritual needs are fulfilled by attending First Grace (on a Likert scale of 1-7, with one representing strongly disagree and 7 representing strongly agree):

1: 1 (2%)

2: 0 (0%)

3: 0 (0%)

4: 4 (9%)

5: 8 (18%)

6: 9 (20%)

7: 21 (48%)

Comments: From one respondent who marked “7”: “Absolutely!”. From another who marked “7”: “And spending time alone with nature”

Comments from “I hold one or more beliefs that I think all congregants should share”:

“Equality, social justice”

“That God works thru [sic] faith with HIS Grace”

“Harmony, Unity, Community Building”

“Service”

“I believe love has power and can change things”

“Christ centered, community oriented”

From the respondent who strongly disagreed with the statement that First Grace fulfills his or her spiritual needs: “True Christians do not look upon other Christians [as] different because of ethnic backgrounds but as a chosen people of God.”

“Knowing Christ through service to others”

“My spiritual beliefs are personal and [I] feel every individual is entitled to their own beliefs. However it is uplifting to share beliefs with others.”

“Love in Christ. Holy Spirit Most Important. Holy Communion Every Sunday.”

“Unconditional love for all. Christian obligation to the poor and needy in community.”

“Love one another like family. Caring.”

“I believe Christ is in my heart and [*illegible phrase*] everyone I come into contact with knows.”

“Certain beliefs I hold as my own and personal enough to not expect others to share, nor do I force them but, I enjoy mutual respect and love for the “diverse wonder” of this church including the individuals and individual beliefs that make this church as beautiful as it is.”

“New Orleans is a very special place. Katrina changed us and made this possible. The Holy Spirit (She) does amazing work.”

“Acceptance”

“Love thy neighbor”

“I believe that love and forgiveness can help us overcome a LOT of suffering.”

“Free expression of your faith. Feel comfortable with congregants. Church is not limited/bounded by the physical plant. Church should be an inviting/celebrating and worshipping experience.”

“I believe that my spiritual belief is enhanced by reading and studying the Bible. I attempt to share what I learn from the Bible to anyone who is willing to listen.”

“I do not believe in celebrating Mardi Gras...”

“All of us are children of God. Jesus Christ is the son of God who came to offer us eternal life. We need to serve the poor, the least of us—Gospel calls us to do so.”

Third Page of Survey: (29 completed)

I know what it means to be a Methodist Christian:

Strongly Agree: 10 (34%)

Agree: 9 (31%)

Neutral: 9 (31%)

Disagree: 1 (3%)

Strongly Disagree: 0 (0%)

Attending a church with ethnic or racial diversity is important to me:

Strongly Agree: 19 (66%)

Agree: 10 (33%)

Neutral: 0 (0%)

Disagree: 0 (0%)

Strongly Disagree: 0 (0%)

If I had a problem within my family, I would call or rely on someone I know who also attends First Grace:

Strongly Agree: 14 (48%)

Agree: 5 (17%)

Neutral: 9 (31%)

Disagree: 0 (0%)

Strongly Disagree: 0 (0%)

No Answer Provided: 1 (3%)

I am satisfied with my own current level of involvement in the church

Strongly Agree: 9 (31%)

Agree: 8 (28%)

Neutral: 7 (24%)

Disagree: 5 (17%)

Strongly Disagree: 0 (0%)

What about First Grace gives you a sense of belonging?

“Joyful Sense of welcoming when you step on threshold. Sermons are not too “preachy.”
Passing the peace. Open to all colors, sexual orientations, beliefs, etc.”

“All are accepted and hopefully made to feel welcome. There are no prerequisites to come to this church. I can be myself and have learned a lot about communication, different people, etc.”

“First Grace UMC has a strong, caring pastoral leadership. Pastor Anglim’s unconditional love for all has created a congregation whose members love one another and who want to serve.”

“True Christian love and joy”

“Warmth and kindness of everyone. So gloriously non-judgmental and inclusive in God’s love.”

“The unity we share with other in good times and bad times.”

“Everyone is open and nice”

“Friendliness and kindness that is so easily shared among the congregation”

“The fellowship and ministries”

“Acceptance of all regardless of race, sexuality, economic states”

“I feel like I have a larger family when I come to church.”

