

DOING BOUNDARY WORK AS AN “INCLUSIVE” GROUP:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF A LIBERAL CONGREGATION

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ABSTRACT

Laura M. Krull: Doing Boundary Work as an “Inclusive” Group: A Qualitative Study of a Liberal Congregation
(Under the direction of Lisa D. Pearce)

In doing boundary work, members of a group solidify their own identity by comparing themselves against an ‘out-group’ representing who they are not, but what happens when a group claims an “inclusive” identity? Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews and a year of participant observation at a liberal, Protestant congregation, this paper explores how church members develop three strategies for boundary work that exclude religious conservatives (the out-group) without challenging the congregation’s claim to “inclusivity.” First, they refer to the out-group in vague terms to avoid explicitly naming who is excluded; second, they emphasize what works for them spiritually rather than criticizing other religious traditions; finally, they construct favorable comparisons between their church and others. Ultimately I show that this tension between boundary work and the claim to inclusivity leads to the reproduction of inequality, as church members value seeing ‘both sides’ over challenging racist, classist, and heterosexist beliefs and actions.

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Introduction

Sociologists who study boundary work in religious organizations typically analyze churches that enact sharp boundaries between themselves and others. For people in these conservative churches, drawing boundaries does not contradict their identity as Christian, because their exclusive theologies encourage them to separate themselves from others seen as sinners (Smith 1998). However, other churches may claim an inclusive identity, wherein they see welcoming everyone as a central part of their Christian identity. Recently sociologists have begun examining how religious organizations that value “inclusivity” engage in boundary work because, like other groups, “inclusive” congregations cannot realistically include everyone while still maintaining a distinctive identity (Becker 1998; Ghaziani 2009; Yukich 2010). How people manage the tension between inclusiveness and boundary work, and the consequences of that tension, warrants further study, as previous studies analyze the tension without considering the implications. How does the claim of inclusivity shape strategies for boundary work, and how does the tension between an “inclusive” identity and an exclusive practice impact the group?

In the case of Dogwood Church, a liberal, Protestant congregation, I show that people use three main strategies for boundary work – remaining abstract, creating positive comparisons, and emphasizing personal needs – that allow them to ‘other’ conservative Christians while still maintaining their moral identity as inclusive people (Kleinman 1996:5). I argue that the tension between claiming an inclusive identity while drawing boundaries leads to unintended and unexamined consequences for social justice at Dogwood Church. As a result of this tension, pastors and members of Dogwood Church may develop a sense of complacency and avoid taking

a stance on social issues, thus inhibiting their ability to effect social change in the ways they desire. My research offers insight into how the claim to inclusivity may shape a group's boundary work and impact other aspects of the group's identity, raising additional questions about the rhetoric of 'inclusiveness' and its use in groups today.

Literature Review

Congregations and Congregational Culture

In the United States, "congregations are the primary expressions of religion," shaping religious behaviors and beliefs for millions of Americans and promoting a particular form of religious organization (Carroll et al 1986:7). A congregation's primary goals are to foster the spiritual well-being of its members through "intentional, regular assembly" for worship and through additional activities, such as educational classes, fellowship groups, and outreach ministries (Wind and Lewis 1994:2; Ammerman 2003). With over 300,000 Christian congregations in the United States, Americans now have numerous options when deciding where to worship, and people are willing to "church-shop" to find the congregation that best fits their personal spiritual needs (Chaves 2004; Madsen 2009; Roof 1990). This religious individualism highlights people's ability and desire to choose when, where, and how they will worship (Madsen 2009; Bellah et al 1985; Wuthnow 1998). People may feel little pressure to remain in the denomination of their childhood, although most will stay within their religious tradition (i.e., few Protestants become Catholics, but many may move from an evangelical Protestant church to a mainline one) (Madsen 2009).

To attract members, congregations began modeling their programs and structure after other successful, primarily Protestant churches in the United States in the 1900s. Scholars call this phenomenon 'de facto congregationalism,' and this institutional pressure shapes religious

life in the United States (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Warner 1994). This congregational model entails voluntary leadership from lay people; a professionalized clergy; opportunities for fellowship and outreach, in addition to worship; and worship being held on Sundays (Ammerman 2011; Cadge 2008; Warner 1994). Many congregations, including those outside of Judeo-Christian traditions, feel that they must offer many of these benefits if they want to attract participants.

The pervasiveness of congregationalism and religious individualism has led congregations to actively differentiate themselves from other churches to convince people to attend. Congregational identity refers to “that persistent set of beliefs, values, patterns, symbols, stories, and style that make a congregation distinctively itself” (Carroll et al. 1986:12). Scholars began paying greater attention to internal dynamics, including identity, in the 1970s, promoting in-depth, ethnographic studies of congregations (Hopewell 1987; Stokes and Roozen 1991; Roozen et al 1984). Carroll et al. (1986) argued that scholars could uncover a congregation’s identity by studying brochures and websites produced by church leaders, examining how members and pastors interact with the local community through outreach and service, analyzing the demographics of the members, and considering the theological perspectives espoused by pastors and the congregation.

Developing a strong congregational identity contributes to the emergence of niche congregations that attract people with particular identities (Ammerman 1996; Madsen 2009). For example, LGBTQ-affirming churches attract queer-identified people and straight allies, providing a space away from heterosexist churches (McQueeney 2009; Wilcox 2003). In Hollywood, Marti (2005) found that an innovative congregation emphasizing creativity and participation in services attracted artists and entertainers; those who disliked the dramatic aspects

of the church stayed away. Congregations, then, develop an organizational identity that indicates to others who is welcome in the group, shapes its goals, and distinguishes it from other religious groups (Beyer 2003:54).

A congregation's organizational identity can be reflected in the congregational culture. Some scholars refer to a congregation's culture as a "web of symbolic meaning, values, and commitments" that then informs programming, leadership, and congregational structure (Stokes and Roozen 1991:186). Ammerman's (1996) definition focused more on how a congregation's members give meaning to practices and objects, writing that culture "consists of physical artifacts, patterns of activity, and the language and story that embellish those objects and activities with meaning" (p. 47).

Many ethnographies and other qualitative studies of congregations explore a congregation's culture and how members engage that culture in different ways. For instance, ethnographies of fundamentalist congregations observed how women developed their own social networks and created new ways for leadership while still adhering to the belief that women should submit to men (Ammerman 1987; Brasher 1998). These women embraced the gender norms perpetuated by their church's culture, but they did so in ways that fit with their lives. In her study of Chinese immigrants, Chen (2008) found that some immigrants began using evangelical narratives of individual morality and submission to God to help them cope with the downward mobility and discrimination they faced in America. Yet only recently have scholars begun drawing on theories of subcultural identity, symbolic boundaries, and boundary work to understand how members of congregations work together to maintain their group identity and what strategies of boundary work they adopt when stating who is 'in' the congregation and who is 'out.'

Symbolic Boundaries, Boundary Work, and Religion

Most of the early sociological research into identity work focused on how individuals' constructed and maintained their personal identities, until some scholars began studying collective identity formation in various social movements. These scholars examined how groups develop a cohesive identity, what strategies they use to determine the group's goals and to describe what the typical member looks like (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). However, social groups that do not arise from social movements also form collective identities, and Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) used the phrase "subcultural identity" to refer to the shared identity claimed by members of a group. People find "meaning and belonging" through their involvement with social groups and through identity work, which is "anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others" (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115; Smith 1998:90). Subcultural identity work, done collectively, helps delineate who can claim the subcultural identity (i.e., who can be a member) and what symbolic resources members share (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996); this identity work also leads "social groups [to] construct and maintain collective identities by drawing symbolic boundaries that create distinctions between themselves and relevant out-groups" (Smith 1998:91)

In their review of recent studies of boundaries, Lamont and Molnar (2002) defined symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors . . . [that] also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership" (p. 168). Symbolic boundaries create not only a sense of who shares in a particular group's membership, but also an 'other' or an 'out-group' that does not share the same values or characteristics of the in-group (Yukich 2010; Edgell et al 2006). By contrasting themselves with people outside the

group, those within the group develop a better understanding of who ‘we’ are and a greater “sense of solidarity and identity,” as the out-group encapsulates who ‘we’ are not (Edgell et al 2006:231). This creation of “a simplified version of some ‘other’” reflects one strategy for boundary work (Yukich 2010:175).

In studies of boundary work and religion, sociologists of religion have often focused on conservative religious groups, known for their strict rules for membership, their willingness to exclude people, and their frequent critiques of secular America (Smith 1998; Wilkins 2008; Avishai 2008; Gurrentz 2014). In one such study, Smith (1998) explained how evangelical churches have continued to grow and thrive in an increasingly pluralistic, individualistic American society. He concluded that “evangelicalism . . . thrives on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless” (1998:89). These findings supported Edgell et al.’s claim that “separating out those who do not belong . . . draw[s] together those who do” (2006:211), suggesting that these evangelical Christian groups compare themselves to multiple out-groups in order to strengthen their own understanding of what it means to be a moral, authentic Christian.

Other studies of boundary work in religion examined how an evangelical college group used happiness as a symbolic boundary between authentic Christian members and outsiders (Wilkins 2008), how members of a Christian fraternity engaged in boundary work to preserve their Christian identity while faced with a drinking culture (Gurrentz 2014), how women in conservative religious cultures navigated both the secular world and other factions in their religion (Avishai 2008; Furseth 2011), and how Christians created an abstract atheist other that is perceived as less moral (Edgell et al 2006). All studies found that the strategies their participants used for boundary work served to include some while excluding others, with this exclusiveness

seen as a natural part of creating an in-group. Yet what happens when a religious group prides itself on inclusivity and creates a subcultural identity founded on the goal of including everyone?

Yukich (2010) began to explore this tension when she studied the New York Catholic Worker, an organization with communities around the world dedicated to “hospitality, welcoming the rejected, and including the outsider” (p. 177). Using the work of theologian and sociologist Martin Buber, she argued that boundary work occurs through I-it relations, where people referred to out-groups, ranging from pro-war people to consumerist America, in abstract, over-simplified ways, but that “genuine inclusion” occurred during I-Thou encounters, when people at the Catholic Workers house welcomed visitors from the out-groups by sharing food, space, and spirit with them. Thus, she argued, groups can do symbolic boundary work while still being “*really* inclusive” (2010:176). However, this argument treated inclusivity as an achievable goal, ignoring the reality that including everyone in a group would render distinctions meaningless, as the group would lose its identity (Ghaziani 2009). Her work did not consider how welcoming everyone into the Catholic Worker house could challenge their subcultural identity or negatively impact their ability to help others.

In the conclusion of her paper, Yukich (2010) asserted that research into boundary work has not sufficiently explored how groups claiming an inclusive identity do boundary work, since boundary work is inherently exclusive and thus contradicts the inclusive identity. My research at a liberal, Protestant congregation also considers this tension between the claim to inclusivity and boundary work, but rather than analyzing to what extent Dogwood Church succeeds in being “really inclusive,” I analyze how this tension can impede the congregation’s ability to act on its commitment to social justice.

Methods

Participant Observation

After obtaining IRB approval, I met with Dogwood Church's co-head pastors, a married heterosexual couple in their early sixties, to discuss my proposed research. I explained that I was interested in understanding how people at Dogwood Church talk about social justice and volunteer work, and how they become involved in different causes, reflecting my research interests at the time. Both pastors supported my plans for research, but they asked that I refrain from using the congregational or denominational names in my work. Thus, I use pseudonyms for all people and places, and I alter potentially identifying slogans to protect confidentiality.

I began my participant observation on June 1st, 2014 and continued through April 1st, 2015. During that time, I attended worship services, participated in adult education classes (including ones designed for young adults), engaged in fellowship opportunities (conversation circles, potluck lunches, informal Wednesday dinners, and more), attended talks about current political and social issues, volunteered as a youth group leader, and served on a church board. My high level of involvement allowed me to meet a greater variety of members, thus giving me a more complete sense of how members perceive the church and create community. Similarly, I could better understand what activities are offered to attendees and who participates. Finally, my work on the Board of Justice, Outreach, and Service granted me 'behind the scenes' access to church governance and decision-making.

I jotted notes during worship services and during adult education classes, as appropriate. When I could not take these in-the-moment notes, I recorded my thoughts on my phone after leaving the church and then typed my observations after returning to my computer. After returning home, I typed a complete record of my fieldnotes, expanding on the jottings and

writing notes-on-notes to document my initial ideas and hunches (Charmaz 2014). Over ten months of participant observation, I spent approximately 100 hours in the field, collected bulletins and announcements from each week as well as 25 sermon transcripts, and grabbed brochures produced by Dogwood Church and by the denomination. These latter documents supplemented my experience at the church and allowed me to analyze how Dogwood Church presents itself to the larger community.

Interviews

I conducted 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members, averaging about 70 minutes. Prior to each interview, I obtained written consent for both participation in the interview and for audio-recording. After transferring the files to my password-protected computer, I deleted the original files on my iPhone and my recorder. Although I altered my interview questions in response to emerging themes, my interviews remained centered around three main codes: the church, volunteer work, and social justice. After the first four interviews, I introduced a card-sort activity that included fifteen cards with various outreach causes listed; I asked interviewees to sort the cards twice, first according to whatever rubric makes sense to them, and again into piles where one contains social justice causes and another charitable ones (Spradley 1979:59). This exercise encouraged interviewees to think about social justice, if they had not already introduced the idea to the interview.

Recruiting Strategy and Description of Interview Participants

Initially I wanted to share an announcement about my research at the start of each service for a month, providing information and asking for interested people to talk to me afterwards, but Janet and David (they ask parishioners to use their first names) discouraged this approach. They explained they prefer to limit the number of announcements shared from the pulpit, and instead

suggested that I write a short paragraph to include in the weekly announcement pamphlet. My blurb ran for four weeks. During this time, only one woman asked me about the research; she noticed my nametag and connected me to the study. No one expressed any concerns regarding my presence as a researcher.

In addition, Janet offered to provide me a list of people with a history of involvement in the congregation, whether through internal opportunities for service or in outreach programs in the local community. Within a week of our meeting, Janet printed a church directory, circled people's names, and jotted notes about their areas of involvement. I had initially framed my research as investigating how people talked about different outreach activities and what motivated people to become involved, and I wondered if the co-head pastors wanted to direct me toward people committed to the church who would put the church in a positive light. However, I found that people recruited from this list were as likely as other interviewees to offer critiques of the congregation; three of the recommended lay leaders had recently decreased their commitments to the congregation. Additionally, the list helped me connect with people I otherwise would not have met or engaged in my study, including retired people.

I asked a friend to serve as my pilot interview, and then I emailed thirty-eight people, providing information about my research and asking if they would be interested in an interview. Ten people responded, and of those I eventually interviewed eight. Three people from this list later agreed to an interview after meeting me ($n=12$). Additionally, Mark, a retired man in his 60s, introduced me to three women at the church who agreed to be interviewed ($n=15$). In addition, I began purposive sampling to ensure that a variety of voices and perspectives are represented in my sample. Of the first ten people I interviewed, only one interviewee was under 50, and only two had started attending within the last ten years. To recruit more people in their

twenties and thirties, I sent an email to the young adult list generated by the pastor for youth and young adults; of the ten people I emailed, six responded to express an interest, and five of those inquiries resulted in interviews (n=20). All four had started attending in the past four years. At this point, I began contacting the four pastors for interviews, as I had developed a better understanding of the direction of my research and had generated more questions specific to the pastors. I interviewed three of the four pastors, as David and I could not schedule a time prior to his sabbatical (n=23).

I also emailed separately two women who had been named repeatedly in my interviews; one had brought issues of environmental justice to the attention of the congregation, and the other brought racial equity workshops to the church and co-leads the ongoing discussions on race. Finally, I interviewed a man who had spent the 2013-2014 year as the intern for the youth pastor (n=26) and who continues to volunteer his time at Dogwood Church.

Interviews took place in coffee shops, parishioners' homes or offices, my office on-campus, and at Dogwood Church. I was initially hesitant to conduct interviews at the church, as I worried that participants might not be fully honest if they thought others might overhear them. I also recognized that it was convenient for many people to meet after one of the church services. Thus, when interviewees suggested meeting at church, I consented. Additionally, the interviews at the church always occurred behind closed doors, where people could not overhear responses. The people I interviewed at the library were as likely to offer criticisms of the church as those I interviewed elsewhere. After each interview, I jotted notes on the setting and the interview. Later that day, I wrote my initial impressions and thoughts regarding the interview. I then fully transcribed each interview for complete analysis.

My sample of interview participants was predominantly white, female, and highly educated. Of the twenty-six people I interviewed, twenty-four identified as white, one woman as Latina, and another woman as African American. This racial composition approximately reflects the entire church membership, as the congregation is roughly 95% white. I interviewed seven men and nineteen women; I sent my initial recruitment email to fifteen men and twenty-three women, and overall people suggested women more frequently than men when suggesting referrals. The bias towards women may be because women feel more comfortable speaking with me, but it may also reflect the trend, common in many churches, of women being more involved at church than men, thus making them more visible and more likely to meet me at a church activity (Chaves 2004).

Everyone interviewed had at least a bachelor's degree; eleven had a master's degree (including six people with a Masters of Divinity), four had a doctorate, one had a law degree, and two young adults were working on their dissertations, leaving eight people with a bachelor's degree. The average age of interviewees is in the 50s, and I interviewed 17 people fifty or older and 7 people in their twenties or thirties. This discrepancy in age also reflects the larger denominational challenge of attracting young adults to the congregations; the average age in a church from this denomination is 60 (interview with Janet). The average length of attendance was 11 years, ranging from half a year to thirty-four years. Finally, five of the people I interviewed, including one associate pastor, identify as gay or lesbian.

Analytical Approach

I coded and analyzed the data inductively, using initial analyses of field notes and interviews to inform my later trips to Dogwood Church. Thus, when my data raised questions or patterns seemed unclear, I could return to the field with these specific ideas in mind, thus

focusing my attention during observation. Coding occurred in two phases. During initial coding I coded line by line to fully capture what was happening (Charmaz 2014). Rather than looking for support for a particular theory or applying preexisting concepts to the data, I considered the patterns that emerged from my data.

As initial codes developed into key categories, I moved to focused coding, wherein I read through my data and apply only these codes; I also considered instances that challenge my codes and try to make sense of these discrepancies (Charmaz 2014:138-147). From here, I continued to develop theoretical codes that helped explain what was happening in the data and that began to capture the underlying processes at play. During coding and analysis, I wrote memos that explained codes, fleshed out categories, and recorded comparisons, patterns, and connections in the data (Charmaz 2014:162-191). These memos served as a record of my thoughts, organize the data, and encourage me to examine my data from different angles.

Study Site: Dogwood Church

Dogwood Church is a liberal, Protestant congregation affiliated with a mainline denomination. Located in a university town in North Carolina, Dogwood Church currently has 950 members, who are predominately white, middle class, and highly educated, with the majority of adults attaining at least a bachelor's degree. The church continues to grow, welcoming new members every month since I have been in the field, but average combined attendance at the two Sunday services is 450 people. Additionally, the \$1.1 million dollar budget, which reflects the affluence of this congregation, comes from the pledges of approximately 370 families.

The main theology found and discussed at Dogwood Church is Trinitarian, pluralistic, and progressive. Trinitarian refers to the belief in a triune God, where God the Creator, Jesus

Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three manifestations of the one God. Although in the services and in the sermons pastors refer to Jesus as divine and otherwise reference the Trinity, many question or actively deny that Jesus is also God. In addition to being Trinitarian, Dogwood Church espouses pluralist beliefs; people recognize there are truths in each religion and that Jesus may not be the only way to heaven. Finally, the theology is progressive, which at Dogwood Church means that people refer to God without using gendered pronouns, situate the Bible in its socio-historical context, avoid literal interpretations, and recognize the importance of bringing justice to earth (official church website).