“The music brings people together. Feeling that there is a great desire by all to make the church one family.”

“First Grace gives me a sense of belonging because of the cheerfulness and welcome attitude of the people.”

“Hugs. Tolerance reflected also in language. Non-judging atmosphere.”

“Historically [at First UMC]: Taught Sunday school, adult class, sang in choir approximately 30+ years, helped with equipment maintenance about 30+ years.”

“The caring and loving attitude of members”

“The people and the diversity of belief, all of our differences all away on Sunday morning, and that can follow through in your life for the rest of the week. Also, I live here, so it feels like my church.”

“Pastor Shawn and residents of church”

“Diversity, Acceptance, New Covenant, God in Action”

“Friendly Atmosphere”

“I feel like there are so many hands extended to me whenever I need it and everyone is very nice. The ethnic diversity here is also very warming.”

“The family-like environment and encouragement by members of the church”

“Friendliness, Diversity, Fellowship, Pastor Shawn”

“I grew up in First Church”

“The warmth of greeting by folk, the number of people whom I know and with whom I am on good friendly terms”

“Everyone is very welcoming. Race and gender barriers are virtually non-existent. This church feels a love, responsibility, commitment and identification to and with the city of New Orleans. If more of the city felt this way then we would be on the right track for solving many of the ills plaguing the area.”

Comments?

“I love the congregation, and the spirit of all the people here. The family idea is so true. Plus so many “cool” things and people.”

“This church has helped me grow in acceptance, love, justice. It has been a major part of my life and when I go somewhere else, looking for another church will be hard because I now have high expectations.”

“After 25 years as a Methodist, I left my church almost 9 months ago because of previous problems with the pastor’s actions that shook my faith. I left that church after 25 years—and had I not come to First Grace—I would have probably changed denominations. First Grace is a church that wants to be a blessing to all, that wants to serve and that has the unconditional love of Christ. I am so thankful for First Grace.”

“This is my family in Christ and no matter where in the world I am there is always a Methodist family that I can be part of. It was the Methodist church in Abbeville, AL that was there for me and my mother after Katrina. I was not a Methodist until Katrina. My mother and I lost 3 homes and all belongings. Then I lost my mother. But God was so good that I ended up in Abbeville AL. I found a new life because of Abbeville UMC. When I returned to NOLA, I sought out a new family. I am very proud of First Grace UMC.”

“I am a new member of First Grace, transferring from another Methodist church which I no longer attended. I am looking forward to meeting and sharing fellowship with my newly met church members.”

“First Grace is the missing piece to my life that makes me whole as a person”

“Thank you”

“Hope this info helps your survey”

“Come back Aziza Bayou.”

“This is a very special place. First church [I have] attended in years.”

“We need more places like this. God Bless.”

“Communion every Sunday may take away a little of the sacredness.”

“This is [the] type of church all churches should strive to be—diverse membership, helping, fun, relevant messages, singing in praise.”