The church is staffed by white, heterosexual, married, co-head pastors and three associate pastors. The co-head pastors, Janet and David¹, are now in their 36th year with this congregation. They were called together to this congregation in 1979, and for their first ten years, they shared a salary as co-head pastors, until the congregation could afford separate salaries. Their fellow pastors and parishioners attribute the success of the congregation, its growth and outreach programs, to the longevity of their tenure and their vision for the church. The associate pastor of children's ministry is Allison, a white, heterosexual married woman in her 40s who initially pursued ordination in another denomination before finding Dogwood Church. She first joined Dogwood Church with her family, and when the church council created a position for a children's minister, they invited her to apply; she has held this position since it originated in 2002. Becca is a white, lesbian married woman in her 30s who was hired as the youth and young adult minister in 2008. She initially wanted to work in the denomination in which she grew up, but that denomination would not ordain gays or lesbians. Finally, Luis, a Latino-American in his late 30s, works as the pastor for the Spanish language ministries, leading the Spanish-

¹ People refer to pastors on a first name basis, and thus I include only first name pseudonyms here.

speaking sister congregation that worship in the building on Saturdays. Although members of Dogwood Church refer to their “sister congregation,” they also recognize that there is little interaction between the English speakers and the Spanish speakers. This research project studies only the English-speaking congregation.

This denomination operates on a congregational model. Each congregation operates democratically and separately, with the denominational leaders unable to impose major changes across all churches. For instance, although the central leadership of the denomination affirms and fully includes members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community², each congregation ultimately decides if they wish to make that commitment; as of 2014, only 30% of congregations had gone through this process (fieldnotes).

At the congregational level, the church council – which at Dogwood Church consists of the chairs of the eight boards and four at-large members, led by the moderator³ – hires pastors and staff, determines salaries, and approves the budget. On their website, Dogwood Church describes itself as “a congregational church, governed by the will of the congregation through elected governing boards that establish and supervise our policies and programs.” Thus, when the congregation outgrew its old building, the members began a ten-year process of deciding whether to purchase a vacant church building or to build a new church. When the first vote tied, the members continued conversations for another two years before ultimately voting to build. Later, members of Dogwood Church underwent a similar two-year process of conversations before voting to become fully affirming of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression.

² The denomination’s official phrase for congregations that fully include LGBTQ people has been altered to maintain confidentiality, as have all other phrases directly affiliated with this congregation. Drawing on my field notes and interviews, I use alternative words and phrases that remain as true as possible to the intent and meaning of the original phrase.

³ The moderator is the official lay leader of the congregation.

Dogwood Church offers two Sunday services: one at 8:45 a.m., which serves communion weekly, and another at 11:00 a.m., which serves communion on the first Sunday of each month. Weekly communion is common in Catholic and Episcopal services, and the large number of people from these traditions led to the establishment of weekly communion in the early 2000s. A deacon oversees each service, and they are assisted by ushers, who volunteer to help the services run smoothly by handing out bulletins, seating people, taking the offering, and serving communion. The services are highly structured and predictable; each week, people at both services can expect to read the call to worship together, to sing hymns, to pass the peace, to have the offertory, to hear readings from the Bible, to listen to a sermon, to have a time for communal prayer, and (at the 8:45 service) to take communion. Finally, with a full-time music director on staff, attendees hear a range of musical performances, including hand-bell choirs, a cappella chamber sings (requiring an audition), and a chancel choir (welcoming anyone who wants to sing).

In addition to these worship services, the church offers extensive programming on Sunday mornings and throughout the week. Between services, at the 10 o'clock hour, people gather in the fellowship hall for food and coffee before dispersing to attend classes. Children and youth can attend church school, divided by grade, and adults can either attend the adult forum or one of several thematic classes offered, including spiritual growth and sacred conversations on race. Adult volunteers lead these classes, with a team of three teaching each grade of church school and usually one leading an adult class. Generally, a visiting speaker or a congregation member presents at the adult forum on a topic related to social justice; offerings have included series on cancer and caring, food and environmental justice, and race relations.

Throughout the week, additional church-affiliated groups meet, including a book discussion group, a women's group, music ensembles, two Spanish classes, a Bible study, and a meditation group. In September and then during Advent and Lent, the church organizes a Wednesday night series, where different groups provide dinner to raise money for their cause and members come together for dinner and then disperse to the class of their choice; the most recent series, occurring just before Lent, offered classes on *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, dream interpretation, poetry, art that emulates Van Gogh, and spiritual growth. Finally, the church opens its doors to other religious communities and community organizations, including Muslim and Hindu prayer groups, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, rape crisis center trainings, Girl Scout groups, and more.

Church members and leaders are also highly involved in various outreach activities, with the Board of Justice, Outreach, and Service committed to facilitating and supporting these involvements with the local community. Additionally, each week a pamphlet of announcements, ranging in length from eight to sixteen pages, describes fellowship and outreach opportunities occurring throughout the week. Here people can find information about when servers are needed at the soup kitchen, upcoming meetings about affordable housing in the county, and the progress on the Habitat for Humanity house.

Insider Status

Aware of Dogwood Church's commitment to outreach and looking for a church community after moving to the area for graduate school, I visited the congregation in September of 2013 out of personal interest, and after attending for six months, I joined in February of 2014. Thus, as a member of Dogwood Church, this research falls at the intersection of my intellectual interests and my personal biography (Lofland et al. 2006; Riemer 1977). I appreciated the

church's progressive theology and its emphasis on social justice, and after several months I translated my personal curiosity regarding how this congregation approaches and discusses social justice into questions for sociological research. Thus, I follow other sociologists who similarly studied congregations where they were members, on staff, or otherwise affiliated (Ammerman 1987; Marti 2005).

Being a member of this congregation grants me insider status as a researcher, which benefits me in multiple ways. Because of my upbringing in a Protestant denomination and my experiences visiting congregation as an undergraduate, I am already familiar with most of the rites and customs found in liberal Protestant congregations. I know what happens at each stage of the worship service and am comfortable with each aspect, including the offertory, the passing of the peace, and taking communion by intinction⁴. Second, as a member I face no barriers to involvement. Only members may serve on boards, and current board members invite new members to join the boards as people rotate off each summer. Thus, four months after joining, the chair of the Board of Justice, Outreach, and Service (BJOS), asked me to join in August of 2014, and I agreed. Finally, my membership suggests that I share certain values, theological beliefs, and political leanings with my fellow members and churchgoers, allowing participants to feel more comfortable sharing their views with me (Lofland et al 2006).

However, I acknowledge that the assumption of shared meanings may result in two challenges to this research. First, interviewees may not fully explain what certain concepts mean to them, as they may think my membership means I share their definition. To counter this effect, prior to each interview I ask the interviewee to imagine I have limited knowledge of the church and its beliefs, and I ask participants to explain their meanings throughout the interview. For

⁴ Communion by intinction refers to taking a piece of bread and dipping it into a cup of juice.

instance, when interviewees say that they see the church as “progressive,” I ask them to explain what that term means to them and to give examples. Second, I recognize that my familiarity with the setting may lead me to overlook what researchers ‘outside’ of the setting may see more readily (Kleinman and Kolb 2011). To combat this possibility, I regularly write memos that explore my biases and expectations, considering how they may shape my analysis and documenting my feelings toward participants (Kleinman and Copp 1993).

Developing a Congregational Identity: The Claim to Inclusivity

Dogwood Church’s official website, managed by the pastors and the office staff, identifies the congregation as a “progressive church” dedicated to “economic and social justice.” Scrolling down the page, a vivid blue banner reads, “you are welcome here,” a phrase included in most printed materials and in each church service. Another phrase, “Radical hospitality,⁵” features prominently in congregational and denominational literature, and refers to the denomination’s history of fighting for equality. On the second page of the church bulletin, attendees find the following: “we invite people of every age, race, marital status, sexual orientation, means, ability and spiritual tradition to join with us in the love of God and neighbor: through worship, dedication to education and commitment to service.”

Then, during each service the pastor who preached extends a verbal welcome following the sermon and the time of prayer. Isaac, a white, gay-identified man in graduate school, describes Dogwood Church’s central message as one of “inclusivity” and sees this welcome as a critical part in maintaining the congregation’s identity:

So the pastor does that every week where right after the message . . . he [sic] gives, you know, some message related to some I guess blurb related to the message about . . . we welcome you whether or not you did this thing I advocated for in my message, or you

⁵ In a pamphlet created by the denomination explaining radical hospitality, people can read about the denomination’s history of involvement in social movements, including “early stands against slavery,” three firsts in ordination (first African-American, first woman, and first “openly gay minister”), and a “bold stand for marriage equality.”

don't do that, or if you are this type of person or you aren't, you're all welcome here, and um I think that goes a lot a long way in sort of defining a church identity.

For instance, one week Janet (co-head pastor) said, “Whether you are married or single, we will partner with you, and the church will be a family to you. If you know what you believe or have no idea, if you have big faith or little faith, you are welcome here. And you are welcome if you are a saint or a sinner, because we are all of us both.” David, after preaching about opening hearts to healing and community, welcomed everyone by saying, “You are welcome here if you have a burning passion, or if you have grown weary and discouraged, for here you will find hope in broken hearts.” By offering examples of experiences at opposite ends of a spectrum, the pastors explain that people at both ends and everywhere in between are welcome. Many interviewees cite this intentional welcome from the pastors as an important step the pastors take to ensure that everyone feels welcome and included. However, Sarah feels there are limits to this welcome:

I don't believe I will ever hear in this church, if you're a Republican or a Democrat (laughs). And I mean that! We say it jokingly, but I do feel like if there's one weakness it's that there's um, you know, we say we're open to everybody, we love everybody . . . [but] it is an insular community where people think everybody thinks the same way.

Throughout my fieldwork, I never heard the pastors explicitly discuss political parties in their sermons, which suggests they are unlikely to encounter an opportunity where welcoming Democrats and Republicans would tie into their sermon. Although she tries to emphasize that she and her friends are joking, Sarah’s comment nevertheless suggests that there may be limits to who will feel included.

The church materials and the pastors promote welcome, and the people I interviewed also describe “radical hospitality” and “inclusivity” as central values held by the congregation.

Nicole, a black woman in her thirties, captures the feelings of many when she says, “Dogwood

Church goes out and does service projects, it helps the community, and the thing I like about that is that is not exactly focused on spreading the message of Christianity, it's just spreading the message of community and inclusiveness." Nicole observes that this outreach does not stem from a desire to evangelize, but rather to show, through service to others, that Dogwood Church members care about the local community. Becca, the pastor for youth and young adults, offers the following thoughts:

We are a church who is welcoming and inclusive, and um, though we still struggle to, you know, as our demographics are predominantly upper middle class, white, um, we do kind of stand behind the everyone is welcome and it's an inclusive community, and I think really strategically try to engage different kind of avenues to continue to be, um, a resource and continue to widen that welcome.

She goes on to explain that she and the other pastors work to make sure programming is affordable, so that people's resources (or lack thereof) do not differentially impact people's ability to fully participate in the life of the congregation. Here she emphasizes that although the church is mostly white and upper middle class, the church "stand[s] behind" their claims to "welcome" and to "inclusivity" and takes action to "widen that welcome" to more people. Rather than simply talking about being inclusive, Becca feels the church takes concrete steps toward evaluating that claim to inclusivity and ensuring that it extends to all, a sentiment reflected across interviews.

"It's not just talk, it's the real deal"

Many people from Dogwood Church say that they perceive the church as going beyond claiming inclusivity as an ideal they value to taking concrete actions intended to include more people in the service. Debbie captures the feelings of many when she says, "I would tell them [people unfamiliar with the church] that it is a church that walks the talk, many of the members do. The issues of justice and inclusiveness are not just there – it's not just talk, it's the real deal."

As she continues to talk about inclusiveness and walking the walk, Debbie mentions “marching in the Moral Monday and the prison ministry” as two areas where the church has shown its commitment to its values. Members of Dogwood Church have tried to realize their claim to inclusivity by reaching out to populations traditionally marginalized by other Christian traditions and/or by the larger society, including the gay and lesbian community,⁶ people with disabilities, and people with religious doubt and/or pluralist views who may not feel welcomed in other Christian communities.

In 1988, the congregation became “fully affirming” of people of all sexual orientations and gender expressions after two years of conversations and workshops that culminated in a congregation-wide vote. As an officially designated “fully affirming” congregation, Dogwood Church recognizes the full humanity of gay and lesbian individuals, publicly welcomes them into the church, and permits them to be fully involved in the life of the congregation. Since then, Dogwood Church’s primary commitment to gay and lesbian rights has been its support of marriage equality. After a state amendment passed that defined marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman, Dogwood Church – with the support of the denomination’s national governing body – sued the state for infringing the pastors’ right to practice religion, since the pastors could be arrested and charged for conducting a same-sex marriage in the church. Dogwood Church is now home to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, couples, and queer couples with children.

Dogwood Church also claims to be religiously diverse, and pastors make a point of emphasizing in every service that people are welcome regardless of what they believe. This

⁶ Although the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) is frequently used by scholars and by people in this community describe this group of people, most interviewees at church referred to the “gay and lesbian” people who attend Dogwood Church, or talk about the church’s designation as “fully affirming” rather than the people Dogwood Church affirms. Thus, I use gay and lesbian throughout this paper, despite knowing that several people identify as queer and/or as bisexual. To the best of my knowledge, no one identifies as transgender.

religious diversity is reflected in the interview sample: three interviewees identify as former Catholics; eight were raised in moderate to liberal Protestant churches; five have backgrounds in conservative Protestantism, including southern Baptist and Church of Christ; four people did not offer information on their backgrounds; one came from a non-religious background, one from the Unitarian tradition, and only four discussed being raised in this denomination. As Abby explains, “It’s a great liberal religious community, which is important for me because . . . I support religious inclusion, [and] I never like to feel like I’m . . . superior or whatever to other religions. So it’s a very inclusive, they practice what they preach, very inclusive place and very socially active.” For Abby, her claim to inclusivity refers primarily to religious pluralism, and that view is shared by many in the congregation. Additionally, her mention of “they practice what they preach” again captures the sentiment that the pastors and people of Dogwood Church work to make their claim to inclusivity a reality.

Ellen also sees Dogwood Church as a place to explore one’s faith, saying “It’s a perfectly good place to be if God isn’t in your life, if you’re still searching for faith.” Additionally, as mentioned in the description of the site, Dogwood Church opens its doors to other religious groups (including Hindu and Muslim). In a Facebook post, the co-head pastors describe this relationship as “a wonderful partnership [that] strengthens and enriches our witness. And we are not alone! Churches across the United States share space with Islamic communities who, together, call upon the same God in prayer. Surely this is pleasing to our God!” Here the pastors not only affirm their support for Muslim communities, but also endorse a pluralist understanding of religion that sees the Muslim and the Christian God as one.

Finally, Dogwood Church continues to work toward making the church building and services accessible to others. Several years ago, the church council hired an American Sign

Language (ASL) interpreter for the 11 o'clock Sunday service, and recently the board of deacons purchased new headphones to assist those hard of hearing; an elevator carries people to the downstairs classrooms, and a built-in ramp allows people in wheelchairs to access the pulpit. A two-part adult forum in November discussed ableism, and people with disabilities gave examples of discrimination they had faced and challenged listeners to reconsider how they talked about ability and disability. For instance, the speakers reminded people present to use "person first language" when talking about people with disabilities (fieldnotes). Soon after this forum, several members established a committee dedicated to challenges faced by people with disabilities and to ensuring that Dogwood Church can accommodate everyone.

"Jesus taught . . ."

People at Dogwood Church strive to turn their beliefs about inclusivity into concrete actions, ensuring that some groups marginalized by other denominations, including the LGBTQ community, people with religious doubt, and people with disabilities, feel actively welcomed into this faith community. For many at Dogwood Church, this desire to include "everyone" stems from their religious beliefs that Jesus and God call everyone to join in Christian community. Many interviewees actively tie their faith and their understanding of Jesus into their desire to be part of and to help create an "inclusive" community of faith. However, when connecting their claim to inclusivity to Christianity, most people remain vague and offer open-ended understandings of Christianity; they avoid stating that others need to subscribe to that particular interpretation of the Bible, thus welcoming more people with various theologies into the congregation.

Abby, reflecting on her own experiences with the Bible as someone with cerebral palsy, talks about who Jesus valued:

I kind of started reading the Bible I guess with a new vision, and I have cerebral palsy and um so for me disabled issues in the Bible are really important because um you know, I felt like disabled people for a very long time and still to some extent today struggle with a lot of like, I struggled with stigma and with like you know, being um people being prejudiced against me growing up, and honestly I still do and I like taking solace in like, - Jesus taught that the people who were most vulnerable, most isolated, were the most important and that . . . they are the same . . . in God's children is anybody else, in fact like he actually kind of says like, they are like more valued.

Although she does not use explicit language about claims to inclusivity or welcome here, she makes it clear that she sees Jesus as someone who reached out to the vulnerable people in society and valued them highly. Her return to religion, after leaving Catholicism, stemmed from her reading of the Bible, where she interpreting Jesus as caring about more the “vulnerable [and] isolated” than telling people exactly what rules to follow. She came to Dogwood Church because she wanted a faith community that similarly saw Jesus as someone who valued the marginalized and welcomed everyone.

When I asked Denise what social justice means to her, she said it means “living the way that Jesus taught us to live.” When I asked for examples, she offered the following:

Um, just to help the poor and um, you know, whatever you do unto them you do unto me, and you know, and um . . . and just the fact that everyone is welcome I like [the fully affirming] part. I think, um, people you know, again, they are just as good as everyone else and I think they should be able to get married, that they should be accepted by everyone, they're just people, you know? And I, I do like that part of it, um, and I've been really involved in the, uh, organizing against racism and the . . . conversations on race. (okay) And I just need everyone to be accepted for who they are and yeah.

Like others, Denise uses the denominational rhetoric of welcoming everyone to help explain how she sees social justice, but then she gives two indirect examples of groups that still need “to be accepted for who they are”: gay and lesbian people, and people of color. She regards the extension of welcome to these – and to all – people as living like Jesus taught. Thus, she connects her faith and her understanding of Jesus’ mission to the church’s claim to inclusivity.

The Problem with Inclusivity

I think it's much better to try to put it in terms of not being just for liberals. But yeah, that's hard because in a way then you're placing value on something that to some extent you don't have that much chance of succeeding at, you know, if you're going to be true to kind of the values and the way that we (fades away). . . but like [the bumper sticker poster], uh to me that's saying this church stands for all these things and I think there should be room to take a different position on any one of those, and not be that explicit . . . when we have seminars we'll have somebody come and speak on health care or something related to climate change, but that doesn't say that the church agrees with that person, right? Although we don't tend to have people who are, you know, climate change deniers or whatever, but still there's a difference between doing something that says 'this is what the church is about' and more having a lot of those messages and even without the so called other side

Joe's comments capture the tension felt by many at Dogwood Church between their claim to inclusivity and their need to draw boundaries in order to maintain a distinct identity as a congregation. He struggles with wanting to include "everyone" Dogwood Church without compromising his own values, a struggle that many share as they pursue a goal – inclusivity – that Joe acknowledges they "don't have that much chance of succeeding at." He wants to be more than a church "just for liberals," but he does not recognize the potential harms that could accompany the desire to hear "the so called other side."

The poster he refers to is a promotional poster created by Dogwood Church as part of an advertising campaign in the early 2000s. The poster read, "when we believe in something, we stick with it," with the background picture showing a car with three bumper stickers: a rainbow for LGBTQ equality; a coexist sticker, which uses symbols from the major world religions to construct each letter and represents pluralism and tolerance; an eracism sticker, part of a movement to "erase racism" and which is not affiliated with this denomination; and "people of faith against the death penalty," from an interfaith non-profit group.

In response to this poster, Joe says that Dogwood Church should not explicitly take a stand on these issues in order to make the church welcoming to non-liberals or to people who

might have a different view, yet three of the four bumper stickers represent positions held by all the people I interviewed: LGBTQ equality, pluralism, and anti-racism. Rather than publicly stating the church's position on these issues, he suggests that the church should instead continue inviting speakers who could educate the congregation without taking a side. Joe is not alone in struggling with how to manage differences of opinion at Dogwood Church or how to ensure that non-liberals feel welcome without losing the congregational identity.

What does it mean that people at Dogwood Church are unwilling to assert that heterosexism, sexism, racism, or ableism will not be tolerated? How does the claim to inclusivity impact how social issues are discussed and addressed by members of Dogwood Church? To further explore this tension between boundary work and inclusivity, I first describe the limits of inclusivity before discussing the three strategies for boundary work that people at Dogwood Church use to distance themselves from conservative Christians without jeopardizing their claim to inclusivity, and thus their moral identity as “good Christians” (Kleinman 1996:5). Then, I analyze the unintended and unexamined consequences of this boundary work, considering specifically how the tension between inclusivity and boundary hampers Dogwood Church's ability to fully act on its commitment to addressing injustices.

Limits of Inclusivity: The Evangelical Out-group

By emphasizing “radical hospitality” in church services and through outreach in the community, by creating a faith community that welcomes LGBTQ-identified people, people from diverse religious backgrounds, and people with disabilities, and by grounding inclusivity in their faith, members at Dogwood Church construct a congregational identity rooted in the claims of inclusivity. Yet despite the near-constant emphasis on welcoming everyone and promoting an inclusive community of faith, there remains an underlying and often unspoken tension between

this inclusiveness and the reality that certain groups remain underrepresented or even excluded from this community. As with any other congregation, Dogwood Church constructs boundaries between itself and other religious communities, and members do boundary work and collective identity work to help delineate who is “in” and who is “out.” These strategies for boundary work often remain implicit or unspoken, as congregation members have learned how to do boundary work while still maintaining an inclusive collective identity.

Occasionally, however, people at Dogwood Church do name the out-group, and these clear examples of boundary work confirm that the people I interviewed or observed see politically and/or theologically conservative Christians as the people least likely to feel welcome or included at Dogwood. Isaac discusses the limits of Dogwood Church’s inclusivity when he offers the following:

I saw the messages on the bus [posters], and they had the giant rainbow flag out front . . . so I think that they are successful in broadcasting inclusivity . . . it's a type of inclusivity that's very appealing to a certain demographic, right? Like people who live in [a college town]. Um that being said, like it's not like there's a lot of, you know, evangelical, there are former evangelicals [attending Dogwood Church], but you know it's not like Mike Huckabee would walk up and just feel welcome at that church. Um so, (laughs) inclusive but inclusive of people that maybe in traditional American culture aren't always included but um you know, they don't, I don't, I wouldn't say they go out of their way to be inclusive to every single type of person that is present in American society.

Of the 26 people I interviewed, Isaac is the only person to explicitly state the limits of Dogwood Church’s claim to inclusivity and to recognize that the congregation cannot include “every single type of person” who might live in the area. He also acknowledges that the “inclusivity” broadcast at Dogwood Church appeals to a particular demographic, which he later describes as liberal, well-educated, and upper-middle class.

Beyond the interviews, my fieldnotes reference several observations of discussion in which the limits of inclusivity were explicitly identified. For example, a conversation among

young adults during a book discussion during the 10 o'clock hours captures how people prefer to talk abstractly about evangelical Christians and what happens when someone deviates from that rule. Six young adults (defined as people in college and/or in their 20s or 30s) and the youth pastor attended this discussion. We had gathered to discuss a chapter from Susan Thistlethwaite's book *Occupy the Bible*, titled "Jesus was not a free-market capitalist." In response to a question from Becca about "what stood out to you in the chapter," Ricki responded by agreeing with Thistlethwaite's critique of the southern prosperity gospel, explaining she wanted to "reclaim Christianity from those others who use Jesus for capitalism, by going back to what the text really says" about money and wealth. She went on to express her frustration that "being Christian" has become associated with conservative thought, asking, "How do I talk to people and say I'm Christian and explain what I really mean, that I am not like them?" In response, a graduate student in physics said that when people ask about her faith, she explains, "I'm a Christian, but most other Christians wouldn't think so." In this exchange, neither speaker said who the "other Christians" are. As someone else began to comment, Becca (pastor for youth and young adults) jumped in and added, "I'm just going to name them – the evangelical right." This point of clarification was met with silence as we looked at each other. Then, instead of continuing to criticize the prosperity gospel or other beliefs associated with the evangelical right, the conversation shifted to talking about, in Abby's words, "the progressive enclave" that is Dogwood Church.

At the abstract level, these young adults were comfortable criticizing conservative Christians, challenging their interpretations of the Bible, and actively distancing themselves. . Yet when Becca named the group, the conversation around labels ended. Instead the conversation shifted back to complementing Dogwood Church, rather than criticizing the named

out-group. Indeed, in most references to the evangelical out-group, people employ one or more strategies for boundary work that enable them to distance themselves from evangelicals without claiming that they should be excluded from the congregation. The three primary strategies for boundary work are: using abstract language; emphasizing personal preferences over criticizing other perspectives; and constructing favorable comparisons.

Strategies for Boundary Work

1. The Abstract Other

Although some members do recognize that Evangelicals and other conservative Christians might not feel welcome or included at Dogwood Church (as seen in the above comments from Isaac, Becca, and Debbie), people nevertheless remain careful to avoid explicitly discussing the conservative outgroup, as to name that group would be to challenge their claim to inclusivity. By staying abstract and simplified, members can feel that they are not excluding specific people, but rather are opposing certain viewpoints or beliefs and are explaining what makes this congregation better or more appealing to some people (Yukich 2010; Becker 1998).

Thus, people at Dogwood Church are careful to avoid criticizing a particular congregation or identifiable group of people. Instead, many people rely on brief references to the abstract, evangelical ‘other’ which give subtle examples of what ideas may not be welcome in the congregation. For instance, in her description of Dogwood Church, Ellen (woman, 70s, attending for 28 years) ends by briefly referencing how other faiths might approach homosexuality:

I think they're very, very focused on the rights of all people . . . and that we're all valuable and there's nobody more valuable or less valuable and so these differences that society creates, whether it's skin color or your sexual orientation, it just doesn't matter. So you know, you're valuable unto yourself, and that's what I appreciate. (okay). Yeah, I don't have to deal with hateful kinds of preaching

By adding “hateful kinds of preaching” to the end of her comments, Ellen introduces two ideas. First, she suggests that other congregations exist with hateful preaching, but that Dogwood Church avoids such preaching, and second that hateful preaching devalues people and places unnecessary emphasis on racial and sexual differences. Although hateful appears to be a strong pronouncement, Ellen avoids giving examples of what is hateful, never saying that being heterosexist or racist is harmful and bad.

Similarly, when asked how she helps welcome people into the congregation, Allison (children’s minister) struggles to give examples of what steps the church actively takes to welcome this population. Instead, she reminds me that the congregation is already doing better than others simply by being affirming:

We’re welcoming of all people, so that means . . . for gay and lesbian couples that they’re, they’re welcome, their children are welcome, it’s, you know, whatever leadership role you want, you know, you feel called to, there are no barriers there, whereas there might be in a different denomination . . . that’s just not an issue and we try to, we just convey that by just asking people, it’s just – it’s really not an issue.

She does not name a denomination, nor does she say what their policies might be, although she clearly suggests that other congregations might prevent gay and lesbian people from leading. Additionally, by discussing denominations rather than the theology that might undergird discrimination based on sexual orientation, she does not challenge their religious viewpoint. Thus, she avoids excluding that theological perspective from Dogwood Church.

In one sermon, Janet discusses the debates or frustrations that can emerge at conference meetings, where “most of us [various pastors] are really passionate about our particular brand of Christian commitment.” Her statement suggests that she does not necessarily view Dogwood’s commitment to inclusiveness as the ‘right’ Christian brand, but her sermon, which focused on “growing our welcome,” stated that churches were harming Christians by not affirming and fully

including gay and lesbian people. Throughout the sermon, she makes abstract references to other interpretations of Christianity or other approaches to community, but rather than criticizing heterosexist communities, she instead concludes by calling on her listeners to become more welcoming themselves.

2. Constructing Favorable Comparisons

In their boundary work, people frequently incorporate favorable comparisons between Dogwood Church and the conservative out-group to illustrate what Dogwood Church does ‘better.’ Drawing on her previous experiences in the black Baptist church and her cultural knowledge of evangelical congregations, Nicole (woman, 30s, attending four years) says:

My goal in finding a church as an adult is finding one that was *more* outreach focused, as far as doing things in the community and really taking the message outward, *instead of being so . . . focused on the actual church service*. (Emphasis added)

In describing her previous church, Nicole had mentioned their occasional work in the community, but here she highlights the importance of finding a church that does *more*. She contrasts this commitment to outreach with other churches that might be focused more internally on the worship service and taking care of church members. She does not give examples, but later in her interview she lists Habitat for Humanity, the local interfaith food kitchen, and the youth mission trips as ways the church does outreach. She does not focus on doctrinal differences, nor does she disparage other congregations, but rather she points out what she personally wanted (more outreach) and how that might not be the central focus of all congregations.

Caro, a woman in her sixties who has been attending for eight years, also observes that Dogwood remains highly committed to local service:

I think this church is bigger in serving locally than I think any of the churches I’ve ever done. I mean, everybody’s had, you know, [a] foreign mission or a U.S. mission or

something they gave to, but they didn't do anything, you know. I know as a Southern Baptist . . . [we] did some volunteering and stuff . . . but I had never seen a church who was willing to get involved in so many local issues, so that's where this one just stands apart from any church I've ever seen.

Although she draws on her experiences in Southern Baptist churches, Carol extends her comparison to all churches by claiming that Dogwood “stands apart from any church.” Here she is less concerned with offering a critique of other churches and more interested in creating a comparison to show how much more Dogwood Church offers its members in terms of volunteering than other churches. Earlier in the interview, she mentioned Dogwood's food ministries, prison ministries, racial justice programs, and involvement with Moral Mondays. She never faults other churches for not engaging in this outreach work, but instead uses the comparison with the abstract evangelical other to show how Dogwood Church does more.

Nicole continues to praise Dogwood Church's approach to outreach when she offers the following comparison between Dogwood's pastors and pastors elsewhere:

I think that's very unique . . . for a church to - a church where the pastors will go and get arrested for their beliefs is something that I'm not seeing . . . I don't know a lot of pastors that would do anything outside of the church, but we have a very active - Janet and David are pastors that I've never experienced before and so I think that's one big thing that makes the church unique, and then because of their, their leadership and the service that the church provides that makes them even more unique.

Rather than comparing only what the church as institutional body does or talking about activities offered, Nicole favorably compares David and Janet to other pastors who would not “get arrested for their beliefs” or serve as such strong role models for the congregation. Jacqueline similarly favors the pastors at Dogwood Church over previous ones she has known, although she emphasizes their approachability and accessibility:

I just think that that, that approachability of I'm also just a person, like yes I'm a leader in this church, but you could be as much of a leader in your own way and you don't have to feel like I am the all-knowing powerful person . . . I have met very few pastors that I have

been like, yeah we could have a beer together, which is what we did with Becca a couple weeks ago.

Here Jacqueline favorably compares the pastors – particularly Becca – against others who might be authoritative and distant from their parishioners. She does not explicitly critique other approaches to pastoring or leadership, but instead focuses on how she appreciates the pastors' approach to leadership.

In these favorable comparisons, interviewees are not putting down other churches or pastors, but rather highlighting what is different about Dogwood Church, occasionally bordering on better. Rather than criticizing other churches for falling short, people tend to take other churches as the baseline and to illustrate how Dogwood Church goes above and beyond in its commitment to the community and to acting on its beliefs.

3. Emphasizing Personal Preferences

Finally, throughout their references to the evangelical right, people often mention their own personal experiences or emphasize that they needed a different church 'for me' and that had 'what I wanted.' Occasionally, people will use similar language to talk about people who attended and were welcome but then found that Dogwood Church was, in Becca's words, not "the right fit." When talking about leaving their former churches or traditions, everyone avoided criticizing those theologies or explicitly labeling them harmful or wrong; to do so might make congregants feel they are contradicting their claim to inclusivity. Instead, interviewees often chose to be where their personal needs were met, implying that others had not worked for them but might still be valuable for the congregations at those churches they left behind. Ricki, a married lesbian in her 30s who has been attending for two years, does both when she says:

I was sort of raised with like the southern prosperity gospel and a big emphasis on like individual morality for the purposes of getting to heaven and, and all of that sort of thing, and that stuff really didn't resonate with me anymore. But when I started thinking about

like Jesus as an advocate for the poor and, and kind of the systems that, that Jesus fought against and the idea of God and of faith not as like this sort of punitive power that's judging everything you do in your measly little individual life but as this sort of eternal source of strength to continue fighting these fights, like it, it was just sort of a reframing.

Here she highlights how her own experiences and changing values led her to start “reframing”

Jesus and her faith, which ultimately led her to Dogwood Church. Rather than offering a critique of the prosperity gospel, she talks about how she needed to develop a new theology that made more sense to her.

Denise, in describing her first visit to Dogwood Church, similarly talks about how elements of the service stood out to her because they fulfilled what she wanted in a church and were in line with her beliefs:

The first one we went to, they had the united voices of praise, do you know what that is? And I was so impressed with that, and, um, you know, I [recording inaudible], at the church and I asked my daughter about the church, and she said yeah it really was and I just liked the fact that everyone is so welcoming and everyone is welcome and the social justice part of it. I wanted to see more in church . . . have some things that I believe.

It is implicit here that she did not feel other churches extend a similar welcome (i.e., when she says “I wanted to see *more* in church”), but again, rather than criticizing them she ends by saying Dogwood Church had more elements that aligned with what she believed and what she wanted in a church.

When talking about people who either leave the church or who visit but do not stay, some interviewees emphasized that others may choose to leave, regardless of how welcoming Dogwood Church is. For instance, Becca gets at this idea when she talks about the theological diversity at Dogwood:

I think one of the most beautiful things about this congregation is it's very. Um, open door, kind of theological policy, doesn't matter who you are basically or what you believe, you're welcome. *You may decide to leave*, but essentially there are a lot of different viewpoints or perspectives um all the way from politically to theologically (emphasis added).

Here Becca explains that what a person believes does not matter, but that openness does not guarantee people will stay. Additionally, she tries to emphasize political and theological diversity, which suggests people leave not because their viewpoint is not accepted (for instance, if someone is a staunch Republican), but because they chose to go elsewhere.

Unintended Consequences of “Inclusive” Boundary Work

1. A Sense of Complacency

When constructing favorable comparisons between Dogwood Church and abstract others, interviewees embrace the idea that their church does more, does better, or does different. By pointing out ways that the church is better than others - particularly in terms of LGBTQ and gender equality - people at church may become content with where they are now, rather than trying to push the envelope further. For example, in the following quote from Jacqueline, who is describing her and her husband Greg’s first experience at Dogwood, she talks about what convinced her the church was serious in its progressive claim:

We went the first Sunday, and the first Sunday Becca was speaking, so if you picture Greg, who's grown up in the Catholic church, and the first Sunday we get there, Becca is speaking and it was the anniversary of the church becoming [fully affirming], so she was speaking and speaking on that topic, and I was like, how are you doing Greg? Like I'm thrilled, are you okay? But he thought it was great too, so that really, I mean it was just kind of entertaining, like that, that was our introduction, we're like yeah okay, they [older people who invited them to the church] were serious about liberal and progressive church. They were not messing with us.

Jacqueline equates ordaining women and fully affirming gay and lesbian people in the congregation with being “liberal and progressive.” Compared to the Catholic Church, with strict rules against the ordination of gays, lesbians, and women, including these demographics in worship is progressive and noteworthy, yet when people at Dogwood Church become content with this difference, they may stop looking for additional ways to support these oppressed

groups. Thus, this complacency may prevent people from fully recognizing their own privilege, as they may develop a sense of superiority for being ‘more inclusive’ or ‘more welcoming’ than other churches, rather than continuing to challenge existing systems of inequality or examining themselves further.

Example: Sexuality

In interviews, people repeatedly bring up the affirmation of gays and lesbians as a strength of this congregation and as something that distinguishes it from others. At the time that the church became fully affirming, in 1988, this was perhaps a more progressive move. Yet today, more and more churches are having discussions around LGBTQ inclusion, and other denominations - including most recently the Presbyterians - have voted at the national level to support same-sex clergy couples and weddings. Holding onto this story of difference and perceived superiority to congregations that are not fully affirming may prevent people at Dogwood Church from examining ways they could continue fighting for LGBTQ rights, including anti-discrimination laws.

Additionally, the language at the Dogwood Church focuses on gay and lesbian people, leaving out the others included in the LGBTQ community, particularly the transgender community. For instance, the church does not yet have gender-neutral or all-gender bathrooms, which would be possible given that two bathrooms on the main floor are single occupancy, something I have observed and that Ricki brought up in an informal conversation at the church. In her interview, she also explained that she saw a connection between her comments on being gay and doing outreach to LGBTQ people and her invitation to join the board of adult education:

They had the guy who’s there from the [denomination] coalition to talk about um helping to build, helping congregations within the [denomination] to become open and affirming

and that kind of thing, and so I had gone to that meeting and I actually ended up speaking some in that meeting about the necessity of doing outreach to um folks in the transgender community as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual identified people. Um So I talked a lot that day and then I got the call inviting me to be on the adult education board.

I have heard only Ricki raise concerns about becoming a “trans inclusive” community (fieldnotes), suggesting that widening the welcome to include transgender people is not a major concern of people at church. Instead, people’s pride and sense of difference in their commitment to marriage equality and the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in church may lead them to overlook new ways they could be supporting the LGBTQ community. The near complete absence of any discussion around transgender inclusion suggests that people at the church have not fully examined or unpacked their privilege as cis-gendered people, when they have the potential to use their high education, their willingness to engage in difficult conversations, and their resources to take a stand on transgender inclusion and protection.

Example: Gender

Issues of sexism or gender discrimination never surfaced in interviews, except in the context of historical accounts. For instance, Janet talks about her experience as a co-head pastor hired in 1978, at a time when she was the only woman in North Carolina with preaching responsibilities. Here Janet describes what she found at Dogwood Church:

I mean, just to give you an example, when we came in [19]78, the church already had a tradition of every other moderator would be a woman, and watching the census on their boards to make sure that half were women and that women were serving as ushers. I mean these, these were things that were just unheard of in churches and there were still, even to this day there are churches – [denominational] churches in this conference who do not permit women on their diaconate, so it’s a, it’s just a very conservative um culture here. That would not be true of [denominational] churches in New England or the Midwest, it I think it really does have to do with how traditional things can be in North Carolina.

She observes that “even to this day” some churches within the denomination do not allow women to be deacons, which compares Dogwood Church in 1978 to congregations today. She

points out that other churches have not yet caught up to Dogwood Church and implies that Dogwood Church remains a progressive church in this conservative state, but many churches do ordain women and allow women on the diaconate. Thus, this ongoing reliance on historical narratives and feeling progressive for allowing women to serve in church leads to a certain complacency around issues of gender, as seen in the absence of any discussion of feminism, abortion, or equal pay. Although in her interview Janet says in passing that everyone would agree on feminism, there is little discussion of feminism, whereas people frequently mention issues with an assumed consensus, such as LGBTQ equality.

A final example

Talking about how she sees social justice occurring at Dogwood Church, Abby offers the following:

That's the great thing about [the denomination] is like we take that [social justice] like at [Dogwood Church] we take that to heart, we don't just say - like a lot of people would just say hey, we're doing a canned food drive, and everybody brings canned foods and then they forget about it until the next Thanksgiving. And that's like not how it is at, um, at our church and I think that's um really special that like the, all the pastors will always bring you back to 'what did Jesus say about um social justice,' cause that's the reality, like, Jesus really didn't spend that much time talking about sexuality or you know, men being more important, or any of these issues that some of our more conservative counterparts like to talk about a lot. He didn't really spend very much time on that, which to me is like, he actually probably didn't care that much about that. What he cared about is like, you know, people that were isolated in society, so um, so yeah, I think that's a really great thing about um, about the church.

Here Abby engages in boundary work directed at “our more conservative counterparts,” criticizing how they have become misguided in their interpretation of what Jesus “cared about.” By constructing a favorable comparison, she avoids explicitly criticizing conservative Christians while still suggesting that they missed the point. This excerpt shows the dangers of relying on favorable comparisons; she goes on to say that Jesus “probably didn’t care that much” about sexuality and gender roles, suggesting that conservatives are missing the point when they

are arguing about sexuality and gender. Yet in doing so, she appears to diminish the importance of fighting for women's and LGBTQ rights, even though these groups may still be "isolated" in contemporary society. By trying to make LGBTQ and women's rights seem like not an issue, and thus taken for granted, she fails to examine ways that Dogwood Church could continue to advocate on behalf of these two groups of people.

2. Avoiding a Stance

As demonstrated previously, when talking about what brought them to Dogwood Church, many people explain that they came to Dogwood Church because it had the theology they needed or wanted, rather than criticizing the theologies they had left behind. In other words, people talked about leaving these churches because they wanted to find a theology that resonated better with them personally, rather than saying they left because of the conservative theology that supported sexism, heterosexism, racism, and classism. These critiques still surfaced – as when Ricki critiqued the prosperity gospel or when Ellen described conservative preaching as "hateful" – but these abstract comments avoided directly criticizing evangelical Christians as people, thus allowing them to preserve a sense of inclusivity.

However, maintaining their claim to inclusivity means sacrificing their ability to take a strong stance on issues, and without a unified position on issues around racism, heterosexism, sexism, and classism, people at Dogwood Church weaken their ability to engage in social justice that could lead to long-term change. Instead of developing strategies for action or uniting around a cause, people at Dogwood Church return to their claim to inclusivity as an ideal in itself. This reluctance to take a firm stance on social issues comes not only from the lay members I interviewed, but also from the pastors in their sermons: rather than using the pulpit to signal a

clear stance and to call the congregation to action, the pastors avoid explicitly one-sided statements.

In interviews, most people describe the sermons as intellectual and informative, connecting current events to scripture and highlight social justice issues. Nicole captures the feelings of many when she says:

It's coming back to the pulpit, I think every Sunday it's amazing that there is an issue that is brought to the congregation as far as it needs changing, you know. Um . . . I feel like I hear about the recent events when I come to the pulpit and how the church can help. It's a very high level . . . it can be ac-academic at times, but the fact that it's being had in a constructive way, um I feel like I am very aware of the issues, because I'm not just given the Biblical perspective of it, I'm also given the sides, the arguments on both sides, you know, what the critics are saying, what the proponents are saying.

Nicole's comments contain an apparent contradiction; on the one hand, she feels that the pastors connect the Bible to current events and explain "how the church can help," but on the other hand, she appreciates that they give "both sides." A closer analysis of the sermons reveals that the pastors have developed a third approach to incorporating social issues into their sermons. Rather than taking a strong stance in their sermons or presenting both sides, they frequently list relevant political issues or mention major news items. In doing so, they rarely explicitly endorse a liberal response or condemn a conservative one. However, people who come with a liberal theological or political stance may interpret any mention of political or social issues through their own perspective, even when the pastors do not take a clear stance.

David consistently includes references to social issues, often mentioning them in passing and without explanation. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a sermon delivered on August 17, 2014:

Not all human differences are lick lines that evaporate with maturity. The headlines this morning are all about border disputes: Israel/Gaza, Russia/Ukraine, Ferguson, Missouri or unaccompanied children on our border; interpretation of tradition disputes: Fourth Circuit ruling on same gender marriages, NCAA on student athletes, Moral Monday and

Tea Party on our common life as citizens . . . I am confident there are Gazans and Israelis, Russians and Ukrainians, black citizens and white citizens of Ferguson who are living a complicated life today trying to decide in this situation or that situation, with this person or that person, whether they are standing at a human lick line or a confrontation.

Here he has listed a variety of social issues that have surfaced in the U.S. and around the world, but he avoids taking a clear stance on any of them by focusing on the list rather than the power. Thus, he labels the dispute a problem, rather than saying which side is ‘right’ and which is ‘wrong,’ or who has power and who does not. However, someone listening with a liberal mindset could interpret all of these mentions as supporting a particular viewpoint, and thus feel that the pastors are taking sides.

The desire to hear or to recognize “both sides” of an issue, as mentioned above by Nicole, further impedes the congregation’s ability to take a firm stance on these social issues. This desire to include many voices in conversation reflects the congregation’s claim to inclusivity, but this approach creates the possibility that harmful and oppressive perspectives (including racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist ones) could remain present, even if they are rarely openly expressed (Kleinman and Ezzell 2012). The ‘both sides’ approach contradicts Dogwood Church’s commitment to welcoming populations marginalized by larger society and by many other churches. For instance, people at Dogwood Church take pride in their claim to inclusivity and want to create a welcoming community for gay and lesbian people, but they still avoid condemning heterosexism – or heterosexist theologies – outright. To do so would be to exclude a group of (heterosexist) Christians from the congregation, which would challenge the claim to inclusivity. Yet if the church wants to remain a welcoming space for gay and lesbian people, it would make sense to be clear that heterosexism is not welcome or tolerated, which would affirm LGBTQ people and send a clear message heterosexual superiority is not tolerated

Moral Mondays: A Case Study

In the interviews, Moral Mondays (defined below) often came up as an example of Dogwood Church's involvement in social justice work. Most interviewees saw the congregation's involvement in Moral Mondays in a favorable light, with many describing the pastors' visible participation in the movement as an example of the pastors' commitment to their beliefs. Yet some people questioned the congregation's involvement and support of the movement, particularly the blessing included in Sunday services for people planning to attend the next day. The language around Moral Mondays illustrates how some church members and pastors balance the tension between supporting Moral Mondays and trying to stay open to other political views, and I conclude by showing how focusing on this tension detracts from the congregation's ability to positively effect social change.

Moral Mondays began in North Carolina during the legislative session in 2013. The movement, led by Reverend William Barber - head of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP - attracted thousands from across the state, focusing primarily on voting rights, education, healthcare, and cuts to social welfare but also attracting a variety of other groups, including people supporting legalized marijuana or mandatory veganism (fieldnotes). From the beginning, many churches joined in the movement, and Dogwood Church was among that group, organizing car pools from the church and marching behind a congregational banner. Each week during the Moral Mondays, volunteers from church would sit at a table in the narthex, signing people up for carpools or helping them buy seats on the NAACP buses leaving from the church parking lot. However, the weekly announcement pamphlet provided no additional information around Moral Mondays; instead the first page was dedicated to conversation hours at church, softball games, and announcements for visitors and potential new members. Thus, despite being highly visible

during church services, Moral Mondays otherwise seemed to be just one of many justice opportunities available to members at Dogwood.

Although the announcements did not provide information around Moral Mondays, a congregational blessing introduced to Sunday services during the 2014 legislative session drew greater attention to Moral Mondays and to the people who chose to participate. During the announcements at the beginning of the service, the pastors would invite people going to Moral Mondays to come to the front of the church during the last verse of the final hymn. Then, a pastor would invite the congregation to stand, “raise your hands turning your palms towards our Justice Advocates,” and join in reading the following blessing together:

O God, bless these advocates, may they witness to justice for
the least of these,
the poor and downtrodden,
the widow and the orphan,
the alien and the sick, and
your children and our brothers and sisters.
Bless those that step forward with steadfast faith in your call for justice and
righteousness, your call to be peaceful and reconciling. And bless those who stand in
witness and support of a just world, a future with hope for all and a people who are one.
Use them and all of us to make all things new, all things better. In the name of our just
and loving God, we bless. Amen.

The decision to include this blessing in the weekly services came from the church council, the primary governing body for Dogwood Church. The pastors advocated for its inclusion, as they felt that Moral Mondays aligned with the congregation’s values, but ultimately the church council made the final decision. Of the 26 people I interviewed, 21 described the blessing of the Moral Monday participants in positive terms. For instance, Nicole describes the blessing as “fantastic,” saying “it was amazing to me to see because it was sending a group of people out there to do justice work, and they were so passionate.” People who received the

blessing described the experience as encouraging and important; Renee describes it as “being commissioned to be an overt voice or to put my body on the line.”

However, not everyone expressed the same excitement around either the Moral Mondays blessing or the church’s visible involvement in the movement. For Sarah, who comes from a religiously and politically conservative background, the ‘moral’ language felt unnecessarily critical:

So the Moral Mondays . . . I think it's great . . . To me, though, calling it Moral Mon-, like it caused the same kind of "uh I'm uncomfortable with this" as when Jerry Falwell did the Moral Majority. Because when you call yourself moral, you're calling other people immoral, people who don't agree. And I don't think that's, I don't think the other people are immoral. I think they have different political views of what's best for people as a whole, and I understand their views, and it doesn't matter if I agree with them or not, they're not, you know, they're not crazy idiots, you know, and just like the liberals aren't crazy idiots, most of them.

Sarah is uncomfortable with the morality because she believes that the blessing implicitly labels the out-group, which includes her friends and family, as “immoral.” She also implies that both sides should be heard, as she says that she understands the other perspective and that neither side should be dismissed as “crazy idiots.”

Sarah directly voices her frustration with the blessing, but more frequently interviewees raised concerns about how they thought others were experiencing the blessing. Thus, some interviewees would say that while they personally support Moral Mondays and the blessing, they worried that it might put off less liberal people. By emphasizing their personal beliefs, a strategy for boundary work, they can express their own support of Moral Mondays while still being open to others who might disagree. However, creating space for people to disagree with Moral Mondays would weaken the congregation’s commitment to the movement, because the congregation would likely stop offering the blessing, thus decreasing the visibility of the movement within the church.

The few people who strongly disagreed with Moral Mondays decided to leave the church. Both associate pastors were reluctant to talk about these people, but Janet acknowledged that several people left Dogwood Church because of the blessing and the congregational support for the Moral Mondays movement:

There were people who uh not too many, but we had a couple people leave . . . they actually thought the election went in a good direction, you know. So to them it was like you don't have a right to do that [the blessing]. This is the government we voted for and I shouldn't have to come to church and you know raise my hand and say there's something immoral about it. Um but people who hadn't gotten the memo about us before that, I mean that's why I say it wasn't very many . . .

Here Janet seems comfortable with the idea that people chose to leave Dogwood Church and does not apologize for taking a stance around Moral Mondays. Although in her interview she also says Moral Mondays is the most “overtly political” action the church has taken, she also feels it is in line with previous church actions, and that people who “got the memo” about the church would not be surprised by the Moral Mondays blessing.

Joe also expressed similar surprise that people stuck with the church until Moral Mondays happened, but unlike Janet, he seems more concerned that the church becomes narrower as these people leave. He says:

I'm concerned that it may have put off some of our more conservative members, and I suspect it may have caused one or two or three family groups to leave the church . . . I don't like the idea that the church gets narrower and even though it's obviously a church for liberals (okay), um . . . you know, I don't like the idea . . . of losing them, I mean obviously the church is committed to those, the values that underlie that. It's, it's just a hard question, 'cause somehow we avoided chasing them away earlier, I'm not really sure why.

Here Joe's comments again reveal the tension between the claim to inclusivity and boundary work, as he recognizes that the church is one “for liberals” but then laments the loss of more conservative members. He supports the causes that the Moral Monday movement stood for, and he engaged in civil disobedience that led to his arrest at one of the protests, but he still questions

the congregation's visible support of Moral Mondays. He wrestles with the tension between claiming inclusivity and taking a stance on Moral Mondays, which could turn some people away.

Allison also has misgivings about the Moral Monday blessing, based on conversations she had with unhappy members. However, her concern addresses a different aspect of inclusiveness:

I don't know if we'll do it [the blessing] again this year . . . we have to reexamine it. Some, I wouldn't say it was widespread, at least not that I heard about, but a few people spoke to me about it and just said that it was uncomfortable to them just because to them I think it felt like those people were being singled out for a special privilege whereas you know, you have all these other people doing these things, now why don't they get a blessing, you know.

Rather than expressing concern about the potentially alienating nature of this political/moral blessing, Allison heard concerns from people who felt that the Moral Monday blessing favored one group's social justice work over others', as opposed to favoring one political side over another. By offering a blessing for only one outreach group, the leaders at Dogwood Church could be seen as not promoting an inclusive message within the congregation, because they seemed to favor one group over another. Thus, pastors may feel they should not prioritize the Moral Monday movement over other causes, even though they believe it is important to strive for long-term change.

Between the people leaving the church and the people unhappy with the "special privilege" bestowed on Moral Monday participants, the church leadership is reevaluating the blessing for the 2015 summer session. Although Janet, Allison, Becca, and Joe all agree that the church stands for the "underlying values" of Moral Mondays and that the movement aligns with the church's mission, the fact that several people left and others complained means that the church may weaken its stance – within the congregation at least – toward Moral Mondays. The need to fully welcome everyone into the service, by not making them uncomfortable with the

blessing, hurts the congregation's ability to stand by its other commitments: to justice, outreach, and service.

Conclusion

Drawing on 100 hours of participant observation and 26 interviews at a liberal Protestant church, I have demonstrated that the tension between claiming inclusivity and using boundary work negatively impacts people's ability to act on their commitments to social justice. Like conservative Christians, people at Dogwood Church engage in boundary work to differentiate themselves from other Christian groups, although the strategies for boundary work differ. These strategies reflect the congregational culture found at each church, how members of the in-group relate to each other and to the out-group. For instance, a conservative religious culture of belief in a patriarchal God may disapprove of women who work and do not submit to husbands, characterizing their lives as sinful (Ammerman 1987). In contrast, people at Dogwood Church do not draw sharp boundaries between themselves and others, as their theology and congregational culture are grounded in the belief that God welcomes everyone into community.

However, Dogwood Church and other 'inclusive' groups cannot include everyone, and people thus develop more subtle ways of demarcating the out-group. People at 'inclusive' groups may use strategies for boundary work that allow them to indirectly critique the out-group without jeopardizing their claim to inclusivity, as seen at Dogwood Church. By remaining abstract, emphasizing personal needs, and creating favorable comparisons, people at Dogwood Church signal who they are (and who they are not) without explicitly criticizing other people or saying they would not be welcome at Dogwood Church. Thus, future ethnographic studies of congregations should consider how members of a church draw on their congregational culture to inform their interactions with the out-group.

This research also speaks to broader questions about group membership and how groups develop a subcultural identity that attracts members. Creating a group identity dependent on “an apparent good,” such as inclusivity, may draw people to the group, but valuing inclusivity may not translate to taking concrete actions (Kleinman and Ezzell 2012:408). As seen at Dogwood Church, people describe the central message as one of inclusivity, but when it comes to addressing social injustices, ‘inclusivity’ does not help unite people around a cause. Their strategies for boundary work lead people to develop a sense of complacency and to avoid taking sides, which in turn limit their ability to act on their commitment to social issues.

This discrepancy between ‘inclusivity’ and action suggests that groups that form to address a specific injustice or to pursue a particular goal may be more successful in effecting change than a group united around a value or an ideal. For example, a feminist group that focuses on including all women and perspectives may meet resistance if the group also wants to take action to make abortions more accessible, as not all women may agree that abortions should be legal; the group thus risks losing members – and its claim to inclusivity – if it appears one-sided on a controversial issue such as abortion, which may then lead to inaction (see Kleinman and Ezzell 2012 for an analysis of the harm that results from invoking ‘both sides’). If a group values its claim to inclusivity and wants to address injustice, focusing on staying “inclusive” may trump the group’s ability to take a stand for justice.

Finally, Yukich writes, “a lack of research on the topic [boundary work in “inclusive” groups] suggests an assumption among researchers that ‘inclusive’ groups using boundary work are merely hypothetical and are not really inclusive” (2010:174). For Yukich and these other researchers, the question seems to be if groups that claim to be inclusive can be “genuinely inclusive” (p. 176). Her statement carries with it two additional assumptions: first, that

inclusivity is feasible, and second, that inclusivity is desirable. These assumptions preclude Yukich from examining what it means for a group to claim an inclusive identity, and the consequences of that claim.

The research presented here raises further questions about how scholars use the term “inclusivity” and suggests the need for greater research into the rhetoric of inclusivity. First, scholars should consider the limits of inclusivity and how its meaning varies across settings and groups. Although a group may claim an inclusive identity, people in that group may recognize that not everyone can be included, and that a certain type of inclusivity may attract a particular type of person. For instance, at Dogwood Church the claim to inclusivity refers primarily to including gay and lesbian people, people with disabilities, and people with religious doubt and pluralistic views. This version of inclusivity appeals primarily to white, liberal, highly educated people. Thus, although inclusivity may sound and feel like a universal value, any group that claims an inclusive identity likely espouses a particular brand of inclusivity, and scholars should examine how the meaning of inclusivity shifts across contexts and how people use the rhetoric of inclusivity in developing a subcultural identity.

Second, by studying how a group talks about inclusivity and what inclusivity looks like for that group, scholars can move beyond evaluating how “really inclusive” a group is to analyzing the impact of an inclusive rhetoric on group identity and actions. As suggested above, claiming an ‘inclusive’ identity may affect not only how group members interact with others, but also how they pursue their other goals. Thus, scholars should analyze the consequences that come with using this rhetoric. Further research should be done to analyze how group members use a rhetoric of inclusivity, the effects of that rhetoric on how members relates to outsiders, and the impact of that rhetoric on members’ ability to act on their goals.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Church Perceptions

- Would you tell me about how you came to be a member of this congregation?
- Imagine you are talking to someone unfamiliar with the church. How would you describe this church to him or her?
- What do you see as some strengths of the church? Some weaknesses?
- How would you describe the church services?
- What would you say is the central message of Dogwood Church
- Do you think the church is successful in communicating this message to people?
- Can you describe the relationship between Dogwood Church and the community?

Church Involvement

- Can you tell me a little about your involvement in the church?
- How did you become involved in _____?
- Are there other groups or causes you've considered getting involved in or wanted to get involved in? What did you like about _____?
- What do you think stopped you from getting involved?

Volunteer Work

- Would you consider your work at the church to be volunteer work? What makes it volunteer work?
- How do you define volunteering?
- Have you volunteered in other ways, outside of what you mentioned at the church? For how long? How did you become involved?
- What motivates you to volunteer in these different capacities?
- Where do you think your views come from?
- I noticed you did/didn't mention Christianity . . . has your faith shaped your attitude toward volunteering?

Social Justice

- What does social justice mean to you?
- Can you give me an example of something you consider to be social justice or social justice work? What does social justice look like?
- Where do you think your ideas about social justice come from?
- How do you think Dogwood Church works towards social justice?
- During Moral Mondays we would bless the people from our congregation going to the protests each week, calling them advocates for justice. What do you think it means to be an advocate for justice?
- How do you see being an advocate for justice as helping people?
- We've talked now about volunteer work and social justice work. I'm wondering if you could talk about how you see volunteer work and social justice work in relation to each other. How are they similar and/or different?

Closing Questions:

- Is there anything you would like to add about the church? Your experiences at the church?
- Is there anything you think I missed or should have asked?
- Do you have any final comments?

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