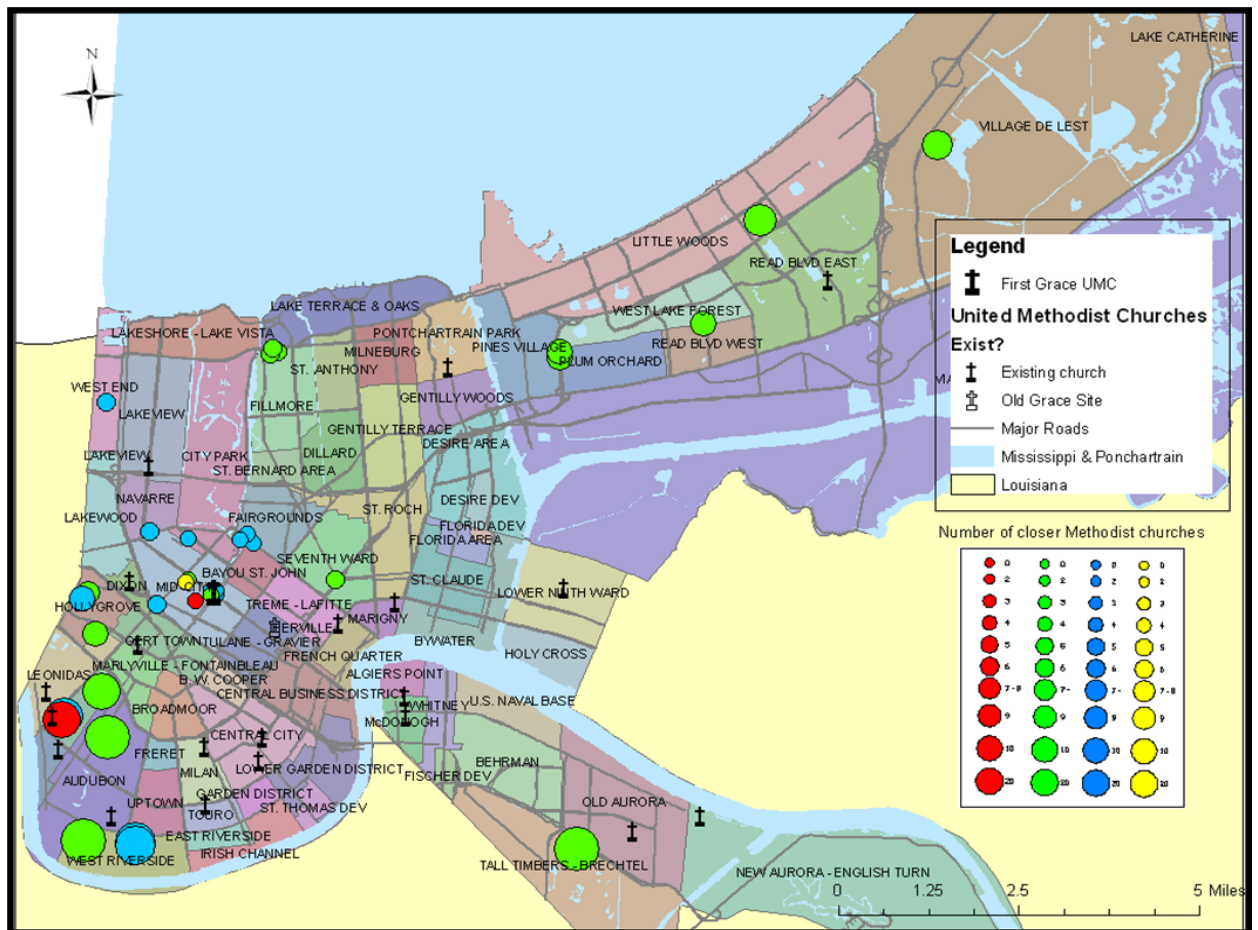
What values do you think First Grace’s congregants and the church encourages or promotes? (Informants were asked during semi-structured interviews to list three)

Openness (listed by four people), Diversity (listed by five people), Acceptance (listed by four people), Community (listed by three people), Caring (listed by two people), Community, Welcoming, Challenge, Wholeness, Mission, Compassion, Spirit, Gospel, Social Awareness, Faithfulness, Fellowship, Service, Methodist Tradition, Inclusiveness, Welcoming, Forgiveness, Celebration, Joyousness, Friendship, Warm Greetings, Togetherness, Understanding, Love the Lord (one person listed three times), Love of People, Make it a Success, Equality, Message and Music, Unity, No Discrimination, Volunteerism, Respect, Love, Wisdom, Individuality/Communality, Faith in God, Fellow Man and Self, Honesty, Tolerance, Reflection

Legend

- Church Status:**
 - First Grace UMC
 - United Methodist Churches Exist?
 - Existing Church
 - Old Grace Site
 - Major Roads
- Congregants:**
 - <all other values>
- Congregant Ethnicity:**
 - Black
 - Hispanic
 - Mixed
 - White
- Geography:**
 - Mississippi & Ponchartrain
 - Blocks
 - Louisiana

Appendix 5: GIS Map 2: First Grace's Congregants' ethnicities and locations relative to Methodist churches in Orleans Parish



Appendix 6: GIS Map 3: First Grace's Congregants' ethnicities and whether or not they lived in or near New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina

